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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 23 April 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Higher Education

1. **Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the higher education challenges in Scotland. [903740]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): I know Members across the House will join me in paying our respects to His Holiness Pope Francis. I offer my sincere condolences to Scotland's Catholic community who have this Easter lost a much loved and compassionate leader.

Just before the Easter recess, I had the privilege of leading the UK Government delegation to Washington DC, then on to Tartan Week in New York. The trip was a key part of my drive to promote brand Scotland around the world, to boost economic growth and to create jobs here at home.

Finally, Mr Speaker, to you, to Members across the House and to Scotland's closest and most important neighbours, happy St George's day.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Scott Arthur.

Ian Murray: Before you do so, Mr Speaker, I had better answer his question. [*Laughter.*] Too excited about St George's day so I am, Mr Speaker.

We should all be proud of Scotland's universities, the contribution they make to Scotland's public life and their reputation as the best in the world, but 18 years of the Scottish National party have left some of those proud institutions in dire straits. Job cuts and course closures are the inevitable product of the SNP's decision to deliver a 22% real terms cut to Scottish student funding since 2013. Scotland's universities, their staff and their students all need a Scottish Government with a proper plan to turn this crisis around; they need a new direction with Scottish Labour.

Dr Arthur: I thank the Secretary for State for his answer and for his comments about the Pope. I make my response within the context of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and I note my membership of the University and College Union.

The university sector in Scotland has never been in a worse state. It is in a state of crisis, with job losses, both compulsory and voluntary, being contemplated across the whole sector in Scotland. It is young Scots who are paying the price. To balance the books, the Scottish Government are limiting the number of young Scots who can go to university, forcing universities to rely more and more on the recruitment of students from overseas. To be clear, that means that Scots are often sitting at home unable to access a place because students from overseas with lower qualifications are getting those places. Does the Secretary of State agree that Scotland's young people must be supported and the university sector must be fully funded in Scotland?

Ian Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for what he does to support higher education in Scotland. Thanks to the SNP's higher education financial crisis, as my hon. Friend says, too many Scottish students are missing out on places. Labour has committed to ensuring that Scottish students from all backgrounds can access university, and that can only be achieved with a new funding settlement that both protects our world-leading universities and gives any Scottish student who wants to pursue university the opportunity to do so. I am proud to have made it from Wester Hailes education centre, in the Wester Hailes scheme, to the University of Edinburgh, but that story is becoming all too rare under the SNP Government. It is time for a new direction for Scottish universities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks about the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis. I also wish all those not fortunate enough to have been born north of Hadrian's wall a very happy St George's day.

While he is not a graduate of the University of Aberdeen, like me the Secretary of State is a beneficiary of a Scottish university education. Scotland has some of the finest and most respected higher education establishments in the world, but as we saw last week at the University of Aberdeen, in warnings from the University of Edinburgh and, most starkly, at the University of Dundee, where over 600 jobs are being shed to make emergency savings, the current funding model, overseen by the SNP, is failing our institutions and our young people. I know we agree on that, but will the Secretary of State also acknowledge the devastating impact on Scottish university budgets of his own Government's national insurance increase, adding £45 million to their salary bills, or will he continue to defend that job-killing, anti-growth tax on workers?

Ian Murray: The shadow Secretary of State is defending the SNP's dreadful record on higher education in Scotland. It is clear from the principal of the University of Edinburgh, Sir Peter Mathieson, that the problems the university is having to deal with are caused by the underfunding of students from Scotland, which has meant the books have had to be balanced with an ever-increasing number of international students. The number of international students at the University of Edinburgh, for example, is still going up, although not as high as projected, and that is the major cause of the financial problems at Scottish universities. The Conservatives would do well not to hide behind the SNP and support it in that process.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments about the death of Pope Francis.

In a rare consensus, I agree with much of what has been said by both the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State. Many universities are extremely concerned about the funding situation. Many of my constituents who are employees of universities or who have children at Scottish universities are concerned, particularly following the news of the 600 job cuts at the University of Dundee. I have spoken to the principal of the University of Edinburgh and he is also concerned about the funding model in Scotland, which is failing everyone. Will the Secretary of State discuss with the Scottish Government how they can make changes and put pressure on them to do so? The national insurance changes are not helpful, so it would help Scottish education if we had some changes there as well.

Ian Murray: The hon. Lady's question is slightly contradictory. On the one hand, she does not like the national insurance contribution increase, which has given the Scottish Government a £4.9 billion boost—the highest settlement in the history of devolution. That money should be going to the frontline of higher education, but it is not. On the other hand, she talks about a more generous funding settlement for universities. She cannot have it both ways. The funding model must change, and the Scotland Office is in touch with all our universities' principals to see how we can work through this issue. This is a problem with the funding of higher education as a result of SNP policies and the Scottish Government.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I associate myself with the comments about the devastating loss of Pope Francis and the compassion that he showed to the most vulnerable in our society. On a happier note, I wish all friends and family a very happy St George's day. I also note my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in relation to higher education.

The Secretary of State will know that the biggest financial impacts on higher education in Scotland have been Westminster policies, which is why the sector in the UK faces some challenges. We have the national insurance increase, Brexit, which I know he passionately opposed—or used to, anyway—and the hostile environment. Labour found common ground with Michael Gove on sticking him into the House of Lords, but it also found common ground with him on his commitment to decentralising migration. That has had a particular impact on the higher education sector, not least in Dundee, which has had the biggest financial hit. Will the Secretary of State let us know what progress he has made on that commitment by Scottish Labour?

Ian Murray: May I give the hon. Gentleman and all his SNP colleagues our deepest condolences on the loss of Christina McKelvie? I think this is the first time that we have had Scottish questions since then.

I say again that the hon. Gentleman and his SNP colleagues voted against the Budget, which delivered an extra £4.9 billion for public services in Scotland. Some of that should have gone to frontline services, including to ensuring that our higher education sector was funded

properly in the Scottish context. The SNP is very good at blaming everybody else for powers that do not belong to it, but what it should actually do is get a mirror. In the last seven days, the only increase it has made in using the budget given to it is £20,000 on the salaries of Scottish Government Ministers, who have all singularly failed.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the Secretary of State for his kind remarks about the sad loss of Christina McKelvie. I also note the kind remarks made by the Prime Minister; the whole party is grateful for them.

Since the Labour Government do not want to talk about their commitments, let me help them out a little. We have time this Friday to discuss Scotland's migration needs, with a Bill backed by the care, hospitality and tourism sectors. Internationalisation in education and research is crucial, so in a spirit of collegiality, instead of pandering to Reform as Scottish Labour too often does on migration and our relationship with the EU, will the Secretary of State work with us ahead of the Bill on Friday so that we can find some common cause to help the higher education sector?

Ian Murray: There is complete denial about the problems in the higher education sector, which is devolved to the Scottish Government. We have made it clear that the immigration system we inherited from the previous Government is not working, that net migration is too high and that the interaction between migration and skills in the labour market is broken, so confidence in the whole system needs to be rebuilt.

Work is under way in government to link the work of Skills England and its equivalents, the Migration Advisory Committee, the Industrial Strategy Council and the Department for Work and Pensions to form a new framework to identify sectors that either do or do not have the adequate workforce, as well as skills strategies for the future workforce. There has been an overreliance on international recruitment. Lots of young people in Scotland—nearly one in six—are not in education, employment or training. That is a shambles. It should be Scotland's shame, and we need to do something about it.

Cancer Strategies

2. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): Whether he has had recent discussions with the Scottish Government on the implementation of cancer strategies. [903741]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): I commend the hon. Member for the consistent attention he has paid to this issue since he was elected last year and for educating us on it. Cancer remains Scotland's biggest killer, with Cancer Research UK reporting that Scots are receiving worse cancer treatment than their neighbours in other parts of the UK. The national cancer plan for England will save lives that would otherwise be lost to cancer and deliver improved care and patient experience. Last year, a UK Labour Budget delivered the biggest settlement for Scottish public services in the history of devolution. It is time for the Scottish Government to step up and get serious about cancer.

Clive Jones: I thank the Minister for her reply and very kind remarks. As in Wales and England, not a single NHS board in Scotland is meeting the 62-day cancer waiting time standard. That is a legacy of under-investment from the SNP in Scotland, from Labour in Wales, and from the Conservatives in England. To develop change and save lives, we need proper funding for cancer services. How will the Secretary of State for Scotland ensure that his colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care understand the importance of fully funding cancer strategies to avoid disasters like that devised by the SNP?

Kirsty McNeill: I assure the hon. Member that this is a priority for the Government, but as healthcare is a devolved matter, the Scottish Government are responsible for their own cancer strategies, including diagnostic services in Scotland. In England, improving early diagnosis of cancer—including breast cancer—is a priority for the UK Government, who are committed to transforming diagnostic services and will support the NHS to meet the demand for diagnostic services through investment in new capacity, including MRI and CT scanners.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): My constituent Stephen found out that he had prostate cancer almost by accident when he was treated for something else. Thankfully, it was diagnosed early and he is on his way to a good outcome. Despite prostate cancer being the most common cancer for men in Scotland, it is not one of the tumour types that has been promoted for early diagnosis in the current Scottish Government cancer strategy. Will the Minister encourage the Scottish Government to make specific reference to prostate cancer when promoting early diagnosis?

Kirsty McNeill: I commend my hon. Friend for her commitment to her constituents, and pass on the best wishes of the whole House to Stephen in his recovery. Her constituents, like mine, are constantly on the receiving end of late diagnoses because of the underfunding of cancer services that the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) has mentioned. We will, of course, continue to raise this issue with the Scottish Government as part of our ongoing commitment to deal with Scotland's biggest killer, which is cancer.

Barnett Formula: NHS Funding

3. **Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the impact of the Barnett formula on funding for the NHS in Scotland. [903742]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): Thanks to the Barnett formula, a Labour Chancellor and 37 Scottish Labour MPs, Scotland's public services have received the biggest ever financial settlement from the UK Government, but how has the SNP spent it? Well, despite the best efforts of our extraordinary NHS staff, every week, thousands of Scots will wait more than eight hours in A&E, and more than 100,000 Scots have been stuck on an NHS waiting list for over a year. Doctors, nurses and—most of all—Scottish patients have been failed by 18 years of SNP mismanagement. We desperately need a new direction.

Irene Campbell: There has been a noticeable increase in the number of people contacting my office about accessing GP services, and about long waiting times for hospital appointments and operations. Those who live in the Isle of Arran and actually get an appointment often cannot get to it, because they cannot get a ferry there and back on the same day. That is a different point, but as a former manager in the NHS, I have seen the consequences of the shortage of GPs in Scotland. There has been a recent successful recruitment campaign in different parts of England; does the Minister agree that it is time for the Scottish Government to utilise the Barnett consequential in order to improve access to NHS services in Scotland through robust workforce planning, and to follow the example of the NHS in England and get GPs successfully recruited?

Kirsty McNeill: I thank my hon. Friend, not just for her service to her constituents but her previous service in the NHS. As she has noted, thanks to Labour, NHS waiting lists in England have fallen month on month, because this Government have a plan and we have invested. Sadly, it is a completely different story in Scotland, as she has pointed out. Like mine, her constituents see a situation in which almost one in six people are now stuck on a waiting list. John Swinney has announced this SNP Government's fifth NHS recovery plan in less than four years, but patients and staff know that it is not good enough, and we need a new direction.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The Minister is right to speak of the wonderful NHS staff that we have, but she also speaks of a new direction that is required. Let me give the House a clue as to what new direction she might be speaking of. The Good Law Project revealed this month that more than 60% of donations to Labour's Health Secretary, totalling £372,000, came from individuals and companies linked to the private healthcare sector. As the same Labour Health Secretary is so fond of saying, all roads lead to Westminster, including on NHS funding. With cuts to public services coming down the line, is the Secretary of State—or the Minister—worried about the influence of private health donors on Cabinet colleagues?

Kirsty McNeill: The hon. Gentleman says that there have been cuts to public services. Let me put on record once again that this Labour Government pledged to end austerity, and we have, with a record settlement for Scotland's public services. That money has been squandered by the SNP Government, such that we are still in a situation where nearly one in six Scots are on a waiting list. South of the border, waiting lists have fallen for the fifth month in a row. That is the difference made by a Labour Government with a plan and a willingness to fund it.

North Sea Oil and Gas Licences: Economic Growth

4. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of not issuing new North sea oil and gas licences on levels of economic growth in Scotland. [903743]

15. **Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of not issuing new North sea oil and gas licences on levels of economic growth in Scotland. [903754]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): I am proud of the enormous contribution North sea workers have made to our country. Oil and gas will be an important part of our energy mix for decades to come. We have a workforce who lead the world, and we are determined to secure their long-term future in the energy industry, including oil and gas. The UK Government will soon respond to our recent consultation on supporting the energy transition in the North sea, and I am in the north-east tomorrow, turning on a wind farm and also meeting leaders in the oil and gas sector.

Sir Ashley Fox: If the UK achieves net zero in 2050, we will still consume about 14 billion barrels of oil and gas a year. We are currently on track to produce 4 billion barrels a year. Will the Secretary of State explain why he prefers to import our energy, rather than produce it ourselves?

Ian Murray: The national mission of this Labour Government is to get to clean power by 2030, but that means three things: renewable power, nuclear power, and oil and gas. As I have said already, oil and gas will be with us in the Scottish and UK context for decades to come.

Harriet Cross: A recent report by Offshore Energies UK showed that if the UK oil and gas basin continued to be used until 2050, it could produce half our oil and gas needs. That would do wonders for jobs in the north-east of Scotland, the north-east economy, our energy security and the energy transition, and it would also bring in £12 billion to the Treasury. On top of that, it would bring in £150 billion of economic growth to the UK, which I am sure everyone in this House and the Government would welcome. Will the Secretary of State please have a word with the Energy Secretary and ask him to stop his policies, which are continuing to ruin our oil and gas sector, and for once back north-east Scotland?

Ian Murray: On the oil and gas sector in 2050, I have already mentioned at the Dispatch Box, as has the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, that oil and gas will be with us for decades to come, including to 2050.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is an opportunity for significant economic growth in Scotland from getting right a just transition from oil and gas to clean power? In my constituency, the landing space at the port of Leith previously used by the oil and gas sector has been transformed by investment from Forth Ports into the largest renewable hub in Scotland. Will he join me in welcoming this investment in Leith, and will he outline how his Department will help secure every job possible in the transition from oil and gas?

Ian Murray: I commend my hon. Friend on the work she is doing, particularly in the port of Leith, to ensure that we can have the transition and have it well. She highlights the important thing about this issue and debate: the energy mix requires us to have renewable power and clean energy by 2030, but it also requires us to have nuclear power and oil and gas. The energy mix means that we do it all; it is not either/or.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): The Secretary of State rightly outlines how important the oil and gas sector is to Scotland, and to the workers and businesses that rely on it, but if we are to have a truly just transition, we need to invest in new technologies such as hydrogen. Will he, therefore, join me in welcoming the shortlisting of the Selms Muir hydrogen project in Livingston for UK Government support, and outline how that will benefit my constituency?

Ian Murray: On 7 April, the UK Government announced that eight Scottish projects had been shortlisted for the next stage of the hydrogen allocation round 2 process. My ministerial colleagues and I look forward to working with industry to deliver our vision for a thriving low-carbon, hydrogen economy in the UK. I commend my hon. Friend on the work he has done in pushing forward the project in his constituency.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with the Scottish Labour leader, who says there is no question but that there has to be new oil and gas, or does he agree with his colleague the Energy Secretary, who has banned new licences in the North sea and is overseeing the accelerating decline of the UK's oil and gas basin?

Ian Murray: The Energy Secretary and his Department are involved in a consultation on the just transition at the moment, but I go back to my earlier answers: if we are to get clean power by 2030 and to have an energy mix in this country, we require oil and gas, we require renewables and we require nuclear. It is a simple process.

Andrew Bowie: I think we all heard that, and I am sure Anas Sarwar did. The Secretary of State was unable to agree with his own leader in Scotland, and is so in hock to the UK Labour party that he cannot stand up for Scottish workers or the Scottish oil and gas industry. It has always been the party interest over the national interest for Labour, with no notice taken of the Scottish Labour party. Ten years ago, the Scottish Labour party was described by its own leader as being simply the "branch office". Nothing has changed, has it?

Ian Murray: The Government's sole purpose initially, in their first few months in office, was to clear up the mess that the hon. Gentleman's party left in this country, including the £22 billion black hole. We will get on with delivering our missions, including clean power by 2030. That is what we are focused on, because that is what is good for jobs, good for bills and good for the environment.

Plant and Seed Nurseries: Northern Ireland

5. Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of support available to Scottish plant and seed nurseries to sell products to Northern Ireland. [903744]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): Under the Windsor framework arrangements, the Northern Ireland plant health label allows growers and traders to move plants and seeds for planting from Great Britain to Northern Ireland without a phytosanitary certificate, and Scottish businesses have benefited from that. For example, more than 1,500 tonnes

of previously prohibited seed potatoes, mostly from Scottish traders, were moved to Northern Ireland from Great Britain last year.

Robin Swann: As the Minister will know, according to McIntyre Fruit in Scotland, which also sells plants, it is easier to supply Japan than to send plants to Coleman's garden centre in my constituency, and the same company is now seeing orders cancelled in Northern Ireland. At the weekend, Ewing's Seafoods, Northern Ireland's oldest fishmonger, had a 40-foot container filled with hundreds of thousands of pounds of fresh fish returned from Belfast to Scotland owing to administrative paperwork errors on seven boxes. Will the Minister, or the Secretary of State, meet me and representatives of those companies to discuss what can be done to ease the bureaucratic burden on both Northern Ireland and Scottish business?

Kirsty McNeill: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman, but let me reassure him: the horticultural working group, co-chaired by senior officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Cabinet Office, was set up specifically to tackle issues involving the movement of seeds to consumers in Northern Ireland as a first priority. The hon. Gentleman has also mentioned other topics, and I should be happy to meet him to discuss them, too. The working group meets regularly to address such issues, and includes representatives of the Ulster Farmers Union, the National Farmers Union and the Horticultural Trades Association, as well as business leaders and representatives of a small number of other horticultural businesses.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): Scotland produces world-class potatoes, which are supplied to our iconic fish and chip shops, such as the Real Food Café and the Green Welly Stop in Tyndrum, Vincenzo's Fish and Chips in Stirling—its fish supper won an award last year—and Corrieri's in Causewayhead; Robert and Peter Corrieri will retire this year after decades of service. Will the Minister recognise their value to our local economies, and assure me that more can be done to support the supply chains linking Scottish growers with these much-loved businesses?

Kirsty McNeill: As my hon. Friend knows, potatoes are a staple of our national dish, haggis, neeps and tatties. They are also a staple of my favourite breakfast, the dry potato scone. I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in recognising all the fish and chip shops in his constituency, and I would be delighted to accept invitations to a tour of fish and chip shops from any colleague on either side of the House who recognises their vital contribution.

Exports: Impact of US Tariffs

6. **David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): What assessment has his Department made of the potential impact of US tariffs on Scotland's exports to that country. [903745]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): We know that this will be a concerning time for businesses in Scotland. In 2024, 12.3% of goods exported from Scotland were exported to the United States. That is why the UK Government are focused on negotiating an

economic deal with the US. As the Business and Trade Secretary made clear in his statement to the House on 3 April, the Government are resolute in our support for industries throughout the United Kingdom, and Ministers and officials will continue to engage with businesses to understand the impact that these tariffs may have.

David Mundell: May I associate myself with the comments about Pope Francis and Christina McKelvie, and wish you, Mr Speaker, a happy St George's day? It is very important that we all celebrate our national identities but still come together as one United Kingdom. I hope that the Secretary of State and I were not too optimistic in our last exchange about trade with the US, in which we hoped that the Trump Administration would be a boost for Scottish business in the United States. What is he doing in the UK's discussions with the United States to ensure that specific Scottish interests, such as those of the whisky industry, are part of the arrangements?

Ian Murray: As I have said at the Dispatch Box before, it is vital that we do all we can to strengthen our diplomatic, cultural and business ties with the United States. I was in Washington and New York for Tartan Week in the week when tariffs were imposed on the rest of the world, and I made the case for Scotch whisky and Scottish businesses in particular. We are engaging with Scottish exporters and industry representatives to assess the potential impact of US tariffs, and remain in contact with US counterparts. Our pragmatic and calm approach has been overwhelmingly welcomed by businesses and industry. We will not address this important issue in a knee-jerk way to get retweets, unlike some others in this House.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the pragmatic and calm approach of our Prime Minister to this issue? He is working in the clear interests of businesses and consumers, in contrast to Opposition Members, who seem interested only in social media and quick headlines.

Ian Murray: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The pragmatic approach of the Prime Minister and this Government to this issue has been welcomed by industry and businesses right across the United Kingdom. That is in the national interests of the UK. We work very hard together to make sure that the impacts of US tariffs on the UK are not as bad as we thought they might be.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [903690] **Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 23 April.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): The entire House will join me in paying tribute to His Holiness Pope Francis, an extraordinary man. His lifelong work on fairness will leave a lasting legacy. People of all backgrounds and beliefs were inspired by his humility and compassion, and the outpouring of grief and love that we have seen

in the last two days or so shows the respect and admiration that he was held in around the world. I will attend his funeral on Saturday and pay tribute to his courage and leadership. May His Holiness rest in peace.

I also wish everyone in England a very happy St George's day. There is a lot to celebrate: our history, our values and our culture.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Steve Darling: May I also wish those in the Chamber a happy St George's day?

After a cost of living crisis overseen by the chaotic Conservative Government, many in the tourist industry in Torbay believed that they had weathered the storm, as did those in Devon and Cornwall. However, many in the tourist industry in Torbay fear that the Government's national insurance contribution hikes and effective jobs tax could be the last nail in the coffin for some of those businesses. In the light of that, will the Prime Minister give me the pleasure of showing him round Paignton zoo this summer, so he can see this outstanding, amazing tourist attraction in Torbay? It is one of many across the west of England that, sadly, are massively impacted by the jobs tax.

The Prime Minister: May I start by wishing Jennie, the hon. Gentleman's guide dog, a very happy birthday for yesterday? She is six years old—although she does not look particularly interested in my answer, I have to say.

I recognise the importance of tourism to the hon. Gentleman's beautiful constituency—I have been there many times, and worked there for a short time—in driving growth and creating jobs. We have announced a new Visitor Economy Advisory Council, which will work with business to deliver a new strategy that is focused on supporting growth and the tourism industry. VisitBritain has also launched a new international marketing campaign to showcase Britain's incredible heritage, culture and landscapes, and I know the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism will be happy to keep the hon. Gentleman updated.

Q2. [903691] Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): The criminal injuries compensation scheme has not been uprated with inflation since 2012, which means that in real terms, compensation for victims of violent crime, including rape and child abuse, is worth less than half of what it was then. The consultation response published before Easter said that there was not the money to look at changing the scope, tariffs or time limits, despite expert advice and the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. Will the Prime Minister commit to properly funding the Ministry of Justice to do this vital reform work, so that victims and their needs can become a priority, instead of an afterthought?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend knows my personal commitment to delivering justice for victims of crime, who have been completely failed over the last 14 years. We are improving access to compensation through better online systems, and are equipping staff with the skills that they need to better support victims. We are of

course also consulting on a revised victims code, which will increase the powers of the Victims' Commissioner to ensure more accountability. I am happy to ensure that she meets the relevant Minister to discuss those issues.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I, too, wish everyone a happy St George's day. Can I also associate myself with the remarks about the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis on Easter Monday? Being married to a Catholic, I know the profound loss for millions in Britain and across the world.

Does the Prime Minister now accept that when he said that it was the law that trans women were women, he was wrong?

The Prime Minister: Let me be clear: I welcome the Supreme Court ruling on this issue. It brings clarity, and it will give confidence to women, and of course to service providers. The Equality and Human Rights Commission will now issue updated guidance. It is important that that happens, and that all service providers then act accordingly. This Government's approach, and my approach, has been as follows: to support and implement the Supreme Court ruling, and we will; to continue to protect single-sex spaces based on biological sex, and we will; to ensure that trans people are treated with respect, and we will; and to ensure that everybody is given dignity in their everyday lives. I do think this is the time to lower the temperature, move forward and conduct this debate with the care and compassion that it deserves, and I think that should unite the whole House.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister cannot bring himself to admit that he was wrong; that was the question. He spoke about respect and dignity, compassion and lowering the temperature, so will he now apologise to the very brave hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) for hounding her out of the Labour party simply for telling the truth?

The Prime Minister: I have always approached this on the basis that we should treat everyone with dignity and respect, whatever their different views, and I will continue to do so. I will tell you, Mr Speaker, why: because when we lose sight of that approach and make this a political football, as happened in the past, we end up with the spectacle of a decent man—and he was a decent man, the previous Prime Minister—diminishing himself at this Dispatch Box by making trans jokes while the mother of a murdered trans teenager watched from the Public Gallery just up there. That will never be my approach. My approach will be to support the ruling, protect single-sex spaces and treat everybody with dignity and respect, and I believe there is a consensus in this House and the country on that approach.

Mrs Badenoch: There was no apology to the hon. Member for Canterbury. There is no taking of responsibility. The Prime Minister talks about political football; he practically kicked her out of his party—constructive dismissal. He talks about my predecessor. What about the abuse I faced from his MPs, who called me a

transphobe for supporting what the Supreme Court has now clarified, to use his words? And where was he? He hid for six days without commenting on the Supreme Court judgment. Why did it take him so long to respond? Is it not because he was scared?

The Prime Minister: The only fiction here is the idea that the right hon. Member delivered anything in office. She held the post of Minister for Women and Equalities for two years, and she did precisely nothing. She provided no clarity on the law, and did nothing to improve women's lives, which got materially worse under her watch. For example, the Opposition talk about hospitals and mixed-sex wards, up hill and down dale. What happened in the last decade? The use of mixed-sex wards in our NHS rose by 2,000%. There is a pattern of behaviour here: the Women and Equalities Minister who failed to do anything for women; the Trade Minister who failed to get a trade deal with the US; the Business Minister who failed to get a deal with British Steel. She is a spectator, not a leader.

Mrs Badenoch: I will tell the Prime Minister what I did. I stopped the gender—[*Interruption.*] I will, I will. When his Labour leader in Scotland was whipping his MSPs to get male rapists into women's prisons, I stopped that gender recognition Bill. I helped commission the Cass review. I replaced the guidance on single-sex toilets. I made sure that the puberty blockers issue was resolved, while he was sitting there cheering on the ideology that was taking away safe spaces. And when the Prime Minister stayed silent last week, presumably waiting to hear what Morgan McSweeney thinks, on his WhatsApp groups some of his closest Ministers were plotting to overturn the Supreme Court decision. Labour MP after Labour MP stood up yesterday and challenged the ruling. How can we take his Government seriously on this?

The Prime Minister: I think the WhatsApp group the right hon. Lady should be worried about is the one with her shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). The mask has slipped, just one week before the elections. The shadow Justice Secretary is not here. A man who is doing everything he can to replace her, the man that most Conservative Members want as leader of their party, has admitted that Reform and the Tories are working together. He said:

“I want the fight to be united.”

He said he is determined

“to bring this coalition”,

as he calls it,

“together...one way or another”.

Well, I think we know what that means. Every Tory voter is appalled at the thought of paying for the NHS; every Reform voter hates what the Tories did for the last 14 years. They are not Conservatives; they are a con.

Mrs Badenoch: Who is playing political football now? The Prime Minister has no answers. Yesterday, Labour MP after Labour MP challenged the ruling. He should be more worried about his Back Benchers than my Front Benchers. His Labour Ministers called the chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission “appalling”. Baroness Falkner's role is critical to enforcing the Court's judgment. She has had to put up with relentless abuse,

not just from his Front Bench but from activists and ideologues. Reappointing her would be a clear sign that he is taking this issue seriously, so will he commit to reappointing Baroness Falkner when her term expires this year?

The Prime Minister: I have always said that the debate should be conducted properly, on the principle. I have said it many, many times. I would remind the Leader of the Opposition that when they were in government, violence against women and girls reached record highs, rape prosecutions fell to record lows, and millions of women were left stuck on NHS waiting lists, unable to get the healthcare they needed. Under this Labour Government, NHS waiting lists are down by more than 200,000, and there are domestic abuse specialists in 999 control rooms. We strengthened access to maternity pay, something she called excessive. She talks about political footballs, but a coalition of Reform and the Tories is being formed behind her back. We know what it means when the shadow Justice Secretary and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) cook up a joint manifesto: NHS charging, pro-Russia foreign policy, and an end to workers' rights. Just as the previous Government lost control of the economy, borders and health, in six short months she has lost control of her party.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister is clearly so uncomfortable talking about this subject. This is a choice between a Conservative party that stood up for common sense and a Labour party that bends the knee to every passing fad. This is a question about moral courage, and doing the right thing even when it is difficult. The truth is he doesn't have the balls. The Prime Minister only tells people what they want to hear. He is a weathervane; he twists in the wind. He cheered an ideology that denied safe spaces to women and girls, because he thought it was cool to do so. He hounded a brave female MP out of his party for telling the truth he accepts now. And now, he is hiding behind the Supreme Court judgment. Is that not because he does not know what he actually believes?

The Prime Minister: I can only assume that that sounded better when the right hon. Lady said it in the mirror earlier. The truth is, it does not really matter what she says, because nobody—none of them behind her—believes that she is going to lead them into the next election anyway. It will be the shadow Justice Secretary, who is away plotting—that is why he is not here today—and the hon. Member for Clacton fighting over the bones of the Tory party. The Conservatives think Reform will give them its votes without changing their policy—absolutely no way. The hon. Member for Clacton will do what he always does: eat the Tory party for breakfast.

Q3. [903692] **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): I wish you, Mr Speaker, and the House a happy St George's day.

I recently had the pleasure of visiting the National Gas operations in Peterborough, where the company was announcing a £350 million investment in the UK, including at least 100 new jobs in my constituency. The investment will make Peterborough the centre of the nation's core gas and hydrogen network. One of the big challenges faced by infrastructure projects is the lack of

available skills and training for young people. What more can the Prime Minister do to boost apprenticeships in places such as my constituency to ensure we create the opportunities this country so desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: The net zero transition is a huge economic opportunity for this country, despite the naysayers on the Opposition Benches. We have had almost £44 billion of investment since July, which will deliver jobs across the country, including in my hon. Friend's constituency—investment that the Opposition presumably do not want. We are ensuring we have the skilled workers that we need, launching Skills England and our new growth and skills offer to encourage even more apprenticeships, and supporting the industry-led plan for hydrogen to deliver the workforce needed for the industry of the future.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I also wish the House and the country a happy St George's day, and join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the late Pope Francis. As a Christian, I found his compassion absolutely inspiring. My prayers are with Catholics in the UK and across the world, who will feel his loss particularly deeply.

I have previously raised with the Prime Minister the issue of North Devon district hospital. The previous Government promised to rebuild it, as they did hospitals across the south-west, in places such as Torbay and Musgrove Park. Unfortunately, they broke that promise, leaving appalling conditions like sewage leaks and patients being treated in corridors. Will the Prime Minister reconsider his decision to delay further the construction of new hospitals, and ask his MPs to vote for our motion today for new hospitals?

The Prime Minister: The previous programme, introduced by the Conservative party, was undeliverable and unaffordable, as I think the right hon. Gentleman knows and accepts. We have put the new hospital programme on a sustainable footing with a timeline that can be met—we are not prepared to trade on false promises, as the Conservatives did—and obviously we have also put record investment into the NHS.

I gently urge the right hon. Gentleman to one day get a bit more serious about the funding of these measures. Every week, he comes to the Chamber to push me on two issues: he pushes me to spend a lot more money, but at the same time, in the next breath, he opposes the measures in the Budget to raise the necessary money.

Ed Davey: Unlike the Prime Minister, we had a funded programme at the election. I am disappointed with his reply—I hope he will actually visit some of these hospitals to see the urgent need for rebuilding.

At Merton Mead farm in Oxfordshire last week, I saw world-class British beef farmers at work. Farmers want the Prime Minister to be careful in a trade deal with President Trump. They were let down by the Conservatives' appalling trade deals and worry that a bad US deal could allow American agribusiness to undercut them with inferior meat. Will the Prime Minister guarantee a vote in this House on any trade deal that he agrees with the United States?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises a point that is of real interest and importance to farmers. We will negotiate, as he would expect, in the national interest and uphold the highest animal welfare standards. We are making progress on that, and there will then be a process if a deal is reached.

Q5. [903694] Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): This time last year, train manufacturing at Alstom in Derby was grinding to a halt. On a single day, workers with a combined welding experience of nearly 1,000 years walked out of its doors, but the whole city came together with crucial backing from this Prime Minister. What a difference a year makes, with Alstom saved and set to host the greatest gathering to celebrate 200 years of rail and our railways coming back into public ownership, with the headquarters of Great British Railways in Derby. Does the Prime Minister agree that, with Labour, we are back on track?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for Derby. She is right: whether it is the workforce I met at Alstom or the workers at Hitachi in County Durham, we will support our rail industry, providing certainty that delivers jobs, investment and security. I met those workforces. I know how worried they were a year ago, as she rightly says, when the previous Government were in charge. I am really proud that Derby will be the home of Great British Railways, because we are bringing railways back into public ownership to provide better services for passengers, cutting delays and cancellations and boosting growth across the country.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I and my party join the Prime Minister in his condolences for the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis.

The Prime Minister has often referred to his time working in Northern Ireland, and I have spoken to one of his bosses, who speaks of his diligence. In that vein, could he speak to his Northern Ireland team about their understanding of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement? In an interview, the Secretary of State seemed to think that it had been negotiated by Ian Paisley, rather than David Trimble and my party. His Northern Ireland Minister said at the start of this week that the future of Northern Ireland as part of the Union is dependent on opinion polls and she was not sure whether she was a Unionist. Will the Prime Minister confirm to me his understanding of the principle of consent and confirm to this House that he is a Unionist?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for that question. I did work in Northern Ireland for five years and therefore appreciate at first hand how important these issues are. It was a very formative period for me in terms of my career and my thinking.

The Good Friday agreement is one of the proudest achievements of the last Labour Government. I pay tribute to everybody who helped to bring that about, because, as the hon. Member and other Members will know, it was such an important moment in the history of the conflict. I absolutely stand four-square behind its principles, some of which I was doing my part to help implement when I was working in Northern Ireland, and they will always drive me on the issues that he raises with me.

Q6. [903695] **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Happy St George's Day, Mr Speaker. May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about Pope Francis?

After 14 years of a Conservative Government, too many of my constituents live on low incomes or in real poverty. I very much welcome the employment support proposals in the welfare Green Paper, but the Government have to be clear about the real opportunities they are offering to the more than 3 million families who they say will lose out financially as a result of this package. Before asking MPs to vote, can the Prime Minister confirm that we will see fresh analysis from the Office for Budget Responsibility, evidence on who will be affected by the personal independence payments changes, and the Government's own assessment of the employment impact of their measures? Will he confirm that this policy will not result in increased experience of poverty?

The Prime Minister: We are reforming a broken system—the system that we inherited. I think most people accept that it needs reform, because it traps people in unemployment and inactivity, and we need to reform it for that reason. The principles will be that we will provide support where support is needed. Where people want to get into work, we will help them into work. The current system operates against people who want to get into work and make that transition; if they can work, they should work. Moving into work is what halves the risk of being in poverty, and that is why we have invested £1 billion in tailored employment support. Of course, we are also introducing a new premium for those with the most severe lifelong disabilities who will never be able to work.

Q4. [903693] **Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Last week, former steelworkers in Port Talbot watched in dismay as this Government deemed their livelihoods worth less than those in Scunthorpe. Freedom of information requests reveal that the UK Government do not know how their funding for reskilling workers in Wales is being used or even how many people are being retrained, and we know that concerns have been raised by the transition board. If the Government cannot explain how they are helping Port Talbot's laid-off workers to build a future through reskilling, why should those workers not come to the logical conclusion that Labour has abandoned them?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Member raises an important issue. I visited Port Talbot a number of times and heard at first hand from the workforce. She may or may not know that even in opposition, before the election, I was talking to the owners to try to persuade them to delay their decisions, because I knew an election was coming. That is how important I thought it was. I remind her that at the same time, the then Prime Minister refused to pick up a call to the First Minister even to discuss the issue. I took a different approach, because I realised just how important it was.

The right hon. Lady compares the situation with the decision we took last week, but I remind her that the blast furnaces were turned off in January last year and the coke ovens in March 2024, which was before the election. That was the very thing I was trying to ensure did not happen, for reasons that she and the workforce will understand, and I was talking to the workforce

throughout. Since then we have been able to negotiate an improved deal with Tata that means better terms for the workers, and we did that within 10 weeks. We are working hard to maximise opportunities from the £1.25 billion investment in an electric arc furnace, we are supporting those facing job losses with £80 million of funding to learn new skills, and we are supporting the supply chains and protecting communities.

The right hon. Lady talks about protecting working people, but she voted against the biggest devolution settlement since devolution. That includes more money for public services, including the NHS, and her party voted against it.

Q7. [903696] **Kenneth Stevenson** (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I commend the Prime Minister and his Government for the action taken to reform the NHS in England and make it fit for the modern day, with improved technology, more GPs and appointments, and waiting lists cut for consecutive months. However, it is deeply unfortunate that in Scotland the SNP Government have made the political choice to waste taxpayer money on vanity projects, flawed legislation and failed court cases rather than focus on improving our health service. Does the Prime Minister agree that the people of Airdrie and Shotts, who have been promised a new hospital for almost a decade, deserve far better than to suffer in pain while on waiting lists or to receive treatment in crumbling buildings as a direct consequence of SNP incompetence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a real champion for Airdrie and Shotts. Over 60,000 Scots have been stuck, waiting for tests or treatment for over a year, which is a 46% rise in one year. Almost 50,000 fewer operations have been carried out compared with before the pandemic. To compare what the SNP is doing with what we are doing here in England, we have driven down waiting lists within six months, with six months in a row of reductions, and we have over 3 million extra appointments. Scotland's NHS urgently needs change, but the SNP has no strategy or plan—it has absolutely no ideas.

Q10. [903699] **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The danger posed by China to our national security is self-evident. Can the Prime Minister explain why he and his Government have chosen to treat Beijing as a business partner and not as the hostile state that it truly is?

The Prime Minister: I have set out our approach to China a number of times. It is not materially different from the approach in the last years of the previous Government, I might add. In relation to Scunthorpe, the deal that we had to deal with during recess was the deal negotiated by the last Government. We have taken sensible decisions in the national interest and will continue to do so.

Q8. [903697] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister will join me in celebrating the opening of the new Brixton blood donation centre in my constituency, which in three months has seen over 3,700 people donate, more than 1,000 of them first-timers and 10% of them black. However, given that sickle cell anaemia is the fastest growing genetic condition in the UK, that is not

enough. Demand for the Ro blood subtype—more common in people of African descent—is rising by 10% to 15% annually, and it is crucial for treating sickle cell. Rules around travellers as well as inaccurate iron tests mean that we are seeing willing black donors turned away for four to 12 months. Of course blood donation must be safe, but failure to review the guidelines is costing lives. Will the Prime Minister commit to reviewing the rules and join me in calling on you, Mr Speaker, to help us all play our part by facilitating a biannual blood drive in Parliament?

Mr Speaker: I am trying to arrange that.

The Prime Minister: I will leave that to you, Mr Speaker. I do not think it is for me to suggest that you donate your blood, although I am sure that you do and that we can support this jointly. We should take that up across the House under your leadership, Mr Speaker.

Let me join my hon. Friend in welcoming the new Brixton blood donor centre and the lifesaving support that it provides. Increasing donor diversity is a priority for the NHS, and we are working to increase Ro blood donations by engaging with communities who are more likely to have that blood type. I will ensure that she meets the relevant Health Minister to discuss what more we can do in this area.

Q11. [903700] **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): British Governments of all political persuasions have long taken pride in reducing the carbon footprint of the British manufacturing industry. Unfortunately, in too many cases, too much of that so-called reduction has been achieved by driving British industry abroad to countries such as China and India that actually use more carbon to produce the same product—British Steel is just the latest example of that—which is bad for the global environment and disastrous for the British economy. That is against a background of European carbon policies that have failed over 20 years. Does the Prime Minister have a new domestic British policy that will protect British industry from this disastrous long-term trend?

The Prime Minister: We are doing everything available to us to protect car building in this country. The right hon. Gentleman will have noticed that two weeks ago, I made announcements about the zero emission vehicle mandate and what more we could do to support the industry. That was an immediate response to circumstances as they were, but I indicated at the time—and I do so again—that we will do whatever it takes to support our car industry.

Q9. [903698] **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): My constituent Billy spent months trying to see a GP to investigate his symptoms. It took four months of telephone appointments before he was finally seen in person and got the test that diagnosed stage 4 cancer. That delay in diagnosis has dramatically changed the prognosis, and as someone who has become a friend, it hurts me to see the pain that he is now living in. Does the Prime Minister agree that primary care is a vital part of the healthcare system and that we need wider access to both in-person and telephone appointments?

The Prime Minister: I am deeply sorry to hear about Billy's case; I am sure the whole House is. Our focus has to be on making sure that GPs spend more time caring for patients. That includes the investment of an additional £889 million in general practice in England, which has put over 1,500 GPs into surgeries since October. We did deliver a record settlement for Scotland's public services to help fix our NHS and ensure that people like Billy get the care that they deserve.

Q13. [903702] **John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): Through the ages, an innovative and vibrant City of London has underpinned investment and growth in the wider economy, but the main challenge the City currently faces is how to get more capital into capital markets. Like many, I believe that London could gain new momentum if the Government took bold action to challenge and empower those who steward our pension assets to do things in new ways. Following the Chancellor's decision to offer continuity of leadership at the Financial Conduct Authority, will the Prime Minister convene an urgent No. 10 summit with City leaders and the regulators to provide a reset and to maximise the chances that the City can lead economic growth and recovery in these times of grave uncertainty and turmoil?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right that we need to go further and faster in kick-starting growth and attracting the investment we need to create jobs, and that our regulators must regulate for growth and not just for risk. We do want that continuity of leadership that he mentioned, and we are convening and getting people together to drive growth. We will take away the ideas that he put on the table.

Q12. [903701] **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Proposed changes to personal independence payments mean that people who require various levels of support due to lifelong conditions such as learning disabilities will not meet the new eligibility criteria. However, the Green Paper introduces a group of people with lifelong conditions who will not be subject to reassessment. Can the Prime Minister confirm that people with a learning disability—a lifelong condition that will not change—will be included in the group of claimants who will not be subjected to repeated reassessments?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question; I know this issue means a lot to her. We are clear on the principles for reform: protecting those with the most severe disabilities, who will never be able to work, as she refers to, and making sure that people with the most severe disabilities and health conditions will never again face the prospect of being constantly reassessed. We are making sure that extra financial support is based on the impact of a health condition or disability, not the capacity to work, and I can reassure her that we are carefully considering options for transitional protection.

Q15. [903704] **Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): His Chancellor's economic policies started off badly and have headed rapidly downhill from there, his Energy Secretary's policies ensure that energy-rich Scotland lives under the highest domestic and commercial energy prices in the world, and his Foreign Secretary provides diplomatic cover for the atrocities committed

in Gaza by the Israel Defence Forces, to the horror of the people of Scotland, but the Prime Minister is the incompetent-in-chief who refuses to bring his Ministers into line. That is just one of the reasons why independence enjoys an 11-point lead over remaining in this dysfunctional, broken, Brexit Britain. Does he understand why the people of Scotland are so dissatisfied with his latest iteration of dysfunctional British rule in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: Does the hon. Gentleman understand that the electorate in Scotland answered that question in July of last year? I remember that there used to be quite a few SNP Members sitting on the Opposition Benches; now it is a distant cry from up on the Back Benches.

Q14. [903703] **Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Ind): Last week, humanitarian law organisations applied for an arrest warrant for Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar over alleged war crimes in Gaza, including the siege of Kamal Adwan hospital and the torture of its director, Dr Hussam Abu Safiya, yet the red carpet was rolled out. Sa'ar has justified blocking vital humanitarian aid into Gaza, backed the illegal annexation of Palestinian land and rejected a Palestinian state. The Prime Minister is a human rights lawyer, so surely he knows that the UK has a legal duty to uphold international law. Why, then, did he block the arrest of an unindicted war criminal?

The Prime Minister: I didn't.

Point of Order

12.38 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You, like me, have long been a supporter of Britain's nuclear test veterans, so I wonder whether you could advise me. Given that Government lawyers have finally admitted, after 73 years of denial, that tests may have taken place at the time that those veterans were in the south Atlantic—they say that

“information may have been recorded by scientists carrying out radiation monitoring”—

surely a statement in the House by a Government Minister is required. How can I facilitate that?

Mr Speaker: I do not think I even need to answer that; the right hon. Gentleman is a man who knows how to facilitate that, and I know the matter will not end here. That is not a point of order for the Chair, and I am not carrying on questions, but he has certainly got the matter on the record and I know he will now pursue it in the many ways available to him.

BILL PRESENTED

CHALK STREAMS (SEWERAGE INVESTMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daisy Cooper presented a Bill to require water companies to prioritise areas with chalk streams and related habitats when investing in new and upgraded sewerage systems, including foul water leak prevention and the replacement or upgrading of porous sewage pipelines; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July and to be printed (Bill 223).

Interpersonal Abuse and Violence Against Men and Boys (Strategy)

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

12.39 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to prepare and publish a strategy for tackling interpersonal abuse and violence against men and boys; and for connected purposes.

This Labour Government have pledged to halve instances of violence against women and girls, an intent that I have no doubt those on both sides of this House are fully able to support. The aim of this Bill is to tackle an aspect of the current violence against women and girls strategy—an aspect that makes no sense and that it is essential for the Government to address.

The violence against women and girls strategy currently includes male victims of violence against women and girls. The Government still define violence against women and girls, or VAWG, as a category of crimes which disproportionately affect women. Therefore, all victims of crimes such as domestic abuse, rape, sexual assault, digital image abuse, forced marriage and honour-based violence, including men and boys, are considered victims of VAWG. I want to make it clear that this Bill in no way detracts from the work already done and still to be done in tackling violence against women and girls; the Bill simply aims to ensure that male victims of those crimes have a dedicated strategy that reflects the differing nature of their circumstances and ensures that male survivors are recognised and receive appropriate support. The current mis-categorisation forces male victims into spaces and discussions that may more appropriately be reserved for women.

At present the Government have no dedicated strategy for tackling interpersonal abuse and violence against men and boys. In 2019, the previous Government published their first ever position statement on male victims, and they followed this in 2022 with an addendum on supporting male victims. The change in Government and a revised strategy on violence against women and girls present a new opportunity to devise a parallel strategy for violence against men and boys in lieu of any direction from the Government regarding the publication of a new, updated position statement. The Minister for Safeguarding, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), is, as I understand it, currently rewriting the violence against women and girls strategy for publication later this spring, and to that end, now is the time to legislate for such a change to be formalised.

It should be noted that when the Government state their hope to halve violence against women and girls, the start-state of that data currently includes victims who are men and boys. Victims of gender-based violence face many barriers that prevent them from reporting instances of abuse: the fear of not being believed; the threat that the perpetrator may still pose; or the simple fact of not being aware of the services available to help or being aware and not being able to access them. There are also the complexities around the consequences of disclosure, such as the impact on living arrangements or financial security and how this can, in turn, lead to instances of coercive control. For men and boys, however,

there are additional factors: the shame and stigma of not appearing to be masculine, of being vulnerable, of potentially having their sexuality outed, and of being the victim of a crime considered, and officially referred to, as applying to female victims.

The majority of men seeking help have coped alone, often for long periods, and are still living with their abusive partners. Men in such circumstances might need help with housing and finances, and, in circumstances involving dependent children, with how they can maintain their role as a father. Safety planning for this group of men must be initiated at the point of disclosure, as the majority of those seeking help do not return to those providing it following first contact.

The crime survey for England and Wales for the year ending September 2024 showed that 3% of men aged 16 and over were victims of domestic abuse between September 2023 and September 2024, compared with 6.6% of women. According to Women's Aid's 2025 annual audit report, as of May 2024 there were just 50 refuges in England with bed spaces for men. As such, of a total of 63,950 people supported in safe accommodation in that period, only 1,830 were men.

There is also a difference in the needs of men who are gay, bisexual or trans. Owing to the complexities of the nature of these relationships and the risk of being outed, of being the victim of prejudice or of being disowned by family members, male victims are less likely to report domestic abuse to statutory services. Carlisle and Withers Green's 2023 survey highlighted that over 70% of gay, bisexual and trans male victims of domestic abuse had never sought support from a statutory service provider. Their statistics are therefore not recorded in any official figures and as a result these victims find themselves further isolated, increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

Sexual abuse against men is a vastly under-reported crime: one in four adults sexually assaulted in the UK each year is a man; one in 10 rapes and one in seven sexual assaults have male victims according to the Office for National Statistics; 3.5% of boys become victims of child sexual abuse before they turn 16; one in four victims of child sexual abuse are men; and over 70% of child sex abusers are people known to their victims. Shame, stigma, homophobia and emasculation are all factors in preventing sexual abuse from being reported. It often takes years for a male victim to report a sexual assault to the police. Male sexual assault survivors are three times more likely to tell a family member, friend or colleague than they are to report an incident to the police. Data from the Office for National Statistics suggests that fewer than a third of male victims of sexual assault have ever disclosed what they have experienced.

For straight men, there can also be a hesitancy to disclose abuse owing to the misconception that men should be physically strong enough to prevent an assault. Male victims of abuse who have been forced to penetrate by a partner can struggle to identify their experiences as abuse because it caused them to be aroused. Rape and sexual abuse should never be minimised because a perpetrator is female. The law currently states that while males and females can be the victim of rape, only males can realistically commit the act of rape. The introduction of a "forced to penetrate" sexual offence could therefore address that.

Honour-based violence is another factor that is poorly understood and catered for. Victims of honour-based violence are at greater risk of repeat victimisation and are often at risk from multiple perpetrators. However, no discrete crime of so-called honour-based violence or abuse is defined in our legislation, so in most instances male victims would be classified by police as victims of violence without injury or stalking and harassment. Data from the Crown Prosecution Service suggests that around 30% of prosecutions for honour-based violence involve male victims.

Additionally, the forced marriage unit has consistently seen that 20% of forced marriage victims are male. That often includes men from overseas who are forced to marry UK citizens and can find themselves forced into domestic servitude, thus also becoming victims of modern slavery.

This time last year, Professor Nicola Graham-Kevan of the University of Lancashire undertook research and published data on how male survivors feel about being categorised as victims of violence against women and girls: 89% stated that it made it harder to seek help; 89% stated that they experienced distress; 88% stated that the Government do not care; 80% stated that it was minimising their experiences; 75% stated that it was not taken seriously; and 73% stated that it was not recognised by society. It is clear that the damaging impact of including male victims within a strategy that caters for violence against women and girls means that male survivors cannot identify with that labelling. Organisations such as We Are Survivors, the Men & Boys Coalition and the ManKind Initiative have been instrumental in providing support to male victims and advocating for a solution, and I thank them for their work to highlight this inequality.

Last November, the Victims' Commissioner Baroness Helen Newlove wrote to the Safeguarding Minister outlining many of the same concerns that I have highlighted. The concerns are not unique; they are shared by the male survivor community. The view of the Victims' Commissioner should not go unheeded, nor that of her predecessor Dame Vera Baird KC, who expressed similar views. The purpose of the Bill is echoed in Baroness Newlove's words:

"I believe it is beyond time for a dedicated men and boys' strategy, with specific policies, strategic milestones, and accompanying funding. A tailored approach for male victims of interpersonal violence is essential to developing their rights and ensuring the availability of appropriate support services. I urge you to seize this opportunity to create both a robust, cross-governmental VAWG strategy and a separate, comprehensive strategy for men and boys, with clear policies, strategic targets, milestones, and sustainable funding arrangements."

Six months later, and with nothing further heard on implementing such a strategy, this Bill is required to push the Safeguarding Minister to act. My hope is that male survivors of such traumatic violence and abuse can finally be given the focus their plight deserves. I also hope that Members on both sides of the House feel they can support what the Bill sets out to achieve, and I thank them all for listening.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Sir Roger Gale, Sir Ashley Fox, Charlie Dewhirst, Wendy Morton, David Simmonds,

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

Paul Holmes, Rebecca Smith, Bob Blackman, Alison Griffiths, Mr Richard Holden and Ben Obese-Jecty present the Bill.

Ben Obese-Jecty accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May, and to be printed (Bill 224).

Opposition Day

6TH ALLOTTED DAY

Hospitals

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

12.49 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the appalling state of repair of NHS hospitals across the country; notes that the NHS maintenance backlog rose to £13.8 billion in 2023-24; further notes the sustained pattern of cannibalising NHS capital budgets to keep day-to-day services running; condemns the previous Government's record of starved repair budgets and exploding maintenance backlogs, which made sewage leaks, cracked walls, crumbling ceilings and sinking floors commonplace; further condemns the previous Government for launching the New Hospital Programme with no realistic plan to fund or deliver it; further regrets that almost half of the selected hospitals are now not set to begin construction until after 2030; calls on the Government to reverse the delay to the New Hospital Programme and create a crumbling hospitals taskforce to bring construction dates forward; and further calls on the Government to end the vicious cycle of false economies and rising repair backlogs by putting hospitals across the country on a path towards sustainable funding.

The appalling state of our hospital buildings is a national scandal. Everybody in this country should be in control of their own lives and health, which means everybody getting the care they need when and where they need it, but that can never be realised while so many patients are treating in grossly inadequate settings. From Shropshire to Cornwall, Cambridgeshire, Watford and Devon, patients are losing their dignity because of decisions taken by the Conservatives, and the Labour Government's failure to rectify them.

The Conservatives' record is one of starved repair budgets, serious leaks, crumbling ceilings and bucket-strewn wards. It is an outrage that millions of people are waiting for treatment, yet overcrowded hospitals have had to close operating theatres because they are no longer fit for use. Patients and hospital staff deserve the dignity of safe, modern and clean environments, but instead the previous Government shamefully chose to raid the repair budget to plug the gap in day-to-day costs, as our hospitals fell apart, and the new Government, who were elected on what increasingly looks like false hope, are pursuing a false economy in delaying the desperately needed new hospital programme.

As with so much of their agenda, the Government promised so much but are delivering so little and betraying those who put their faith in the Labour party. Farmers who were fed up with the Tories taking them for granted have been hit with a tax grab on their families' futures. Employers, who were promised growth and no new taxes, have been whacked with a national insurance increase. Patients, who were promised new hospitals, have had them taken away.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I was with the hon. Lady almost up until that point. I congratulate her on opening the debate. It is absolutely true that the new hospital programme did not deliver new hospitals and was unfunded under the Tories. However, it is being funded now under Labour. Money

is being invested in my local hospitals, in the Imperial College Healthcare NHS trust, and it is preparing for major rebuilds. Will she perhaps give the new Government a little credit for what they have done, and correctly identify the shambles that we were left with?

Helen Morgan: The hon. Member will be aware that there were not 40 new hospitals—they were not all hospitals and there were not 40 of them. The issue here is that the start dates for work on many hospitals that need urgent rebuilding have been pushed back into the 2030s, long beyond the life of this Parliament. The people who are served by those hospitals were promised new facilities and have not had them. That is devastating for those communities.

If the Conservative approach was contemptible, Labour's approach has been to procrastinate. The cost to the NHS of papering over the cracks and keeping hospitals running past their natural lifespan is enormous. That is why the Government must reverse the delay to the new hospital programme at once and urgently deliver the new hospitals that patients have long been promised.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I wonder if the hon. Member can explain to me how spending £22 billion extra on the national health service this year can in any way be described as procrastination.

Helen Morgan: It is important to recognise that the additional investment in the NHS amounts to about £10 billion a year—according to Office for Budget Responsibility numbers, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman has looked at—because of the cost of national insurance hikes and of compensating other public sector employers for those hikes. The £22 billion figure is somewhat misleading. The point that we are making is that it is a false economy to keep those buildings going, to keep repairing a crumbling estate, to keep patching up and putting a sticking plaster on those problems. Those buildings need to be demolished and rebuilt, so that approach is a false economy. It would be much better to build new buildings up front and save on future repair costs. We need to ensure that no one is treated in broken, uncomfortable and unsafe facilities. Repairing and replacing crumbling, substandard hospitals is not only vital for delivering better care and treating more patients, but crucial for rebuilding the economy after years of Conservative economic vandalism.

How much would all this cost? In my county of Shropshire, the cost of the maintenance backlog across all sites has reached about £75 million. I am sure that everyone here would agree that £75 million is a lot of money—indeed, it is so much that it is the total amount of Government capital investment for hospices this year—but in terms of hospital maintenance it is a drop in the ocean. Torbay hospital needs more than £50 million to clear the backlog, Watford hospital has a backlog of £63 million, and Hull royal infirmary requires an eye-watering £70 million. Across England, the figure is a colossal £13.8 billion—and that is just to bring our existing hospital estate to the minimum standard.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The hon. Member is right that a huge amount of money needs to be spent. A lot of that goes back to the fact that, as

Lord Darzi tells us, £37 billion less was spent on hospital buildings in the 2010s than was necessary. Will she remind me who was in government for the for half of the 2010s?

Helen Morgan: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, when one comes into government and has to clean up the mess left behind by the previous Government, one has to make difficult choices. It is the job of the Opposition to point out where they would make those choices or take different options. We would invest to save money in the long run, rather than fritter money away on a repair bill for buildings that need to be demolished. It is not sensible to pour good money after bad when the right thing to do is invest in a new fit-for-purpose and modern estate that does not have endless and extortionate maintenance requirements.

Several hon. Members rose—

Helen Morgan: I will make some progress.

At North Devon district hospital, the ducting of the ventilation system that serves the operating theatres has not been changed since it was installed in 1979, and cannot be replaced because of ceiling height and asbestos. As a result, all operating theatres have been non-compliant with NHS England buildings guidance since 2007. The good people of Devon clearly need a new hospital, and they were promised that they would have one by 2030, only for the Labour Government to take it away and decide that the change those people need will not be delivered for another decade.

Even hospitals with comparatively few maintenance problems, such as the Royal Shrewsbury hospital, which serves my constituents and has a £35 million backlog, are clearly a long way short of being up to standard. I will not go into detail again about the catalogue of issues in Shropshire—the ambulance delays and station closures, the waiting times for check-ups, scans and surgeries, or the substandard state of cancer care—but they all combine to put huge pressure on hospitals, where staff and buildings are straining under the load.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady and the Liberal Democrats for securing this debate. One issue that they have not mentioned in their motion is car parking at hospitals, which is an ongoing problem for disabled people and patients who miss or delay their appointments as a result of a lack of spaces. Does she agree that car parking is central to addressing the issues that she is setting out?

Helen Morgan: Car parking is a real problem, particularly where public transport is poor—it plagues my constituents—and when it is unrealistically expensive for people who need to use hospital facilities. I thank the hon. Member for that point.

The NHS crisis impacts on patient outcomes. My constituent Emma was left in the “fit to sit” area for 48 hours despite having been diagnosed with suspected sepsis, 96-year-old Mary waited outside in an ambulance for 11 hours, and 82-year-old Paula spent 24 hours on a trolley in a corridor. That is the reality in hospitals up and down the country. I think we all agree that that is a disgrace and it must be rectified.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Morgan: I will make some progress.

One of the main reasons those problems have not been rectified is successive delays from successive Governments. Shropshire is, again, a prime example. This is not related to the new hospital programme, but none the less, £312 million was granted for the hospital transformation programme in Shropshire back in 2018. Seven years later, while the country has been through five Prime Ministers and eight different Health Secretaries, Shropshire is still waiting for that transformation to take place. Opposition from both the Labour and Conservative councils that serve the area, along with the ridiculously lengthy process that capital expenditure has to go through to be signed off, means that desperately needed improvements have been horribly delayed as construction costs rise. As a result, the original plans have been scaled back and their value diminished.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): My hon. Friend mentions the inordinate delays that occur with regard to applications for capital funds. I have watched with horror as my local hospital trust in West Hertfordshire has had to submit business case after business case while watching the costs rack up. Does she agree that one way to spend the allocated money more efficiently would be by devolving those budgets to local hospital trusts, rather than having a centralised programme that drives up the costs?

Helen Morgan: I could not agree more. That is exactly the situation we saw in Shropshire. Once again, the people who will suffer are the patients.

Last year, less than £900 million of the £13.8 billion required to eradicate the repair backlog for hospitals was invested—just 6.5%. It does not take an accountant to work out that at that rate, it will take 15 years to clear the current backlog, let alone the further deterioration of the crumbling buildings. Investment in eradicating the repair backlog fell sharply from £1.4 billion in 2021 to £895 million in 2023–24—a fall of 37%. I am afraid that, just like their approach to fixing social care, the Government's continued lack of imagination and ambition is leaving our NHS less productive and less stable, which risks leaving millions languishing on NHS waiting lists.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Helen Morgan: I will give way to the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) because he has tried to intervene before.

Ben Coleman: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for her delayed response. I am struck by her lack of response to two of my colleagues. She did not acknowledge to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) that in my constituency of Chelsea and Fulham, the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust is getting money from the Government as a precursor to rebuilding the hospitals promised to it. More importantly, she did not address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) that we are all reaping the whirlwind of

the decisions taken by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government. The Liberal Democrats made a choice to go into that Government, to take on roles including as Chief Secretary to the Treasury and as Health Ministers, and to make those cuts and destroy the NHS. We are now reaping the whirlwind of the decisions that she and her colleagues made. Is it not a little bit cheeky of her to make some of the points and claims she is making today?

Helen Morgan: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman's hospital is being dealt with, but I am sure that the residents of Torbay will not feel the benefit of that. I am slightly surprised that he thinks that the decade since the Liberal Democrats were in power has had no impact whatsoever. I did address the point that when a party comes into government and has to clear up the appalling mess left by the previous Government, there are difficult choices to be made. His party knows that. Labour Members, for example, have voted to retain the two-child benefit cap and keep a quarter of a million children in poverty—something that no one in my party has ever voted for.

The last time I opened a Liberal Democrat Opposition day debate was in October, and the topic was primary care. I explained how the Government's failure to invest in primary care was a false economy that increased pressures and costs in the critical parts of the system. The management of our hospital buildings displays that same false economy. Just as spending money on critical care instead of prevention and public health is a poor approach to managing a health service, waiting for the roof to collapse is an irresponsible way to manage NHS buildings. As problems are ignored and investment is poorly targeted, it is the patients and the hard-working staff striving to help them who are forced to suffer.

This is not just about the new hospital programme. Across the country, there are thousands of GP surgeries that need urgent improvement if they are to provide the care that patients deserve. More than 2,000 hospital buildings across England were built before the foundation of the NHS in 1948, while the state of GP surgeries varies wildly. Many surgeries are simply no longer fit for purpose, having been built in the 1950s. Prescott surgery in my constituency, for example, has long been recognised as somewhere that needs to drastically increase in size because the population of the village has increased drastically itself. Despite the land and the community infrastructure levy funding being available, there is no sign of a new surgery being built. As the delay continues, the costs are rising and the challenge grows for both the council and the integrated care board, which are already under immense pressure to cut their costs.

Instead of pursuing fantasies like the Conservatives or false economies like the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats would invest to save by starting construction now, and ending the epidemic of cancelled operations, closed-off wards and huge sums wasted on emergency repairs. That would save the taxpayer money in the long run and benefit patients much sooner.

Andy Slaughter: The hon. Lady is being a little bit unrealistic. I have three world-class hospitals in my constituency: Charing Cross, Hammersmith and St Mary's Paddington. The repair bill is £874 million, but the rebuild or new build cost would be £4 billion. Yes, we

are refurbishing parts of Charing Cross and putting a lot of investment into preparing for that work, but the idea that suddenly the hon. Lady is going to come up with tens, if not hundreds, of billions of pounds is unrealistic, is it not?

Helen Morgan: The plan that we have put forward involves £10 billion over 10 years, and I will come to that in a moment. The real issue is that we cannot pick one hospital and say that it is indicative of an NHS that is being dealt with appropriately. Hospitals across the country are falling apart. For example, Stepping Hill, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison), is not in the new hospital programme, yet it is falling apart at the seams. We need to address the whole estate fairly urgently.

Our 10-year guaranteed capital investment programme would provide long-term security and fix our crumbling hospitals and creaking GP surgeries. It would provide an extra £10 billion for our crumbling buildings over the next decade, improving outcomes for patients, boosting productivity and cutting day-to-day costs for the NHS. Providing certainty is crucial. As it stands, managers have to raid precious budgets not just to plug leaking pipes, but to plug staffing gaps when winter pressure arrives. That is why we would also end the reactive approach to the annual winter crisis through our winter taskforce. Instead of the average £376 million of emergency funding announced late into the winter each year for the last seven years, our winter taskforce would manage a ringfenced fund of £1.5 billion over the next four years. That would help hospitals to plan their budgets and build resilience in wards, A&E departments, ambulance services and patient discharging.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): The hon. Lady is talking about the day-to-day budgets of the NHS, in particular the costs of paying off previous debts. She talked about the work that needed to be done during the coalition years and in the decade and a half since then, in response to interventions from Labour Members. Does she agree that one of the biggest messes that needed to be cleared up then, which is still being felt in NHS budgets, is the disastrous private finance initiatives of the Blair and Brown years?

Helen Morgan: There have been successive failures in NHS management that all parties need to hold their hands up for—that is a fair point. We should, though, focus on the task in hand rather than continually going back decades, either to the coalition Government or to the Blair Government before that. That is not helpful to our constituents, who want a solution now.

Ben Coleman: On that point, will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Morgan: No. I have been very generous with my time and I am going to make some progress.

We are also campaigning for a review of outdated Government finance rules that prevent NHS trusts from investing the funds that they have raised into their own buildings. Even NHS managers struggle to access common-sense investment in their facilities due to overly complex rules and glacial processes. Trusts are prevented from using unspent funds on improving their buildings. We

need root-and-branch reform, combined with our 10-year programme of investment, to bring our local health facilities up to scratch.

In conclusion, the recent history of the NHS is one of short-term decision making and of the failure of successive Governments to grasp the nettle of long-term sustained investment in the things that matter: hospital buildings, GP services, dentistry, pharmacy and, crucially, the unspoken crisis of social care. The outcome is an organisation that is spending millions of pounds to go backwards. It truly is a false economy.

This Government have spoken warmly of the need to reform the NHS and improve productivity, and we support them in that, but we cannot expect to retain staff and provide high-quality care when so many doctors and nurses are negotiating leaking roofs and sewage backing up on the wards. Dealing with the new hospital programme is a matter of urgency, and I urge the Secretary of State to, at long last, grasp the nettle.

Mr Speaker: I call Stephen Kinnock—is it?—to move the amendment; I have a different name in front of me.

1.9 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I am glad you recognised me from the Chair, Mr Speaker. I have lost some hair since we last spoke.

I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “it” to end and insert:

“also notes that the Chancellor has announced new fiscal rules to ensure capital budgets can no longer be cannibalised, with transfers from capital to resource budgets not permitted; recognises that the previous Government left a New Hospital Programme which was unfunded, unrealistic and undeliverable; welcomes that the Government has taken action to review that Programme and has published the New Hospital Programme Plan for Implementation, to put the Programme on a sustainable footing; supports the Government’s investment in the Plan, which will increase to up to £15 billion over each consecutive five-year wave, averaging around £3 billion a year from 2030; and further supports the work being done to bring forward construction of the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete replacement schemes wherever possible, to ensure that patient and staff safety is prioritised.”

The amendment on the Order Paper is in the name of my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister. I thank the Liberal Democrats for using their Opposition day to address a matter of vital importance for so many Members, including many colleagues right across the Chamber and their constituents. I sincerely hope that the Liberal Democrats will work with us on solutions, not on soundbites, because we need to be realistic about the problems we face and serious about how we tackle them.

The new hospital programme was announced by the last Government to much fanfare in October 2020, with a promise to deliver 40 new hospitals by 2030. We were told that there was a plan and a timetable, and we were glibly assured that it was fully funded, but from the outset it was clear that there were not 40 new schemes—some were just refurbishments or extensions. To put it simply, there were not 40 projects, they were not all new and many of them were not even hospitals.

The spin around the programme was widely questioned and challenged before the general election, but nevertheless we were truly shocked by what we found on entering the Department of Health and Social Care. The programme

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was hugely delayed, by several years more than had already been revealed by the National Audit Office. There was no credible plan to deliver the building projects, let alone to deliver them all in the next five years, and there was not even enough construction capacity in the UK to build all the hospitals in the new hospital programme by 2030. That is why when the hospitals with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete were brought into the NHP in 2023, even the last Government had the sense to admit that nine schemes would have to be delivered past 2030 in order to prioritise the RAAC hospitals.

Perhaps most shocking of all, the funding for the programme was due to run out a month ago, with no provision whatsoever for future years: the money simply was not there. The programme was built on nothing more than false hope, dodgy claims and disingenuous press releases.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Does the Minister share my constituents' anger at the failure of the Tories to back up any of their promises about new hospitals? Will he reassure me that my constituents who are served by Airedale general hospital will finally get a new hospital to deal with the RAAC in an affordable, deliverable timetable, unlike the false promises of the Conservatives?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for her constituents, and she is absolutely right. The point she makes raises the even bigger issue of trust in politics and the trust that her constituents have in this place. That trust was fundamentally undermined by the disingenuous nature of what went on with the previous hospital programme. The British people are grown up enough for us to be able to level with them, be straight with them and say, "This plan is credible and affordable. It's based on facts, not fantasy."

Daisy Cooper: On the point of trust, the Conservatives completely blew trust with the constituents of West Hertfordshire. They promised a new hospital—they even said in 2023 that it would be fully funded, and it clearly was not. At the most recent general election, the Labour party promised that Watford general hospital would be a priority. Will the Minister make a new promise to keep that trust by coming to visit that hospital this year?

Stephen Kinnock: I am sure the hon. Lady will appreciate the fact that we have now come forward with a programme built not on sand or smoke and mirrors, but on reality, and the hospital she mentioned will be a part of that. She is very welcome to write to me with any further representations.

The situation I have described is the dog's breakfast that we inherited from the Conservatives. This is genuinely not a partisan point, because when the previous Government did the right thing—for example, on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill—we were more than happy to support them, but where they failed, fibbed, and fobbed off Members of this House, we will not pretend that they were acting in good faith. It now falls to us to level with the British people about why their hospitals will not be fixed on time.

Our constituents are understandably furious, because our national health service is quite literally crumbling. As Lord Darzi found in his investigation, over the past 14 years our NHS has been starved of capital, with a staggering £37 billion under-investment over the course of the 2010s. I know that we will hear today from hon. Members about many examples of hospital roofs failing or falling, leaky pipes that freeze over in the winter and buckets for catching rainwater in corridors, and I know that capital spending is needed now more than ever.

Although we are deeply shocked by the neglect and incompetence of the Conservatives, it has not prevented us from rolling up our sleeves and clearing up the mess that they left behind. That is why we immediately commissioned a review, which had two core objectives. The first was to put the programme on a firm footing with sustainable funding, so that all the projects can be delivered to a realistic and affordable timetable. The second was to give patients a realistic, deliverable timetable based on facts rather than fantasy.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend talks about realistic timelines, which are really important. My constituents in Harlow were promised a new hospital when there was clearly no money, no business plan and not even a site made available for it. Does he agree that this work is so important for the trust that we want to have from our constituents? Certainly in Harlow, we have a realistic timeframe and plan that we can actually meet.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is also a doughty champion for his constituents. With each brick we build in the new hospital programme, I hope that we will start to rebuild some trust between his constituents and this place. He is absolutely right to point out that it is much better to have a realistic programme, rather than one built on smoke and mirrors.

Officials reported on the review in the autumn and set out a range of options for a more realistic timetable for delivery. In January, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced five-year waves of investment, backed by up to £15 billion of investment over consecutive five-year waves, averaging £3 billion a year from 2030. Our programme is a balanced portfolio of hospital schemes at different development stages, being delivered now and into the future. It is the most efficient and cost-effective way of giving our NHS the buildings it needs, while also giving the construction sector the certainty that it needs to deliver.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Minister referred to the capital needs of the NHS as a whole. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) mentioned, that applies to many GP surgeries too. In my constituency, we have rapid growth in population. The populations of Woodstock, Heyford Park and Bicester are struggling, because GPs want to expand, but they cannot access the money to do so. Will the Minister look urgently at releasing more funds through integrated care boards so that future revenue can be provided to allow for the capital investment that would give my constituents an expansion in GP surgeries and take some pressure off our much-pressurised hospitals?

Stephen Kinnock: I was very pleased to see the £102 million capital investment in GP primary care. I encourage the hon. Gentleman's ICB to look very

carefully at that fund and to explore the potential that it offers. We are in conversation with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about ensuring that section 106 processes are working properly, so that when there are new developments, there is proper wraparound in the social infrastructure required to make them sustainable. In the space of just nine short months, we have gone from a charade based on smoke and mirrors to a programme based on serious, systematic delivery.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): The Minister is setting out very articulately what this Government are doing to clear up the mess around the hospital provision that this country needs. Does he agree that the announcement by Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust last week that it will build a new and expanded intensive care unit at Darent Valley hospital is a big step forward for Dartford residents? It badly needs new facilities to cope with waiting lists and get them down and to cope with the rising population of the area.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is a strong campaigner for his constituents. He is right that that development will be a game changer. It will be important that we keep people's feet to the fire to deliver on what has been promised. I guarantee that he will have my full support and that of the entire ministerial team.

With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will now address the Liberal Democrat motion, beginning with its point about the cannibalising of NHS capital budgets to keep day-to-day services running. I am delighted to confirm from this Dispatch Box that this Government have drawn a line under that appalling practice, to which the Conservative party was utterly addicted. The Treasury now has new fiscal rules to prevent that from happening again; capital spending is safe in our hands.

Secondly, on reversing the so-called programme that we inherited on 4 July, I hope I have made it clear that that whole sorry mess was a work of fiction. It is not a question of reversing anything, as the Liberal Democrats say in their motion, because there was nothing to reverse. Instead, we have gone back to the drawing board, and systematically designed and built a completely new programme and a completely new approach.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): As somebody who had to put up with what I think was seven photo opportunities by previous Conservative Ministers—including one who is sat on the Opposition Front Benches now—proclaiming that they were rebuilding Whipps Cross hospital with money that did not exist, it is clear that what needs reversing is the Conservatives' chutzpah in saying that somehow they are the ones championing change on reforming PFI. Some of us spent years trying to persuade Ministers that we could reform the disgraceful spending on PFI—particularly private finance 2—schemes brought in by the previous Conservative Administration. Under those schemes, some trusts were spending £2 billion a year on repayments—more than they were spending on drugs. That is one way in which we could get some money for the new hospitals, so does my hon. Friend agree that it is this Government, rather than the Opposition, who understand good public finances?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend, who is a relentless campaigner for her constituents, is right: it was simply government by press release, with so many aspects of policy based on making announcements and unfunded spending commitments. When we came into government, we discovered a £22 billion black hole in the public finances, largely based on promises that had no funding whatsoever attached to them. That is the sort of behaviour that undermines trust in politics.

On the Liberal Democrat proposal to create a taskforce, we have excellent teams working on the programme, and they are getting on with the job. We do not have a second to waste. Setting up a new taskforce would simply mean further delay and distraction through process, rather than a laser focus on delivery.

I know that Members across the House share my outrage at the almost £14 billion backlog maintenance bill facing NHS trusts after years of historic under-investment. I understand that many in the Chamber are concerned about the condition of the health facilities that serve their constituents, and I reassure them that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has given us the funding to begin immediately reversing the trend of decline that started under the last Government. This financial year, we are backing NHS systems through over £4 billion in operational capital; a lifesaving cash injection of £750 million of targeted estate safety funding, as a vital first step towards fixing our crumbling estate; and £440 million to tackle crumbling RAAC, keeping staff, patients and their families safe. We are empowering systems to manage their capital allocations locally and assign funding to local priorities, ensuring that money is spent as effectively as possible, as soon as possible.

Andy Slaughter: My local hospitals were evicted from the new hospital programme when the RAAC schemes came along. There was nothing to delay—there was no money there at all. Does the Minister recognise that some very innovative schemes are now going on locally? We in the Imperial College healthcare trust are partnering with Paddington Life Sciences, Imperial College in South Kensington and White City, and the Hammersmith and Fulham industrial strategy to maximise the available resources so that we can rebuild three world-class hospitals.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is making some very strong points on behalf of his constituents. We would certainly be very happy to work more with him on some of those innovations. So often, hospitals are anchor institutions—alongside universities—for driving forward innovation, harnessing the power of technology and contributing to the Government's growth mission. There are huge opportunities there, and I would be happy to explore them further with my hon. Friend.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Despite overwhelming support, the Coventry and Warwickshire integrated care board has decided to cut all beds at the Ellen Badger hospital in Shipston-on-Stour, an anchor building and community hospital that is at the heart of our town. Does the Minister agree that cutting such vital services is unacceptable, and that community hospitals play an important role in rural areas by providing equality of access to our health services?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that community hospitals play a vital role, and I share her disappointment with the decisions that are being

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made. The fact of the matter is that we are in a hole, and we have to dig ourselves out of that hole. It is going to take some time to do that. We are getting the public finances back on an even keel, we are getting our public services back to where they need to be, and we are getting the economy back on a sounder footing. As we make those achievements, I hope that we will be able to reverse some of the decisions that are being made—decisions that are, of course, damaging to the hon. Lady's community—but we are in a very difficult position, and it will take some time for us to get over that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Kinnock: If hon. Members will bear with me, I will make a little bit more progress and then come back to them.

Many Liberal Democrat colleagues have made the argument that with hospitals in the state they are in, it is more important than ever to have a robust social care system in place. As the Minister for Care, I agree with them wholeheartedly, but it is simply not true to portray the Government as sitting on their hands while Baroness Casey gets cracking on her vital work. In fact, we have hit the ground running through a plethora of measures. We have legislated for the first ever fair pay agreement for social care in order to tackle the 130,000 vacancies we see today. We have delivered an extra 7,800 home adaptations through the disabled facilities grant to change the lives of thousands more disabled people for the better. In the Budget, the Chancellor provided the biggest increase in carer's allowance since the 1970s, worth £2,000 a year to family carers and with an extra £3.7 billion for local authorities.

We are not hanging around on more structural reforms, either. We are introducing new standards to help people who use care, their families and providers to choose the most effective new technology as it comes on the market. We are joining up care and medical records, so that NHS and care staff have the full picture they need to provide the best possible care, and we are training more care workers to perform more health interventions, helping people to stay well and at home. Just two weeks ago, we announced a new qualification for social care staff, training them in artificial intelligence to automate routine tasks and motion sensors to detect falls. We are seizing the opportunities of care tech and harnessing it for the benefit of thousands who draw on care across our country.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): We are desperate to help the Minister in this endeavour, and look forward to receiving our invitations to the cross-party talks, which have yet to be issued. However, the Health and Social Care Committee heard today from an organisation called Think Ahead, which is the only organisation in the country that trains mental health social care workers. I have just heard that the Department of Health and Social Care is not refunding that organisation. Can the Minister explain why?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Baroness Casey is working at pace to get the commission up and running, and that will be launched

this month. On her point about Think Ahead, the fundamental challenge we had with that programme was its relatively high unit costs. We are aiming to ensure that we deliver value for money for the taxpayer—I am sure that the hon. Lady shares that objective. We have to ensure that we deliver a programme for mental health social care work that delivers not only the best possible outcomes for our communities, but the best possible value for taxpayer money.

A lot has been done in the nine months since the election, but there is a huge amount more to do, and this Government are getting on with the job. Alongside the work I have described, the Government are putting record levels of investment into healthcare, with capital spending rising to £13.6 billion over this year and the next. That includes £1.5 billion for new surgical hubs, diagnostic scanners and beds across the NHS estate, as well as new radiotherapy machines to improve cancer treatment; over £1 billion to tackle RAAC and make inroads into the backlog of critical maintenance, repairs and upgrades across the NHS estate; and over £2 billion to be invested in NHS technology and digital. We are also taking the pressure off our hospitals through care in the community, and I am sure the whole House will welcome the fact that we have recruited 1,500 extra GPs on to the frontline.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Coming back to community hospitals, I came to this House to try to save Teignmouth community hospital, which has been under threat of closure because Torbay, its parent hospital, has such a massive maintenance backlog that it cannot afford to maintain both itself and Teignmouth hospital, so it is shutting down community hospitals. In Devon, we have just three principal hospitals: North Devon, which we understand is under pressure, Torbay, which is under pressure, and Exeter. We need the community hospitals. Will the Minister stop Teignmouth hospital from being shut, so that we can maintain it until it can be rebuilt?

Stephen Kinnock: These decisions are the responsibility of ICBs, and the ICB is having to balance a range of pressures, as the hon. Member points out, created largely by the neglect and incompetence of the previous Government. It is now a question of ICBs having to cut their cloth to make the finances work with the limited resources they have. I am afraid that is symptomatic of the mess we found when we took over on 4 July.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): The Royal Sussex in my constituency is in desperate need of a new cancer centre, and I am delighted that the centre is being added to wave one. I would be even happier if the Minister also added a new accident and emergency department, but we will come back to that another day. Is the reality not that we all want to build these new hospitals, but we all have to be honest with the public about how we will pay for them? The Liberal Democrats never are, and the motion is not. Bringing forward construction dates is a multibillion-pound commitment, but all the motion talks about is creating a taskforce. Is that not fundamentally unserious? This is an incredibly serious issue, and we should put forward proper proposals.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is an outstanding champion for his constituents. I noted the point he made about A&E; that was nicely done. He is right in what he says about the motion. The broader point to make is that thanks to the necessary decisions that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer made in the autumn Budget, we have generated the revenue that we will need to rebuild public services, and in particular our NHS, which was brought to its knees by the previous Government. I cannot claim to be a careful student of the Liberal Democrat manifesto for the last election, but I did notice that the revenue that would be generated by their measures was, I think, about £8.4 billion. Last time I checked, that was significantly lower than the £23 billion raised by the Chancellor's Budget. The Liberal Democrats should probably get their calculators out and figure out exactly how they will generate this revenue, rather than criticising us constantly for the decisions we have taken.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Kinnock: I will just make a little more progress, if I may. We are committed to rebuilding our NHS and rebuilding trust in Government. We will never play fast and loose with the public finances, and we will never try to pull the wool over the public's eyes. Everyone in this House remembers, or should remember, that the last Labour Government cut waiting lists to their lowest level in history, raised patient satisfaction to the highest level in its history, and brought in historic health interventions, such as the smoking ban. What is less remembered is that they also delivered the largest hospital building programme in NHS history. All that meant that when the coalition took over in 2010, it was presented with a strong national health service that was firing on all cylinders. Tragically, that coalition Government and their successor Governments set about weakening and undermining every aspect of our precious NHS, to the extent that by the time this Government took over in July, the NHS was well and truly on its knees. Today, it once again falls to a Labour Government to take the necessary and right decisions for the future.

We have now put the new hospital programme on a sustainable footing. It has a timeline that can be met, and a budget consistent with our fiscal rules. That is how we have turned the programme from empty rhetoric into reality, and in doing so, we have provided the construction industry and its supply chains with vital certainty, while also restoring confidence in public sector procurement. We are on the side of the builders, not the blockers. Our plan is credible, achievable and fully funded. It is a programme grounded in fact, not fiction. I was born in Tredegar, the very same town as Aneurin Bevan, so it is the privilege of a lifetime to be part of a Government who are carrying his torch into the 21st century, building a generation of hospitals that would do Nye proud.

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

1.35 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): We can all agree that we want a world-class NHS, and that includes having the very best hospitals,

technology and staff. I have been delighted to see the brilliant facilities created in my area, including a new A&E in Boston, new mental health wards at Lincoln county hospital, and new operating theatres at Grantham and District hospital. These upgrades mean that patients can receive the best possible care in appropriate settings, and staff can go to work each day proud of their workplace environment. However, we must be alive to the challenges that face the NHS. We live in an ageing society where people have more complex comorbidities. We also have a growing population, so there is more demand for services. In fact, the NHS treats 25% more patients every single day than it did back in 2010. New treatments, technologies and procedures have been developed, saving and improving lives, but they come at an ever more expensive price. We also had the covid pandemic, which I noticed the Minister did not mention.

According to the King's Fund, in 2023 prices, spending on capital in Labour's last year in office, 2009-10, was £6.9 billion. In 2023-24, that had nearly doubled to £11.4 billion. Even before the pandemic, capital spending was nearly £1 billion higher than when Labour left government. That helped us to open 160 community diagnostic centres and more than 100 surgical hubs, and to invest more in scanners, beds and operating theatres to deliver a million more checks, scans and procedures closer to home. We were committed to delivering the new hospital programme in full.

There was more to do. The challenges were evolving, the demand for care was growing and the pressure on the NHS was ever increasing. It now falls to the Labour Government to address those problems. I want them to succeed—that is in all our constituents' interests—but what we have seen so far does not fill me with hope. One of the Health Secretary's first choices on entering government was to pause the new hospital programme and put its future at risk. That was despite the fact that he and the Chancellor travelled the country throughout the election period, meeting candidates and promising a new hospital in their area. Just like the Government's promises to the farmers, the pensioners and businesses, those were hollow words.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): The Conservatives committed to restoring and renewing our hospitals. My constituents in Epping Forest depend on the Princess Alexandra hospital in Harlow, and on Whipps Cross hospital in Leytonstone. Despite Labour making clear promises about those two vital hospitals prior to the election, the Labour Government have delayed their rebuilding. It is particularly galling because Whipps Cross has planning permission, and work on the car park has already started. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Labour Government should re-evaluate their priorities and crack on with delivering the rebuilds promised at the Princess Alexandra and Whipps Cross?

Dr Johnson: I absolutely agree that the Labour Government should do that, but unfortunately, we have learned that their promises do not mean much at all.

Daisy Cooper: On promises not meaning much, the hon. Lady will be aware that the previous Conservative Government promised West Hertfordshire a new hospital. In 2023, they said it was fully funded, yet there is still not a spade in the ground. Can she explain where that money disappeared to, please?

Dr Johnson: The previous Secretary of State made it clear that the hospital was fully funded and would be built. What has changed since then is that we have a new Government who made the choice not to build it. These are choices that the new Government must own.

When the Government came to power, the Secretary of State commissioned the Darzi review, which highlighted the need for more capital investment in the NHS, but decided not to prioritise the delivery of the new hospitals. To govern is to choose, and the Secretary of State has chosen not to deliver the hospitals. We set out our commitment to delivering them on time, with the agreement of the then Chancellor. Of course, spending decisions cannot be made for a future Parliament, but the Secretary of State has chosen not to make the same commitment.

Ben Coleman: It may be helpful I correct a couple of “facts” that the hon. Lady has given. In his election literature, my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Chelsea and Fulham made the clear statement that he had secured the funds for the rebuilding and refurbishment of Charing Cross hospital. When I spoke to the chief executive of the hospital, he said that he had received no such reassurance from the Government, and on coming to power we found that no money had been set aside for the guaranteed refurbishment.

Moreover, this did not just apply to Charing Cross hospital. Across the country, the last Government's claims to have found the funding were discovered not to be true when we came to power. The right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), who is talking to the hon. Lady at the moment, lives in my constituency, so he is well aware of the accuracy of what I am saying. *[Laughter.]* I know; I will get complaints about the bins again now. Would the hon. Lady like to reflect on the accuracy of what she is saying, in the light of the facts as I have set them out?

Dr Johnson: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is not correct. The previous Government, and the previous Chancellor, made a clear commitment to providing the money, and to the hospital building project, but the current Government have not chosen to meet that commitment. These are choices that are being made. For now, patients and staff are being denied the quality facilities that they have deserved for decades. For some hospitals, construction work will not even begin until 2039. Will the Minister write to me, giving the date on which each hospital will be completed?

We can see the Labour Government's lack of ambition. There are 40 hospitals in waves 1 to 3 of their programme—40 hospitals over 15 years—but there are 515 acute, specialist and community hospitals in England. At this pace, the replacement of the NHS estate will require a cycle of nearly 200 years. That is the equivalent of a hospital built in 1825 not being replaced until this year. That is Labour's ambitious programme.

We can all see the pressures facing the Chancellor as her economic mismanagement hits the country. We cannot tax our way to growth. Perhaps that is yet another reason why growth forecasts have been cut yet again. How do we know that Labour will not come for those already delayed new hospitals in a year or two, and that there will not be further delays or cancellations? The Government have made it clear that the new hospitals are not their priority. Will the Minister give us that guarantee?

Andy Slaughter: May I return the hon. Lady to the subject of Charing Cross hospital for a moment? It used to be the main hospital in my constituency, before it became part of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman). The Conservative Government proposed to demolish it, and it took a seven-year campaign by residents to secure a reprieve. It went into the new hospitals programme, and then came out again in 2023, under the Conservatives, because hospitals with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete were going in. That is the history.

Has the hon. Lady been living in a different world for the last decade? In that time, there has been not just underfunding, but threats to demolish and close hospitals, and then to remove them from a programme that the Conservatives invented. Only now is this hospital in a viable programme, and being given the help and support that it needs to become the world-class hospital that it has been.

Dr Johnson: I must confess to not being terribly au fait with the position of Charing Cross hospital in 2012, which was before I was elected. It is not a hospital in which I have worked as a doctor, but I am advised that it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), when he was Health Secretary, who kept it open, and I am sure that local residents will be disappointed that this Labour Government have chosen not to rebuild it until 2035.

Will Labour—in an attempt to fill the black holes of their creation—return to private finance initiative contracts, to bridge the gap between the spending that they want and the fiscal situation that they have created? I saw at first hand the disastrous agreements that were reached, which led to extortionate costs and ridiculous inflexibility. Let me give just one example. I remember being very pleased to have an office of my own for the first time when, as a doctor, I was promoted. I was given a desk, a computer and a large whiteboard. When I asked, “How do I get this put up on the wall?”, I was told, “You can't have it put up on the wall, because it would cost £800.” That was more than a decade ago. I thought, “Why is it costing £800?” and I said, “I can go and buy some ‘no nails’ from the local hardware store and put it up myself!” I was then told, “You can't do that, because a deal was negotiated, and it would be against the contract.”

In total, there are about 700 PFI contracts with a capital value of £57 billion, and there is about £160 billion still to be paid for them and their maintenance. During covid, in 2020-21, analysis from *The Guardian* found that nearly half a billion pounds was being spent purely on interest charges. That is money that is not being spent on patient care, and it is a long-lasting legacy from the last time a Labour Government were in power and trying to get around their fiscal rules. These were fundamentally bad deals. Yet again, we see that when Labour negotiates, the taxpayer loses.

Despite 14 years in opposition, Labour came to office without a plan for what it actually wanted to do for the NHS. Instead, we have seen review after review and consultation after consultation, with very little action or delivery in return for what this means for patients and the taxpayer. The Labour Government hiked taxes on general practices, community pharmacies and even children's hospices, only to give them some of that money back and expect them to be grateful for it. They

cut the winter fuel payment for millions of the most vulnerable people in the country, and then sat back and watched as the number of pensioners attending A&E this winter soared. They caved in to the trade union demands with an inflation-busting pay rise in return for no modernisation or productivity reforms, and the threats to strike again are already back. They scrapped our productivity plan, which we had already fully funded and which would have unlocked billions in savings by the end of the decade.

Mark Ferguson: I have a question to which I know the answer. The question is “How many new hospitals were built in the last five years?” and the answer, of course, is “Zero”. Is it not the case that the 40 new hospitals promised by the last Government were not new and were not hospitals, and there certainly were not 40 of them?

Dr Johnson: Actually, we use the definition of “new hospitals” that Tony Blair used when he was Prime Minister.

Let us turn to where we are now. We welcome the capital funding to continue the programmes that we started in government for new surgical hubs and diagnostics, but how much of the additional capital funding allocated in the last Budget will be used to carry out repairs in hospitals that should be rebuilt? Let me repeat the question asked by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan). Will those delays cost more money, both because work that would otherwise be unnecessary will have to be done to keep hospitals open and because of inflation, which is rising under this Government? How much extra will the national insurance jobs tax cost the contractors building the new hospitals and undertaking maintenance and repairs? Those additional costs will be passed on to the NHS. Will that mean less repair work being undertaken, or will the Government make cuts elsewhere—and if they do, where will those cuts fall? The Chancellor has already hiked taxes on working people and businesses, and today we saw that borrowing has also increased by £30 billion a year, with debt piling up and inflation on the rise. How does the Minister intend future repairs and builds to be funded—through yet more tax rises, more borrowing, bringing back PFI, or cutting other areas of spending?

Ultimately, these are decisions for Governments. To govern is to choose. This Government must own their choices, but sadly it is the public who will have to pay for them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I must now announce an immediate five-minute time limit for Back-Bench speakers, with the exception of the Chair of the Select Committee.

1.48 pm

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): A few months ago I stood in this Chamber and told a story that I wished I did not have to tell. It was about my 91-year-old grandmother, and the night that we had to rush her to hospital with a suspected heart attack, only to be told on arrival that the average waiting time was nine and a half hours. Our brilliant NHS staff worked

tirelessly, but after 14 years of Tory neglect the truth is painfully clear: our health service has been pushed to breaking point, and my family did not receive the urgent care that we needed and deserved.

I know that my story is not unique. I hear it time and again, on the doorstep, in community centres and in my constituency surgeries. There is a painful fear, shared by so many, that the NHS on which we all depend will not be there when we need it most. Let us be honest about why that is: it is not because our NHS staff are not working hard enough—far from it. They are heroes in every sense of the word.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on his point about how brilliant our NHS staff are. First, will he commend my dad for his 40 years’ service badge as an NHS staff member? That has to be put on the record. Secondly, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are laser-focused on supporting NHS staff to stay in the NHS, work their way up the ranks and lead a fulfilling career in serving our constituents?

Chris Curtis: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and for the work that her family have done for our national health service.

It is not the staff’s fault that our NHS has been let down; it is because of Tory Government after Tory Government, and decision after decision. Fourteen years of Conservative mismanagement have hollowed out our health service, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue today. Although I might not see eye to eye on everything with the Liberal Democrats, there is one truth that we cannot ignore: the NHS is facing serious challenges, and real change and investment are needed. However, people back home are not crying out for more motions; they are crying out for action, for delivery, and for change that they can see and feel. With this Labour Government, they are finally getting it.

When we came into office, we did not come in to manage decline; we came in to turn things around, to rebuild, and to restore a sense of hope and pride in our public services, starting with our NHS. We have seen that work across the country, with waiting lists falling for six months in a row. In my city, this Government have finally secured funding for the new women and children’s hospital that residents in Milton Keynes—a growing city—so desperately need, and construction is set to start in 2027-28. For too long, families have walked through the doors of my local hospital, which is simply not fit for purpose and has some of the longest waiting lists in the country. Let me be clear: it is completely unacceptable that it has taken this long to get funding in place. Milton Keynes has been one of the fastest growing cities in the country for years, and we have been left with far fewer hospital beds than we deserve and far fewer than the national average.

Despite some of the comments from Conservative Members, and despite the Conservative Government plastering the new hospital on all their leaflets, how much funding was actually secured by my hospital under the last Conservative Government? Given that it was “fully funded”, one would assume the figure was 100%. Was it 50% or 10%? No, just 4% of the “fully funded” hospital promised was actually secured by the previous Government. It is this Government who have

[Chris Curtis]

found the other 96% to ensure that we can finally build the hospital that my city so desperately deserves. We are now trying to deliver a hospital that has been delayed not by local failure, but by national dither. Thanks to this Government, I get to be the MP who delivers what Tory MP after Tory MP promised my city but failed to deliver.

I want to ensure that we do not face further delays—not just because of the health risks to my city, but because of the cost increases. I have been told that every single month this project is held up costs an extra £700,000. That £700,000 could be invested in other important projects that have been mentioned by Members across the House. One potential hold-up is the Hospital 2.0 programme, which I am told is still not complete. Will the Minister look at whether that important work will hold up projects that we know are ready to go, such as in Milton Keynes? We need to fast-track these projects through the Treasury to ensure that there are no further bureaucratic blockages once the go-ahead has been given, especially bearing in mind that we have a track record in Milton Keynes of building to budget and on time. Give us the tools and we will build the hospital.

We must also be honest about what happens after the ribbon is cut. Even if we build the hospital, our health system in Milton Keynes will still be operating under immense strain. Thanks to the legacy of the last Government, our integrated care board is one of the most, if not the most, underfunded per person in the entire country. That has real consequences. It means that places including my local hospice, Willen hospice, which has provided vital end of life care to many members of my family, are being left to scrape by. This Sunday I will be running the London marathon for our local hospice, because I care deeply about the work it does. Marathons should not be the funding model for our healthcare system. We need sustainable investment, which starts with fairer funding for our ICB and fairer treatment for a city that has been overlooked for too long.

I will support anything in this House that helps us fix our NHS, and I will work with anybody who wants to rebuild it, but I will also say this: I am proud to be a member of a Government who are finally not just talking about the problem, but getting on with the solution. Let us build that hospital, let us fund our services properly, let us fix what is broken, and let us give people back the healthcare system they so desperately deserve.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

1.54 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Lord Darzi's independent investigation clearly set out the impact that "capital starvation" has had on the NHS in recent years, and the importance of capital spending to fixing the health service. The report highlighted substantial shortfalls in capital investment, combined with a tendency to raid capital budgets to cover in-year spending deficits, so I welcome today's Liberal Democrat motion, which allows Parliament to highlight how important these issues are to the public. This is the second Liberal Democrat Opposition day, and it is the

second time we have debated health and social care. It is because it is a priority for the country that it is a priority for us.

The Health and Social Care Committee has taken a keen interest in the new hospital programme. We have challenged the Government to maintain their capital spending and not fall into the traps of the past, when capital spending was redirected to fund day-to-day spending, so I was pleased to receive confirmation from the Department, and now from the Dispatch Box, that the Chancellor's changes to the fiscal rules will stop future raids on the capital budget, or CDEL, to fund the day-to-day spending budget, or RDEL. That is hugely welcome. However, although the protection of capital budgets is reassuring, I remain concerned about the lack of transparency around how the funding is allocated by the Treasury.

The charge levelled at the Government is that funding is being funnelled into acute care to tackle waiting lists, at the expense of funding primary care, infrastructure and care in the community. Clearly, on current commitments, we will not see capital funding that is sufficient to meet anything close to the unfunded promises made by the Tories in 2020. Nevertheless, the principle of investing in our hospital infrastructure is good; money will be saved in the long run on maintenance and emergency repairs, as well as providing a better quality of care.

In the policy paper on the plan for implementing the new hospital programme, the Government stated that funding will reach only £3 billion in the early 2030s due to

"other key priorities in health spending, such as funding to enable the Secretary of State's 3 shifts".

That is good, but we need transparency around how decisions were made and which projects were chosen. In January, the Secretary of State provided the criteria by which the schemes were scored and funding was allocated, such as site constraints and maturity of planning permission, but it is disappointing that, as I understand it—I am willing to be corrected—the review was conducted without the involvement of the trust teams responsible for delivering the rebuilding programmes. As of last month, no trust with a new hospital programme scheme has been provided with the full details of how it scored specifically against the criteria.

The Health and Social Care Committee has asked how the Department is prioritising schemes and has not received a clear answer, so my question is very simple: in the interests of transparency, will the Secretary of State publish, for every single new hospital programme scheme that was subject to last year's review, the details and findings of the Department's assessment of them against each of the criteria that were published alongside his statement in the House of Commons on 20 January 2025? It is the very least that the schemes that felt deprioritised deserve, and we are hearing many examples of those from Members of different parties. I choose to believe that this outcome is inadvertent but, frankly, it just looks a bit shady. We have seen it happen before with the levelling-up money under the previous Government. The Public Accounts Committee, on which I know many Members have served, as have I, has a motto: sunlight is the best disinfectant. If the Government will not publish the detailed assessment, the Minister needs to explain why.

My local area, like so many others, has been affected by this issue. Last year I visited the John Radcliffe hospital, which serves much of Oxfordshire, and I saw at first hand how its capacity to deliver care is being severely constrained by the size and condition of the physical estate. We went to visit the old site of the neonatal intensive care unit, which had to be moved because the staff were worried about the ceiling literally coming down on sick children and on incubators. It was atrocious.

The John Radcliffe hospital wants to be world-leading. It is a specialist tertiary care hospital, which means it is able to perform very specialist surgery, and it wants a new building to do that in. When it put to the Government a bid for £28 million, it was rejected. Instead, it has gone out to seek private financing, and it will now cost the trust £46 million to deliver the exact same building. Would it not have made sense for the Government to allow the trust to borrow from the Government to build it, and then to pay the money back from its own reserves over time? Think what it could have done with that £18 million.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I know the John Radcliffe hospital, which serves some of my constituents. The hon. Lady has made a powerful case about the amount of money that has potentially been lost through this process. Would she, however, reflect on the role played by her party, particularly the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), and the amount of money wasted on the disastrous top-down reorganisation of the NHS under the coalition Government?

Layla Moran: I have to say that that was quite a segue. We are focusing on the capital estate. We all know that there were problems with the Lansley reform. In fact, I welcome the fact that it is being unravelled, and I was pretty vocal about it at the time.

The savings the John Radcliffe could have realised might have been spent on hospital at home services and other ways to divert people away from coming into A&E in the first place.

Across the wider Oxford university hospitals NHS foundation trust, £100 million of backlog is deemed as high or significant risk. Pausing or delaying plans to rebuild hospitals is a false economy, and hospitals around the country, including the John Radcliffe, are overspending on maintenance as a result. That is not limited to our hospitals; we are also seeing it in GP practices, many of which date from well before 1948. I will declare an interest in that my own surgery—the Summertown health centre—is one of those practices. It is doing incredibly well, despite working out of a very old Victorian building. It is desperate for a new site, and it was deemed one of the top priorities for the ICB. I note that the Minister mentioned a figure of £102 million, but, frankly, that does not touch the sides.

As in the case of the John Radcliffe, the Summertown health centre is now going out to seek private finance, which it will find a way to pay back slowly over time. The Exchequer would not even have to lay out this money in advance, and even with inflation, the amount it would get back is less than what the health centre has to pay to do this with private finance. I ask the Government to think about this innovatively. It is not the same as the

PFI. It is the Government using their own borrowing rules to allow investment in vital public services, and it makes no sense that they cannot do it.

When it comes to mental health services, we have the incredible Warneford hospital in Oxfordshire, and Warneford Park in Oxford will provide a new cutting-edge mental health hospital surrounded by a research and innovation hub. Groundbreaking research is planned on understanding brain health and discovering new drug therapies and new forms of treatment. This is a great vision, but it will cost £500 million. We do have private benefactors, including local businesses, willing to feed into it, but where is the funding pot for mental health trusts? They were excluded from the new hospital programme, and it is not at all clear where that kind of money may be found.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I would like to share a story from a constituent who called me last night. Her daughter had psychosis and was locked in a room at the local hospital, with a mattress on the floor and two security guards outside. She was there for a week waiting for mental health provision in a setting outside the hospital. I would like the Minister to tell me what mental health provision will be in place.

Layla Moran: I am so sorry to hear about the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent. In Lord Darzi's report, there are some stark pictures of him sitting in substandard accommodation for the very sickest in our society. The Health and Social Care Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry into severe mental ill health, because we know that mental health is so often forgotten in the NHS. It is good that the mental health investment standard has been continued, but it is sad that the overall spend as a proportion of NHS spend is going down this year for the first time in the last few years. We very much hope that this is not a trend, but a one-off, and that it will continue to rise from next year.

For the Warneford, we need to understand what new innovative funding pots we can put together. We understand that the Government are working across Departments, and this project would be as much of an advantage to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology as to the Department of Health and Social Care. Where are these pots of money, because they are important?

I will end simply by saying that I completely agree with the thrust of the motion—and, indeed, with what the Government have themselves said—which is that if we invest in capital expenditure, we need to take an invest to save approach. We know that this matters to our constituents, and we know that they cannot get the services they so desperately need. If we are to achieve the three shifts, we should not be pitting them against each other. Investing in capital will help the three shifts to succeed, and we do will the Government and the NHS to succeed.

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

2.5 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for introducing the debate. We will be talking a lot about Milton Keynes, because if you wait for a speech about its hospital, you get two at once.

[Emily Darlington]

For me, the story about Milton Keynes hospital is really personal, as it involves my family and my in-laws. Unfortunately, I lost both my in-laws in the years leading up to my being elected to this place. What I would like to say about the care my family, my in-laws and my children have had is that the team at Milton Keynes hospital—the staff from the chief executive to the consultants, the doctors, the nurses and the porters—are all so professional. I am sure everyone in this House would want to join me in thanking them for their absolute persistence in the work they have had to do just to keep the NHS going over the last 14 years.

I worked closely with the hospital in my constituency for many years as deputy leader of Milton Keynes council, and the council had to step in when the Government did not. It was with funding from the council that we were able to build the new cancer centre and the new radiotherapy unit that will open very soon. It is because of the close working relationship with the council that the hospital has some of the lowest bed blocking waits in the country. With our teams integrated into the hospital, we make sure that the people who are able to go home go home with a care package as soon as possible, because it is our belief in Milton Keynes, and it was my belief as deputy leader, that people want to be in their homes.

Despite all that work, Milton Keynes hospital has had some of the longest waiting lists in the country. That is partly due to the 14 years of underfunding of Milton Keynes. When there are over 30,000 people waiting for non-urgent elective operations, with 1,762 of them having been waiting for more than a year, these do not feel like non-urgent cases, because those people are not allowed to live a proper life, to play with their grandchildren or to go back to work as fast as they should. There is both a social cost and an economic cost. I am pleased to say that, with the investment by this Government to reduce waiting times, we have seen waiting times go down, but they are still too long.

Unlike a lot of other hospitals we will talk about today, much of the issue for Milton Keynes is that it serves the fastest growing area in our region. In fact, it is growing at double the rate of anywhere else in the greater south-east. That means that our population is set to double to 410,000 people by 2050. On average, 11 people move to Milton Keynes every single day. That is not new in Milton Keynes, because we have been developing communities, homes and businesses for quite some time under the leadership of the Labour council. What has failed time and again in Milton Keynes is the investment that we need in our local hospitals, but this Government and these Milton Keynes MPs will actually deliver what was promised over and over again but never delivered by the Conservative party.

2.9 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): Laying in an operating theatre, a patient at North Devon district hospital in my constituency can take great comfort in knowing that they are surrounded by some of the most dedicated healthcare professionals in the world. But astonishingly, the operating theatre around them is little changed since it was first built in 1978. The theatre is barely 60% of the size the NHS now expects, and it cannot accommodate more modern equipment. Much of the

air-handling system and ventilation infrastructure has either never been upgraded, or is simply beyond repair when it breaks down. That is a critical risk to patient care. North Devon district hospital now has a maintenance backlog of £44 million, over £13 million of which is for its operating theatres alone. There are no independent providers, and the next nearest NHS acute hospital is more than 40 miles away. The trust says that failing theatre facilities are the most urgent threat it faces during the next five years—not 10 years, but five—so what happens next?

Well, we know what happens, because that exact scenario struck Torbay hospital in 2018, with failing air-handling infrastructure closing down a number of operating theatres and causing widespread cancellations of surgery for more than a year. North Devon district hospital faces the same nightmare. Thanks to woeful behaviour by the last Conservative Government, not a single penny was put in place to do something about it. Now the Labour Government say that none of the planned rebuild will be delivered until after 2035. North Devon is one of nine hospitals pushed right to the back of the line by the new hospital programme review, and the Government still fail to recognise the increased maintenance costs that will flow from that decision.

If the Government ignore the symptoms, the problems will only get worse. Our hospital trust has put forward alternative plans for a lasting refurbishment at North Devon district hospital that would cost just £250 million—a fraction of what is really needed, but enough to keep the maximum number of operating theatres open beyond 2027 and avoid spiralling costs down the line. I thank the Minister for agreeing to visit North Devon district hospital to see the facilities and to listen to the trust board's proposals. I am really grateful to the Minister for listening, but I urge the Government to seize the initiative and act now before it is too late.

2.12 pm

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): In 2020, the Conservative Government announced the new hospital programme. The Prime Minister at the time, known for his complicated relationship with the truth, said that spades were in the ground, but it is clear from their disastrous 14 years in power that we cannot build on promises alone and we cannot change the country on empty slogans.

Fast forward to today, and the Labour Government have committed to building the hospitals not just with words, but with cold hard cash and a credible plan for delivery. I note that the Liberal Democrats appear to try to draw a comparison between the inheritance left to the coalition Government and that left to this Government by the previous Conservative Government. I have to take the opportunity to remind them that the coalition Government were left an NHS with the highest patient satisfaction on record and the lowest waiting lists on record. I welcome the progress made once again by this Labour Government in bringing down waiting lists six months in a row.

I am delighted that Leighton hospital in my constituency will be in wave 1 of the new hospital programme. Leighton has been in desperate need of an upgrade for some time. Building began on a new modular unit in January 2025, with some services due to move there by the summer of 2025. The original out-patient department has RAAC planks in the roof that are now well beyond

their lifespan. Recent risk assessments have graded the condition as catastrophic, with an incident likely. That compounds the betrayal of the empty promises from the previous Government. The rebuild will mean that the hospital can serve my constituents, who desperately need medical facilities, for many years to come. The value of that is immeasurable.

I also welcome the Government's commitment to changing the way we use health services. The NHS is our most beloved institution and it has served us effectively for a long time, but it must adapt. That is why I particularly welcome plans to turn Leighton into a health and care neighbourhood, transforming it into a site where provision is joined up; a place where resources are utilised well and people are actively involved in their care; a place where technology, digital and data help both proactive and personalised care to be more effective; and a place where we look after each other, we collaborate and people join forces to improve the whole.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency, there has been a popular campaign for a general hospital for many decades without success. Given that we did not even make it on to Boris's fantasy list of 40 hospitals, we are certainly not going to succeed now. In the absence of that hospital, what we need is a strategy to move more of the treatments for which distance really matters into smaller local clinics. In Horsham, that might include wound dressing and sexual health services. Does the hon. Member agree that if we are going to continue to be denied the hospital we deserve, the kind of localised treatment strategy he is suggesting could be implemented at very low cost?

Connor Naismith: I agree with the hon. Member that we must move care into the community. Where we are not able to build hospitals as quickly as we would like to, community care is so important.

The NHS needs to be reformed to serve an ageing population, taking long-term patient care out of hospitals and putting care back into the heart of communities. We need more joined-up proactive, health and social care services, and we need to change our mindset from sickness to prevention. In support of that, the NHS Confederation set out in a recent report that working more at the neighbourhood level, which the Government intend to do, can improve people's health and wellbeing.

I appreciate the efforts and sentiments from the Liberal Democrats today, but big promises with no clear plan are what got us into this mess to begin with. Empty words to gain votes have destroyed voters' confidence in our politics, and only a sensible Government with a credible plan for delivery of their commitments will restore that trust, so I am thankful that this Government's approach has been to set out a clear plan to deliver. Labour is the party of the NHS, from the original conception of the service back in the '40s to the modern day. I am confident that, as we have already seen in the example I cited from Leighton, this Government will deliver for the British people.

2.17 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to speak in today's debate and to be able to give voice to so many of my constituents' frustrations about how their right to access quality healthcare has been deprioritised by this Labour Government.

Many of my constituents, especially those in the north of my constituency, are served by the Epsom and St Helier university hospitals NHS trust. To be blunt, the situation at the trust today is simply not sustainable—clinically, financially or structurally. The trust currently operates two acute hospitals, in Epsom and St Helier, with duplicate services spread across both sites. The arrangement, while a product of historical necessity, today places considerable pressure on clinical teams. Allocation of staff members between sites is challenging and service delivery is stretched. No matter how committed the staff—their dedication is beyond question—they are constantly being asked to do more with less, in buildings that are often quite literally falling apart around them.

To give just one brief example, earlier this year St Helier was forced to cancel scheduled blood tests because of widespread flooding in the phlebotomy section. We simply cannot go on like this. Indeed, time is not a luxury we have, with the estate now deteriorating faster than it can be fixed. The trust is spending millions every year simply to keep the most urgent problems at bay: patching leaks, coping with flooding, and addressing the worst outbreaks of damp and mould. I think we all agree that these are not the conditions in which 21st-century healthcare should be delivered.

That is why it was so disappointing to learn earlier this year that the planned specialist emergency care hospital in Sutton—a long-standing scheme under the new hospital programme that was carefully conceived to address the very issues I have mentioned—has been delayed to the point that work will now not even begin until 2030 to 2035, with opening coming in 2037 at the earliest.

The new hospital will consolidate emergency care into one state-of-the-art facility, delivering world-class treatment, faster access to care, and safer outcomes. At the same time, it will allow for major investment at Epsom and St Helier hospitals, helping to modernise crumbling buildings, improve planned care pathways and ensure that most services remain close to home. Under the trust's plans, 85% of services would remain on the Epsom and St Helier sites, including out-patient care and diagnostic appointments. Local people would continue to receive the vast majority of their care where they always have done, but would benefit from shorter waiting times and access to better facilities, particularly for surgery. I passionately believe that the new hospital at Sutton is a once-in-a-generation chance to overhaul healthcare provision and ensure that my constituents receive the high-quality care they deserve in a timely fashion.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The new Sutton hospital will sit in my constituency. In 2020, we were promised by the former Member for Sutton and Cheam that the hospital would open in 2025; indeed, he continues to have that claim on his website. Does the hon. Lady agree that the failure to deliver any new hospital in Sutton borough, whether at Belmont or St Helier, is entirely down to the failure of the previous Government to fund and bring forward these projects while they were in power?

Rebecca Paul: I can confirm to the hon. Member that if the Conservatives were in power, we would be delivering that hospital.

[Rebecca Paul]

I want to be clear: the trust is ready to move forward, and clinical consensus has been secured; what is now urgently needed is commitment from the Government to drive the programme forward. After all, patients and staff alike deserve better than to spend another decade or more in facilities that are not fit for modern healthcare delivery. They deserve to know that promises made through the new hospital programme will be honoured, not quietly shelved or endlessly deferred by this Government.

I urge Ministers in the strongest possible terms to look again at the decision to delay Sutton emergency care hospital and to provide the long-term certainty the trust needs to proceed—not in 2035, but now.

2.22 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I am glad that we are taking the time today to discuss the immensely important issue of the state of our NHS hospitals. Nowhere is it more obvious that our NHS has been broken over the past 14 years than in our crumbling NHS estate. Our NHS has been starved of capital funding, and the backlog maintenance bill now stands at more than £11 billion. Research from the NHS Confederation shows that nine in 10 NHS leaders believe that the crumbling NHS estate is undermining their ability to tackle the elective backlog. This is devastating. It is apparent in my constituency, with Hillingdon hospital plagued by flooding, sewage overflows, failing lifts and outdated equipment.

The need for a new hospital in Hillingdon is not new—my predecessor's predecessor described the hospital as no longer fit for purpose many years ago, and pledged at the time to replace it. The Lib Dems are right today in their condemnation of the previous Government's record, with their fantasy hospital programme that seemed to exist only in the mind of Boris Johnson, and never in the reality of the Treasury's decisions. Residents in Uxbridge have been led up the garden path time and again, with false promises upon false promises, a funding package that was never approved and building works that never began—to this day, not a stone has been laid and no ground has been broken. At the election, no business case had been agreed, the hospital design was still being tweaked, and no contractor had been appointed. Rather than being fully funded, only £70 million of £1 billion had ever been provided.

I am glad, therefore, that the Labour Government have prioritised capital investment, with capital spending increasing by £13.6 billion in the Budget, and I am grateful for the progress we are now making with a realistic, honest and deliverable timescale for the programme. After years of broken promises, people are fed up and need action, delivery and credible commitments. That is why it is disappointing that the Lib Dem motion today, if approved, risks leading again to unfunded commitments, promising to deliver all the hospitals simply through a new taskforce. That is not how hospitals are built or paid for. It does not feel to me like a credible funded programme; instead, it is a recipe for more talk, more delay and more inaction.

I know that the community in Uxbridge and South Ruislip are now reassured that Hillingdon hospital has been included in wave 1, with a capital envelope agreed

in recent weeks of nearly £1.4 billion. Instead of more words or a taskforce, we have delivered solid agreements and funded commitments—a real plan for change. The hospital is now finalising its business case and design. A contractor will be appointed and on site in 2027, and construction work will start in 2028. It is essential that the new hospital programme continues to work at pace to provide my constituents and all residents in this country with the quality of care they deserve. I am sure the Minister would expect all Members to hold the Government to account for the delivery of the programme.

Turning to the concrete actions we could take to deliver the hospital programme more quickly, long-term revenue funding for new wave 1 teams is much needed so that they can work at pace, as well as a simplified planning process for new hospitals. I welcome the Government's planning reforms and Planning and Infrastructure Bill. I hope that Lib Dem Members will support the Bill, which seeks to speed up the delivery of critical national infrastructure.

As well as investment in hospitals, we need investment right across our NHS estate, as has been discussed today. I have met GPs who are using store cupboards as consulting spaces and heard from pharmacies that want to do more but are desperately lacking the space to deliver Pharmacy First services in privacy. The Wakley centre, which provides sexual health services in my constituency, is crammed into an outdated building, using every inch of space, and is desperate for more modern space to do preventive work.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman on the need for investment outside of hospitals, but does he agree that we also need smarter investment? Dorset NHS foundation trust, along with Somerset NHS foundation trust and university hospitals Dorset, has submitted a business case for an integrated electronic health record system that would allow them to work together, share information and, ultimately, save the NHS money. Does he agree that this is exactly the kind of technological advancement the NHS should be funding?

Danny Beales: We need to think not just about buildings, but about digital infrastructure and investment in a whole range of capital investment needs for the NHS for it to be a modern, fit-for-purpose service. It sounds like the measures the hon. Gentleman suggests are sensible.

There is a strong desire in the emerging 10-year plan to shift to neighbourhood health services, which would also require capital investment. Three neighbourhood hubs are planned in Hillingdon, but there are still no clear sites and no capital investment to make them a reality. We need a long-term infrastructure strategy for the NHS, alongside our 10-year health plan. I welcome the significant increase in capital spending for the NHS at the Budget. I also think the Government's new commitment to protect capital budgets in the NHS is vital. Far too often, under the previous Government, those budgets were raided for short-term investment to plug revenue-based gaps; now that has come to an end, which is very welcome.

My constituents have waited long enough for Hillingdon hospital. We do not need more taskforces or reviews, but concrete funded plans of action. At last, we have

from this new Labour Government a fully funded new hospital programme ready to be delivered. I look forward to construction starting and working with this Government to deliver health services that are fit for the future.

2.27 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I fully support reversing the delays to the new hospital programme and want to emphasise the importance of investment in community health provision, which offers multiple benefits to patients and the health service.

There is currently no out-of-hours healthcare provision anywhere in my constituency. Patients typically have to travel to Swindon, Bath or Salisbury for urgent medical treatment or, at best, the minor injury units in Chippenham or Trowbridge. Most of the constituency, including Melksham and Devizes towns, has limited public transport options to get to major hospitals, with patients unable to travel by car facing lengthy bus journeys.

In Melksham, we already have a working community hospital that offers a range of healthcare services, from physio to consultant out-patient appointments, but it has been without a minor injuries unit since 2008. On occasion, people in need of urgent treatment for cuts and broken bones turn up at the hospital only to be turned away without so much as a sticking plaster. That simply is not good enough.

Melksham is seeing ongoing development in and around the town, which is driving population growth, yet we have not seen the investment in services and infrastructure to match. If the long-term strategic goal is to shift more care out of larger hospitals and into community hubs, is there not a clear case to consider expanding services at under-utilised sites, such as at Melksham community hospital? Investment in services, such as in a minor injuries unit at a Melksham community site, not only offer greater convenience and potentially improved outcomes for patients, but is cost-effective, decreasing demand on overstretched services at major hospitals and reducing congestion on our roads.

I very much hope that the Department will consider the compelling case for upgrading community hospitals, and I would welcome the chance to meet the Minister to discuss the specific case for Melksham and to bring representatives from the Friends of Melksham Hospital with me.

2.30 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the earlier speech of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith). I hope Members will forgive me, but they are about to be treated to more information about the hospitals of Mid Cheshire and south Cheshire.

We on the Labour Benches are incredibly proud of our NHS. It is one of our country's greatest achievements, and is founded on the principle that everyone, no matter their background or circumstances, should have access to high-quality healthcare that is free at the point of use. That simple idea has saved millions of lives, and offered comfort, healing and hope to generations. However, after 14 years of Conservative failure, the NHS was left on life support, with record waiting lists, surgeries and appointments cancelled or delayed, a workforce worn down and undervalued, and hospitals crumbling. That is the legacy of the previous Conservative Government—

a legacy of neglect, underfunding and broken promises. Nowhere is that clearer than in the new hospital programme that they introduced in 2020. This was meant to be their flagship plan to modernise the NHS estate—to replace crumbling buildings and ensure that patients and staff had the safe, modern environments that they deserve—but the scheme was built on shaky foundations.

From the start, the scheme was plagued by delays, confusion and a complete lack of proper funding. The reality behind the headlines was that very few hospitals saw any real progress. In many cases, the money simply was not there. Let me take the case of Leighton hospital, which serves my constituents in Northwich, Winsford and Middlewich, and four other hospitals across the country. All are known to be riddled with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. Experts warned of a “catastrophic” risk to patient safety. Structural engineers said an incident was “likely”. In simple terms, these buildings were falling down, but what did the previous Government do? When the programme was first published, the plans to rebuild those five hospitals were blocked. The previous Government chose to ignore the warnings, ignore the patients and ignore NHS staff working every day in buildings that had been declared unsafe.

It was not until 2023 that the previous Government finally amended the new hospital programme to include Leighton and the other RAAC-affected hospitals. By then, years had already been wasted—time that we did not have—and even that decision came without a real plan, without a timeline and, crucially, without the funding needed to do the job.

What was offered to my local community was not a solution; it was false hope dressed up as progress. The promises crumbled faster than the hospitals that the previous Government failed to rebuild. In contrast, this Government are delivering. We are not just talking about change; we are making it happen. We are rebuilding the NHS from the foundations up and, just as importantly, rebuilding trust that the Government will deliver on their promises on the NHS. At Leighton hospital, we are proving it: the funding has been confirmed to the trust; the ground investigations are under way; and the project is moving forward. This is not just talk, but action. But let us be clear: rebuilding Leighton is not just a matter of replacing concrete; this is our opportunity to do something bigger. We have a chance to build a healthcare neighbourhood that reflects the future—a modern, resilient facility that will serve communities for generations to come and will meet the challenges of 21st century healthcare. This is not just about bricks and mortar; it is about people, it is about care and it is about building a system that reflects our values.

We are tackling the root causes of the crisis that the Conservatives have left behind. We are reducing waiting lists through more appointments, better use of technology, and support for our overstretched staff. We are training and recruiting the doctors, nurses, and carers of the future. We are ending the sticking plaster politics of the last decade and a half and building an NHS that is fit for the future.

2.34 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In rural communities like mine, our issues are very often about the distances that we have to travel in order to get

[Tim Farron]

any kind of healthcare, but particularly to reach hospitals. In Morecambe bay, which covers three quarters of my constituency population-wise, we are funded as if we have one hospital, but have to have three. One way that we have got around that is to have funding for GP surgeries to provide minor injury care in places like Grange, Ambleside, Hawkshead and beyond—yet, as of 1 April, our local integrated care board has cancelled that funding. There was a total of 1,221 minor injury assessments last year; they are now pushed on to the urgent treatment centre at Kendal, potentially overloading that excellent centre, but also causing huge harm to people who live in those rural and dispersed places, and undermining the funding model for those GP surgeries and putting them at risk. I would love it if the Minister had words with the ICB to challenge it on this.

Tomorrow, the ICB for Lancashire and South Cumbria will meet. On its agenda may or may not be, but jolly well should be, the decision to approve and to seek a new provider of GP services in the community of Coniston. We have known for three months that the excellent Dr Frey and Dr Abbas were retiring and leaving their posts in July, and the ICB has dragged its feet for three months, despite the community clamouring for action. We presented a petition of over 1,000 signatures in this place just a few weeks ago for there to be a replacement of the GP surgery to serve the community in Coniston.

When it comes to the new hospital programme, I acknowledge the fantasy figures behind the previous Government's non-existent programme, but I point out that land is available in the larger district general hospital site serving Lancaster in the southern part of my constituency. It is right next to the new medical school at Lancaster University and it is absolutely shovel-ready. There is no logical reason for it to be in the last division of the third phase of the programme, which means that it will not be built until the 2030s. I urge the Minister to think again on that point.

The Minister will be unsurprised to hear me use my last minute and a bit to talk about radiotherapy. In the northern part of my constituency, in places like Appleby, people who have cancer are able to get good quality radiotherapy treatment at Carlisle, but in the southern three quarters of my constituency, people have to make return journeys, sometimes of four hours a day for weeks on end, to get radiotherapy treatment at our nearest centre in Preston. That is outrageous. That is why we are asking for there to be a satellite radiotherapy unit at the Westmorland general hospital in Kendal. This is not just about convenience. According to an OECD recommendation, radiotherapy should be the primary treatment for cancer in 53% of cases; shamefully, in the UK, it is in only 36% of cases. Lancashire and South Cumbria ranks 42nd of 42 ICBs, with only 29% of people with cancer receiving radiotherapy. That is in no small part down to the failure to provide that treatment within our communities.

It is absolutely the case that the longer the journeys to treatment, the shorter the life expectancy of the people suffering with cancer. I urge the Minister finally to make the decision, which we have been demanding for years, to add to the chemotherapy service, to the diagnostics and to the cancer surgery that we now have at Kendal. It was wonderful to win those campaigns,

but the one thing that we are missing is radiotherapy. It is time that we brought it to the people of Westmorland, so that they can have shorter journeys and longer lives.

2.38 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I have a unique case to make in this debate on behalf of my constituents and Merton council. We do not want the new emergency hospital at Belmont, which is in phase 2 of the hospital rebuilding programme. In direct contrast to the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), I have fought this scheme for 25 years against all Governments—my own Government, the coalition Government and the Conservative Government. This plan will take the hospital away from my constituents with the greatest health needs, the largest levels of deprivation, the lowest car use, the highest hospital admissions and the greatest level of chronic conditions, and take it to healthy, wealthy Belmont at a cool cost of £1.5 billion.

The hospital will provide 80 fewer beds than we have at the moment, serve 83,000 fewer patients, and put increased pressure on St George's hospital in Tooting and Croydon University hospital—both hospitals that the Care Quality Commission has said need fewer patients to arrive at their sites. This scheme would give them more patients. Worse than that, it depends on a 3% annual reduction in lengths of hospital stays and a 3% annual reduction in activity. What hospital in the country has experienced a reduction in activity? It is also based on increased access to mental health services, which should have been provided last year, the development of community paediatric pathways, a child development centre—yet to be seen—and the reopening of the Wilson hospital in Mitcham. That hospital has not been reopened; the money has not been found, so it remains closed.

The scheme is also dependent on an increase in home births in Mitcham and Morden, which has the highest levels of social housing, the greatest housing deprivation and the most overcrowded conditions in the region. This is the Tudor Hart law writ large, where hospital services are taken away from those who need them most and given to the areas that need them least. I ask the Minister: save taxpayers' money. Already £50 million has been spent consulting on this scheme. Nobody wants it and nobody supports it. Leave St Helier hospital as it is. Spend the money that the Government have on St Helier hospital and give better services to those who need them most.

2.41 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The motion starts by referring to “hospitals across the country”, but most of the debate today has been about England. I want to highlight the situation that has arisen from the decisions made in this House on capital investment and changes to fiscal rules, and how that affects Northern Ireland and the capital investment there.

Capital investment in the health estate in Northern Ireland has been broadly stable for the 15 years prior to 2019—until 2020 when the covid pandemic brought about increased capital investment. The long tail of the pandemic, compounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, significantly disrupted global supply chains and increased construction costs. Those price increases have compounded

a subsequent and very serious problem in Northern Ireland: the outcome of the two most recent Budgets, which has meant that the funding available for capital investment in Northern Ireland is now projected to be 16% lower per head of population than England for '25-26, and therefore much lower than any assessed relative need would suggest. While I listened to the complaints of many English colleagues across the House about capital investment, in some cases I am quite envious of what they are being allocated, because it is a contrast to what we have.

Much of our health and social care capital budget is project-based. As the former Minister of Health in Northern Ireland, I am acutely aware that there is an increasing need to address the serious risks across our health and social care estate. That includes tackling its backlog maintenance liability, which currently sits at £1.4 billion. Now, as a constituency MP, I see the impact of below-needs budgets on projects in South Antrim. The new Birch Hill mental health centre is a much-needed, purpose-built facility to provide the very best environment for assessment, treatment and recovery. Yet under the budget that the Executive have provided the Department of Health, there is not enough to fund what has already been committed to, including the Executive's flagship projects, to meet current contractual commitments, to progress projects in design or development, or to fund even limited maintenance of existing property assets.

Good projects and massive potential are being lost because the Executive cannot seem to think even six months down the line, never mind one or two years. Nevertheless, Birch Hill remains high on the agenda of our Department of Health, and I hope that the Executive parties responsible for funding allocations consider the consequences of their decisions and recognise the critical need for the project. For mothers and babies in Northern Ireland, it would also provide a centre for perinatal mental health and wellbeing.

I join the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) who said that the motions are welcome but what we would like to see is action. That action would be the certainty of having budget, and assurance that it will be a recurrent budget. I look to the words of the Secretary of State for Health, who talked about transformation in the health service and how it needs both funding and political will. I hope that following today's debate he can get both.

2.45 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I must confess that I am slightly surprised that the Lib Dems have brought forward an Opposition day debate about hospitals and are stating their case in such a way, because the last thing we need in this country is a load of promises we cannot keep. I am proud that we Government Members have provided sustainable and affordable plans for the new hospital programme. I have been on the doorstep the last few weeks in the run-up to the county council elections, and the No. 1 priority that comes up is GP access. We have provided 1,500 new GP posts in this country, and waiting lists have been going down for the last five months. Emergency dentistry is also very commonly brought up on the doorstep, and we have provided 700,000 new dentist appointments.

There are many other parts of the NHS that are crumbling. I see the crumbling of the hospital buildings as a metaphor for what has happened to the NHS over the last 14 years.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): My hon. Friend is talking about the important work done by Lord Darzi, and the findings on crumbling hospitals in England. He may be interested to hear that recent figures show that the bill for the high-risk repairs needed to Scottish hospitals stands at £64 million. Those repairs have not been carried out under the SNP. They include two high-risk repairs that are badly needed, and have been outstanding since 2016, at Cameron hospital in Fife, which is used by some of my constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Scottish Government should use some of the record funding provided to them by this Labour Government to fix our hospitals in Scotland?

Dr Opher: Of course it is essential that we maintain hospitals so that they are safe to treat patients in, so I agree with my hon. Friend about spending the money. In fact, the backlog bill for repairs in the NHS runs to £13.8 billion. I work as a GP in a GP practice, and I note that Lord Darzi estimates that £37 billion more should have been spent on the NHS since 2010, but was not. For those of us working in the NHS, it does feel like that. There is a massive building project ahead of us.

I point out that the previous Labour Government built 100 new hospitals. One was the Vale hospital in Dursley, which we started in 2008, and which I had a hand in. As hon. Members have said, community hospitals such as Vale hospital are crucial to how the NHS works. We must invest in our community hospitals and use them properly. The Vale hospital provides excellent minor injuries unit services, a specialist stroke service and in-patient beds for the community. We must invest in our community hospitals going forward. As we have heard, there were meant to be 40 new hospitals in the last few years, but none of them got built, and it turned out that they were not even funded.

We need to get care out of hospitals and back into the community. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) talked about GP premises; 20% of GP premises were built before the inception of the NHS, and I inherited one of those premises in Dursley. Twenty years ago, we opened a purpose-built surgery at May Lane, and we are still enjoying the benefits; it provides patients with excellent services. We must therefore invest. I was glad to see the Government investing £100 million in GP surgeries. I was pleased to see £80 million put into GP advice and guidance; that will allow consultants to give GPs advice, so that they can care for patients in the community. I am also really delighted with the push for neighbourhood health centres; that must be the way. We must bring back the family doctor, as that continuity of care is what really makes patients better. That is so important.

We must also integrate health and social care in the community, so that we can pull patients out of hospital. That also applies to emergency care, as far too many people are having to go to overwhelmed A&Es at big district general hospitals. At the moment, only 20% of acute admissions go through GPs, who are the best

[Dr Opher]

people to ensure that we avoid admissions. We have to change all of this. Our NHS staff and patients deserve better; they deserve facilities that reflect the excellence of the care provided within them. The Labour Government are committed to rebuilding not just our hospitals, but trust, and the integrity of our public services.

2.51 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): Hospitals matter to everyone, but hospitals falling apart help no one—not patients, not staff and not the economy. The Government have called the NHS “broken”. They rightly blamed the Conservatives, and criticised the NHS’s management under their leadership, so why are the Government now making the same mistakes?

Under the revised new hospital programme, the building of the Royal Berkshire hospital will not commence for another decade. There is little prospect of a new Royal Berkshire to serve the communities of Henley, Reading, Newbury, Bracknell and Windsor until the 2040s. Doctors who have worked in the NHS for over 30 years believe that they will never work in modern buildings. The cancer centre alone is 164 years old.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My hon. Friend talks of members of staff with long service. A former nurse with 40 years’ experience in the NHS recently contacted me. She took her husband, who has complex needs, into hospital, as he had a hand infection, and they were forced to wait for over 12 hours in a tiny cubicle with no ventilation. It pained me to hear that story. She worked so hard for the NHS, which she felt was down on its knees. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a damning indictment of the state of our hospitals, and that we urgently need to pursue a major 10-year capital investment programme to get them back up to speed?

Freddie van Mierlo: My hon. Friend is right to point out the impact of the state of the NHS on the brilliant people who work there. My sister is a nurse in the Royal Preston hospital, and she tells me just how hard it is to walk past people who are being cared for in corridors. Every week at the Royal Berkshire, an operation is cancelled due to power cuts, water supply issues, broken lifts or malfunctioning temperature controls. Those are lost appointments and lost efficiency for the NHS. Floods and sinkholes plague the foundations of the Royal Berkshire hospital, which now requires relocation, and identified suitable sites are set to be put on the market at the end of this year. Further inaction by the Government will mean that those carefully laid plans and that funding will amount to nothing.

There are also hospitals that were never considered for the programme, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) pointed out. I recently visited the Warneford hospital in Oxford, which gives in-patient care to patients with severe mental health conditions, including schizophrenia, personality disorders and psychosis. I was shocked by the conditions that patients live in. They are in tight spaces in dark rooms, and the infrastructure is Georgian. There were rooms that reminded me of recent visits to HMP Huntercombe. I said that rather nervously to the member of staff

showing me around, worried that I might offend them. They gently held my arm and said, “Freddie, why do you think we showed you these rooms?”

Staff told me that cramped conditions make it difficult to take breaks during the day. One worker showed me their windowless cupboard office—hardly great for their own mental health. Staff also told me how working in Georgian buildings impacts the quality of their work. Sight lines in common rooms are obstructed by pillars; rooms are difficult to heat; and security is difficult to maintain. A new Warneford would cost a fraction of the price of a physical health hospital, and the Government promised to put mental health on the same footing as physical health, so why does the revised new hospital programme not include a single mental health facility?

Both the Warneford and the Royal Berkshire have been devastated by the Government’s lack of foresight. The cuts to hospital spending are a decision made to save money, but that is a false economy. Over the next 10 years, repairs to the Royal Berkshire hospital are projected to cost £400 million—a quarter of the cost of a new hospital. Add to that the many other neglected hospitals, and the loss is unthinkable. Proper investment in modern infrastructure is needed now.

In my constituency we have the Townlands Memorial hospital, which shows how good the NHS can be with modern infrastructure. Anyone who receives care there, whether through the Royal Berkshire NHS foundation trust or the Oxford Health NHS foundation trust, sings its praises. It hosts over 30 specialities and plans to expand further. Let us give our hospitals the chance to excel.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. There is an immediate three-minute time limit.

2.56 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. The previous Government made off-the-cuff commitments to new hospitals that were never going to be affordable or deliverable; I am really proud to be part of a Labour Government who commit only to what we can afford. We stick to our promises and deliver them. The rapid progress that we have made towards improving the NHS, reorienting it towards frontline delivery, is a fantastic example of that.

Over 3 million more appointments were delivered in the first nine months of this Government—that is well ahead of the target—and over 100,000 people have been treated on time. Those are great statistics, but when I knock on doors and meet residents, I hear about the difference that that has made to them and their families. People are back on their feet, back at work, and back being active parents and grandparents sooner than they could have imagined. This is politics that is delivering for people. It is not the politics of easy answers, but the politics of progress, and of change to people’s lives.

I will highlight one change that will be particularly important in my constituency of Aylesbury as we continue the work of transforming the NHS, including through the new hospital programme: the need to better integrate primary and secondary care. There is great potential for savings there, if we think about the secondary and primary care estates in the round. More importantly,

that will help bring traditionally hospital based-care closer to the community; it will be better care that has better outcomes for people.

As I have said in this place before, we face an acute challenge in Aylesbury with our GP surgeries. We had new housing estates built in a poorly planned way under the previous Government, without the necessary GP services being provided. We also have particularly high levels of deprivation in Aylesbury and the county of Buckinghamshire—it is really marked by inequalities—which contributes to the pressures on our GP services.

The Government have already made significant progress in improving GP provision; 1,500 new GPs have been recruited, and successful negotiations with the British Medical Association have resulted in the biggest uplift in funding for GPs in years. I think that will start to make a real difference.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Has the hon. Lady had any feedback, in conversations with her GPs, about what the increased employer national insurance contributions will do to their growth of provision?

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I am in regular contact with my GPs, and I know that they are really pleased, actually, with the uplift in funding that they have received through the contract, and with what they will be able to deliver with that.

As we think about the future of hospital provision, we must think about our healthcare in the round—what each community needs more broadly, and how we join up hospital services with those provided by our GPs, and with other community services. I am really excited by the work already under way in Buckinghamshire to establish integrated neighbourhood teams and I am pleased at this Government's commitment to neighbourhood health centres.

In Buckinghamshire, and particularly in Aylesbury, all our key health organisations are coming together—including the acute and community NHS trusts, primary care, the local authority, public health, the mental health trust and voluntary sector organisations—to agree a collective plan for the next 10 years, which I think could be transformative. They are pooling their collective resources and teams across Stoke Mandeville hospital and three primary care networks, and looking not only at creating a centre in Aylesbury for shared delivery of services, but at providing better care out in the communities.

As we build our hospitals of the future across the country, it is essential that we plan in that way—not just for in-hospital care, but for a joined-up approach across all our services, bringing that care closer to our communities. Ultimately, that is what people want and what people need: a future healthcare system in which as many people as possible can access care close to home and manage their health in their own homes and their own communities as best as possible.

3 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): Many of our hospitals are crumbling, but even those that appear sound may contain hidden dangers, notably asbestos. Last week I met a constituent who is suffering from mesothelioma, contracted from asbestos. He was very concerned that so many of our hospitals and other public buildings still have asbestos within them, putting

more people at risk of getting that terrible disease. We need a proper survey to find out where all that asbestos is and a plan for its safe removal.

I was pleased to hear the Minister talk about the work he is trying to do to get more funding for GPs, because that is one of our big problems in Ely and East Cambridgeshire. A while ago, when we nearly lost our GP in Sutton, residents were told, “Never mind—you can go to nearby GPs.” In rural areas, however, a GP even a few miles away is inaccessible to anyone who does not have a car. More recently, unexpected changes to the bus route with no notice left patients of the Bottisham practice suddenly unable to get to their GP.

We have seen a lot of new build around my constituency, not least in Soham, which desperately needs a larger surgery. I went there and saw the conditions staff were working in, the tiny space they now have for their pharmacy area and the difficulties they face in serving a much larger community than the surgery was built for. The practice has been trying for years to get a new surgery, but the procedure for keeping or enlarging a surgery or building a new one is incredibly complex, and GPs must put together funding from a range of sources. Those GPs should be spending their time trying to help patients, but they are instead spending their time building business plans and looking for funding. As we heard earlier from a Government Member, we desperately need NHS dentists in my constituency too, and they in turn will need premises.

We do not have any major hospitals in Ely and East Cambridgeshire, but we rely on those elsewhere to be in good condition when we need them. We need our own Princess of Wales hospital to be in good condition, and we need excellent GP surgeries and NHS dentists who can serve us into the future.

3.3 pm

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Today's debate is a welcome chance to talk about the challenges of our health service. The Darzi report was a stark demonstration of the state in which the health service was left by the last Government. I know that part of the game today is for our colleagues on the Liberal Democrat Benches to say, slightly deceitfully, “Oh, the Labour MPs are supporting the delay.”, but Members across the House will know, if we are honest with ourselves, that we cannot delay something that was not going to happen.

What of our inheritance? It stretched far further than just the buildings; it included the staff and the patients in them, weakened by austerity and decimated by covid. Lord Darzi talked about £37 billion of under-investment in our hospital buildings in the 2010s. On top of that, what else did we inherit?

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my real discomfort at the gall of the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) in suggesting that somehow this Government are making the same mistakes that the Conservative Government made, when it was in the 2010s—under a coalition Government—that the rot started, with the Liberal Democrats?

Josh Fenton-Glynn: I think if the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) were to reflect on what he said, he would know that these things always go a lot deeper.

[Josh Fenton-Glynn]

What have we inherited? We inherited 14,000 unnecessary deaths in A&E alone each year. NHS waiting lists peaked at 7.7 million. That is people waiting anxiously, needing treatment, tumours growing, their bodies getting further from being well, and every day 2,000 people were being sent to hospital who did not need to be there, because social care had been failed and forgotten by the previous Government and by the coalition Government. In my constituency, that means 20% of beds in our hospitals are taken up by people who do not need to be there.

We have work to do, and I am concerned that in this debate we will get caught up in a discussion about hospitals and will not fix the systems within them that we need to fix. That is why we have talked about three shifts. The first is from hospital to community. We have to stop people needing hospital care because they have been failed by care closer to home. That is why our revolution in GPs will make a real difference. The second is the shift from fitness to prevention. We can have the best buildings, but with less prevention they will still be full. Finally, there is the shift from analogue to digital; every week, the Health and Social Care Committee hears about people caught between systems and between computer systems.

Although I welcome this debate, we must not fetishise buildings over people. We need to think holistically about our system and deliver the decade of national renewal that the public voted for. We need to look at all of our health service, across parties and in good faith.

3.6 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): My constituents are predominantly served by two hospitals: Frimley Park to the east and Basingstoke and North Hampshire to the west. Some 65% of Frimley Park is RAAC concrete, known to be highly unstable, so it is right that it is included in phase 1 of the new hospital programme and prioritised as urgently needing a complete new build. Basingstoke and North Hampshire hospital, however, has been moved to phase 3 and building is now scheduled to begin some time between 2037 and 2039, leaving staff and patients to endure the crumbling buildings for another 15 years.

That decision was made without a single ministerial visit—not one. However, I have visited the hospital and seen what is needed, so I can tell Ministers about the repairs needed to the ceiling to stop rain coming into patient wards and the windows that cannot open, cannot close or are not double-glazed. I can tell Ministers about the air conditioning and filtration systems that keep the air clean in the hospital's operating theatres, which are already at their maximum capacity. Replacing those systems will become essential within five years, and there is no physical room to add to what is there.

I can tell Ministers about the flooring that connects two important parts of the hospital over a car entrance, which is in a poor state and held together with industrial tape. Patients are being trolleyed across that uneven, unstable flooring on a daily basis. The tape holding the site together is both literal and a metaphor for the state of the system and of hospitals right now in this country. Ministers would know that if they had visited the

hospital. One third of the repairs needed are high-risk—not a phrase we want to hear associated with our hospital structures and systems.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I completely agree with my hon. Friend that in none of the repairs we are talking about to our hospital infrastructure do any of us want to use the phrase “high-risk”. Stepping Hill hospital serves my constituents; I have met the Minister about it and I look forward to welcoming her to visit it later this year. Despite needing a reported £134 million spent on it, Stepping Hill is not on the new hospital programme. I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that the health of our nation is directly related to the wealth of our nation, and that investing in hospital infrastructure is thus an extremely good investment in all of our population.

Alex Brewer: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Health and wealth are two sides of the same coin and we need to invest in both, which is why the delays are a false economy. Maintaining Basingstoke and North Hampshire hospital for the next 15 years will cost almost as much as the rebuild, making it a false economy and a categorically bad financial decision as well as a bad health decision. There is no point in investing in a multimillion-pound brand new air filtration system in a building that is falling down.

In June 2024, the Prime Minister who was then the Leader of the Opposition visited Basingstoke town but not the hospital. Assurances were given and reported in the *Basingstoke Gazette* that the hospital would be built by 2030. In February after the announcement, I asked the Prime Minister about the logic of the delay, given that it will clearly be a significant financial burden for taxpayers while continuing to limit healthcare delivery. I was told that the hospital would be built, but not when. This is a clear step backwards. With the exception of the shadow Minister, we all know the situation in which the previous Government left the country, but that is not a reason for economically and medically unsound decisions now. I invite the Minister—or any Minister—to visit Basingstoke and North Hampshire hospital with me to understand the full financial and health implications of this decision for local people in North East Hampshire.

3.11 pm

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Wickham) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

This has been an interesting and enlightening debate in some ways. Of all the subjects on which the Liberal Democrats might have brought a motion to this House, it is fascinating that we are talking about new hospitals, as I think everybody would agree that the Labour party has invested both historically and under this Government in the national health service. In fact in the last Budget back in the autumn, £13.6 billion extra was allocated to NHS capital expenditure—a record amount. I know that Opposition Members have not particularly enjoyed repeated references to the coalition years. I do not think anybody in this House particularly enjoys remembering the 2010 to 2015 period. The Conservatives certainly do not, and apparently the Liberal Democrats—

Luke Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Ferguson: I am barely getting going but would be delighted to add an extra minute to my speech.

Luke Taylor: It is amazing how short memories are on the Labour side of the Chamber. The note from the right hon. Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne) which said “I am afraid there is no money” led to decisions that were apparently “ideological”, yet difficult decisions now being made by the Labour Government are “mature and realistic”. It is amazing how short the memories are to make those two things different. A lot of time and patience are being given to this Government for the delays to our hospitals; if their tone were more constructive, more patience would be given.

Mark Ferguson: If we want the tone to be constructive, we should be constructive about the fact that Labour is going to be building hospitals, when no hospitals were constructed over the last five years. The reality is very clear: hospitals do not simply appear; we cannot wish a hospital into existence. They require two things: money and time. If we wish that there were more new hospitals in this country, we should go back in time to 10 to 15 years ago. That would have been a fantastic time, when borrowing was much cheaper than it is today, to have invested in hospitals in all our communities. Unfortunately, the cancellation of the building schools for the future project was basically the first act of the coalition Government, and there was a lack of investment in schools and hospitals. As the shadow spokesperson the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) has said today, we are cleaning up the mess that has been left. That was the characterisation of the early 2010s, but it is very much more realistic today. The shadow spokesperson accused the Government of a lack of imagination. Well, there has been no lack of imagination here; there has been magical thinking from the Liberal Democrats, who apparently believe that a taskforce will generate the billions of pounds necessary to build hospitals immediately.

Helen Morgan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Ferguson: I am keen to make progress.

I have repeatedly made this point to Conservative Members, who I do not feel are taking the advice, but I will repeat it to the Liberal Democrats, who I equally do not think will do so. I have a huge amount of experience in opposition—a lot of us on the Government Benches have a lot more experience of it than we ever wanted. If we are really serious about what this country needs, we cannot just say that we want to have hospitals now and expect them to be delivered if we simultaneously oppose revenue-generating measures in the Budget. I am afraid that what this motion is about, which has been revealed by many of the speeches, is opportunism.

We all want more investment in the NHS and that is what this Government are delivering. A great point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) when he said that it is not simply a matter of buildings, but a matter of people too. The best maternity facility in the country is in my constituency at the Queen Elizabeth maternity hospital, yet it is in a very old building. I want a new building for that maternity hospital. I want far better resources for the staff. I hope

that it will come in time, but they are doing a fantastic job with what we have got. We need to support those in the NHS rather than knocking them down.

3.15 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Torbay hospital is very much a family affair for me. My wife has worked there for more years than she would let me admit in this Chamber and my son is now a registrar there, so I thought I knew the hospital quite well until I was elected, and then the chief executive of Torbay and South Devon NHS foundation trust opened the Pandora’s box of pain and challenges that the hospital faces. That made me really angry at how the previous Conservative Government failed to invest in the desperate needs of our NHS, both in Torbay and across the country.

So it was with hope in my heart that I came to this Chamber in July, hoping that over the next few months Labour would be part of the solution. It is extremely sad and disappointing that Torbay feels as if it has been kicked into the long grass. We know that this means that there will be a failure in serving our communities. We are expecting outstanding staff to deliver services in poor conditions, and Torbay is one of the most deprived communities in the south-west, so we are letting down some of the poorest in our communities.

I want to share some of the contents of this Pandora’s box with the Chamber. On visiting the hospital, there is a vista of hope, as there is scaffolding around the main tower, but it is actually there to stop pieces of the tower falling on NHS workers and visitors to the hospital, rather than because repairs are under way. There are almost 700 sewage leaks across the hospital, many impacting on clinical areas. Whole wards have been shut down and had deep cleans due to these sewage leaks within Torbay hospital. Only 6% of the hospital is of A1 standard—that shows starkly how poor the situation is.

We face immediate pressures in Torbay. There are cuts to out-of-hours coronary care services that could put those in Torbay and nearby constituencies such as South Devon at risk of tissue death because there are not fast enough interventions for coronary conditions.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I represent that neighbouring constituency, and those in the largely rural area of South Devon will be severely threatened by the closure of out-of-hours coronary care in Torbay because somebody decided it would be a good idea to merge it with coronary care in Exeter, meaning a potential increase of up to 45 minutes in ambulance times for constituents from the south of my constituency to get to hospital. It is clearly going to put people in critical danger, and I am sure my hon. Friend would agree that we desperately need the integrated care board to reconsider this poorly thought-out decision.

Steve Darling: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that this wrong-headed approach needs urgent review.

In Paignton, there are threats to the long-term delivery of ambulance services, which would add delays to communities getting support. Perhaps the biggest threat is a financial one. Down in Plymouth, £60 million of cuts to health service budgets were announced in the last few days. In Torbay, the hospital admitted that it is looking at £40 million of cuts to NHS services. With £100 million of cuts and the pressures on our services in

[Steve Darling]

south Devon, will the Minister tell us where that money has gone and how she will intervene and support our services, because our hospitals in Torbay are crumbling?

3.20 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): In all sincerity, I thank the Lib Dems for bringing the debate to the House. It is fair to say that Labour Members are more than happy to discuss the NHS and the new hospital programme at any opportunity. I would again like to put on the record my thanks to all the staff at Princess Alexandra hospital in Harlow. I also pay tribute to the staff of the East of England ambulance service, who go back and forth to the hospital.

I often visit the Princess Alexandra—I actually visited it today—and I see a workforce who work incredibly hard in difficult circumstances. They are a credit to not only my town of Harlow, but the NHS as a whole. As has been mentioned, the new Princess Alexandra hospital was one of 40 new hospitals that only existed in the mind of the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. When I was elected, I found a project without any funding, without a business plan and without even a site to build the new hospital on. The idea that it would be built by 2030 was an absolute pipedream. The current Princess Alexandra site is too small. The corridors and wards are too small, the A&E department is crammed, and it is literally falling apart. We have seen sewage leaking into the wards and we saw the roof of the ICU falling down. Fortunately, nobody was injured. [Interruption.] My speech is so riveting that I have woken Jennie up, so I apologise for that.

I support the Government's amendment and pay tribute to the work already done by this Labour Government. Waiting times are down, and we finally have a realistic, achievable and fully funded timetable for a new Princess Alexandra hospital and at least £1.5 billion of investment in our town. In the meanwhile, of course the Princess Alexandra hospital will need funding. I have met the chief exec a number of times and will meet him again next week to discuss the matter. I know that the Minister is already preparing herself for the lobbying she will get from me in the Tea Room next week.

I would like to end my speech on something that there will be consensus on across the House.

Charlie Dewhurst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Does the hon. Member agree that the new hospital programme is just one part of the jigsaw and that facilities such as Bridlington district hospital and Alfred Bean hospital in Driffield in my constituency are much under-utilised resources? We should be making the most of every NHS facility by bringing community services back into those places.

Chris Vince: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. As a fellow Leeds United supporter who is celebrating this week, I took his intervention just to have the opportunity to mention that. I add that Harlow Town were also promoted on Monday.

The hon. Member makes a valid point, and a hospital like Princess Alexandra is only part of the jigsaw. Just over the road, there was the walk-in centre, which was sadly closed in 2013. Ideas such as care in the community,

which mean that fewer people need to go to hospital, need to be looked at. At Princess Alexandra hospital, one of the biggest issues is the number of people who need to go to the A&E department. We need to consider how we can avoid that and free up more medical staff to do other things, so I absolutely take his point.

I will end on another area of consensus. This is an issue that Members who have hospitals in their constituencies will all be aware of: NHS nurses, doctors and staff suffering abuse at work. I would like to put on the record that NHS staff are absolute heroes and that any abuse, be it physical or verbal, is totally unacceptable. I am sure that that is something we can all agree on across the House.

3.24 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The crisis in our NHS and the scandal of crumbling hospitals are a daily reality for my constituents and all communities served by the Epsom and St Helier university hospitals NHS trust. We have allowed our healthcare infrastructure to decay to a point where it hinders the delivery of care. These are not minor cosmetic issues; many of our hospital buildings predate the NHS and are riddled with damp, mould and leaking roofs. Yet we expect our dedicated doctors, nurses and support staff to deliver world-class treatment under those appalling conditions. The consequences run far deeper than peeling paint: patient safety is jeopardised, staff morale is crushed, and the basic functioning of our hospitals is compromised. Staff are stretched to their limits, struggling to provide the care that our communities deserve in facilities that are simply not fit for purpose. They deal with the consequences of decades of under-investment, where patching up failing infrastructure has become the norm—a short-sighted and ultimately more costly approach.

The impact of the ageing estate on elective recovery has meant that since April 2024, more than 600 operations have had to be cancelled. The lifts break down and cannot be fixed simply because they do not make the parts any more. Over the past five years, over £60 million has been spent on improving the Epsom and St Helier estate just to keep it operational. At St Helier, 46% of repairs are identified as high risk.

The human cost of this crumbling infrastructure is evident. Patients are forced to endure unacceptable waiting times, often in undignified conditions. A&E waiting times at the Epsom and St Helier trust are among the worst in London, with over a third of patients waiting more than 12 hours for a bed.

Luke Taylor: My hon. Friend mentions corridor care. That is a recurring theme in Members' inboxes. A constituent recently told me that her husband, who is immunosuppressed because of his chemotherapy, had to wait 54 hours in A&E at St Helier with sepsis, exposing him to more infections on top of his existing conditions. Does she agree that without a proper rescue package for crumbling hospitals like St Helier, immunosuppressed patients will continue to be put at unnecessary risk?

Helen Maguire: I am sorry to hear that story. It is just one among a catalogue of incidents that we hear of on a regular basis.

This past winter, more than 2,000 patients waited over half a day just to be seen. The delays not only cause distress and anxiety but can have serious and long-term consequences for patient outcomes. The Epsom and St Helier university hospitals NHS trust has worked diligently, developing detailed plans for a new specialist emergency care hospital alongside the modernisation of Epsom and St Helier hospitals. This state-of-the-art facility would be a beacon of hope, improving outcomes for our sickest patients and consolidating acute services in a way that strengthens staffing and keeps care local. But that promise has been left to wither. The Health Secretary's latest announcement pushes the start of construction of the new specialist emergency care hospital to 2032 at the earliest, adding to decades of false promises that have let my constituents down time and again.

That is why, this Friday, I will be abseiling 125 feet down St Helier hospital to raise funds for the Epsom and St Helier Hospitals charity and shine a spotlight on the urgent need for investment in our hospitals. The funds raised will provide extra support to our hospitals, over and above what the NHS can currently deliver.

Charity can only fill so many gaps; it cannot substitute for the Government action that our hospitals desperately require. The Government should reverse the delay to the new hospital programme and urgently deliver the new hospitals that patients have long been promised. They must prioritise the construction of the specialist emergency care hospital and fund the long-overdue repairs at St Helier. My constituents deserve nothing less than modern, safe and high-quality healthcare.

3.28 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I declare an interest: my daughter is an NHS nurse. I want her, her colleagues and the patients they care for to have buildings that are safe, secure and suitable for their needs.

Nowhere is it more apparent that our NHS is broken than in our crumbling hospitals. My own mam recently spent two and a half months in hospital—the majority in one of our local community hospitals, which I am sure is not alone in being held together by the professionalism and care of its staff, rather than by the fabric of the building itself. Lord Darzi's report paints a stark picture of the crumbling buildings in our health service and of a primary care estate in which 20% of the buildings predate the founding of the health service.

I am very much an advocate for preserving historic buildings, but I draw the line when it comes to hospitals that are not fit for purpose. That is why we need an NHS fit for the future, which starts with buildings fit for its staff and the patients they care for. Crumbling old buildings, and indeed modern buildings with inadequate staff facilities, lead to low morale and low productivity. That is why repairing, rebuilding and improving our healthcare estate is central to this Government's plan for change and to our health mission.

We are delivering that plan. It includes, as we have already heard, £13.6 billion in healthcare capital spending, over £4 billion in operational capital, and over £1 billion to tackle critical NHS maintenance. Let us compare that with the record of the previous Government: under-investment in the estate, record low public satisfaction in the NHS, record high waiting lists, doctor strikes allowed to drag on and on, and a new hospital programme years behind schedule with no money beyond March 2025.

This Government are committed to rebuilding our NHS, and that is happening on the ground now in my Carlisle constituency, with funding for a new £12 million urgent treatment centre, which was approved in December and is on track to be opened by the end of this year. That is the change that Carlisle needs, it is the change our country needs, and it is the change our Government are delivering.

3.31 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): My local hospital, the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King's Lynn, is one of the seven RAAC hospitals. I have campaigned for a new hospital since I was first elected in 2019. The QEH has had the dubious honour of being the most propped hospital in the country. Today, steel and timber supports hold up the roof to keep the hospital safe. Staff and patients should not have to put up with that.

Initially, QEH was not part of the new hospital programme, but through campaigning in Parliament and strong local support, it was added to the scheme as a priority by the last Conservative Government—part of a fully funded scheme that is being funded in the same way as this programme: through future spending reviews. After the election, this Government's review of the new hospital programme cast doubt on our new hospital, but I am glad that, after pressure, RAAC schemes were removed from that review and restored as the priorities they should be. That was warmly welcomed by patients, staff and my constituents.

The clock is ticking, however, and the Government's decision to delay the timetable for a new hospital opening from 2030 to 2032-33 is unwelcome and, I would argue, unnecessary. It also means spending money propping up the roof, wasting millions of pounds that could be spent getting on with the new scheme. The trust has well-developed plans and an experienced team in place. The Health Secretary has said that if we can go faster than the 2027-28 start date for construction, he will pursue that. When I went with the Minister to the hospital trust, she repeated that commitment, which I welcomed.

There are concerns that the NHS England reorganisation could cause issues with approvals, but the Health Secretary told me in the House that we would use it to take an axe to the multi-layered approvals process. I am not sure that he has swung it yet, but I hope he does, because the savings in business cases, consultant costs, other costs and time are considerable.

There has been much talk across the House of the need for action. I was at QEH last week with the chief executive. My ask is that the business case for the multi-storey car park is approved as rapidly as possible, so that work can start next year at the latest. That is the key enabling scheme to free up the existing car park so that we can get on and build the new QEH. The recent confirmation of the available funding was welcome and I thank the Minister—it will be a major investment in my constituency. Let us now get on with the new QEH that the staff, patients and the community it serves across Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire deserve.

3.34 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): For years, my constituents in Banbury have lived with the consequences of a health system that has been allowed to fall apart bit

[Sean Woodcock]

by bit, service by service. Our mental health services, especially for children and adolescents, are severely under-resourced. Families are waiting far too long for help, even in the most serious cases. Our maternity unit in Banbury was downgraded under the Conservatives, so those having complex or emergency births have to travel to Oxford or Warwick, with all the risk that that brings, especially when delays are caused by our inadequate transport infrastructure. There is no overnight surgery or day-care surgery available locally, and patients fall through the cracks because of poorly co-ordinated services between Oxfordshire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire.

Under the Conservatives, and with the support of the Liberal Democrats in coalition, money was diverted away from vital health services into a disastrous and unnecessary reorganisation of our national health service. The result is what we are seeing now: fragmented care, overstretched services and communities like Banbury being left behind. My constituents are not going to be pleased by Governments making promises that they cannot keep and when they have no realistic plan or funds to deliver them.

Helen Morgan: Multiple Government Members have made that point, but surely they can see that promising to build a hospital in a decade's time when they may not be in power is a meaningless promise.

Sean Woodcock: I suggest that our decade of national renewal will ensure that the hospitals that we have promised will be delivered. I am confident about that because things are changing. The new hospital programme has been put back on a firm footing, with every project backed by real funding and a realistic plan, which is equally important.

Crucially, this Government are not stopping there. Labour's 10-year health plan is about improving how the whole system works with patients. That means better co-ordination between GPs, hospitals, mental health services and social care, and ensuring that wherever people live, even if that is on the border between counties, which is an issue close to the hearts of people in my constituents, they are not passed from one part of the system to another without support. It also means doing more locally, with more care available close to home, so fewer people have to travel longer distances to get basic treatment, and earlier intervention, so that problems are picked up before they become emergencies.

We have already seen progress. We have cut waiting lists by over 200,000, delivered over 3 million extra appointments, recruited more GPs and invested £26 million in mental health crisis centres to alleviate the pressures on A&E services. Some £2 billion will be spent on technology and digital improvements to increase productivity and ensure patients are seen faster. We are starting to turn things around and doing so in a way that puts patients first, without making undeliverable, unrealistic promises that damage trust in politics and the power of politics under our democratic system. For too long, people in Banbury have been left wondering if their NHS would be there when they needed it. After 14 years, they can see that help is finally on the way. With this Labour Government, things are changing practically and with purpose.

3.38 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I start by declaring an interest that will prejudice me in this debate: I was born in Eastbourne district general hospital; I have said farewell to cherished folks there; and I have been brought back from the brink in the DGH myself. I express huge thanks to the incredible staff in A&E, the resuscitation area, the acute medical unit and on Jevington ward who treated me and got me back into action last year.

However, for years, our DGH services have been eroded, with core services like consultant-led maternity moved to the Conquest hospital in Hastings, an unacceptable 20 miles away. I will keep fighting for the return of consultant-led maternity services at the DGH, just as I fought alongside local campaigners to reopen our midwifery unit for births after months of closure. I fight standing on the shoulders of local campaigning giants for our NHS, such as Liz Walke. I have known her since I was seven, and I am proud to welcome her to the Gallery today alongside Rose Bunn.

Beyond services, our DGH buildings are crying out for help. Our DGH bosses have said:

"The age and standard of current hospital buildings presents challenges for the consistent delivery of safe, effective, responsive and efficient care."

The trust's backlog maintenance bill stands at £460 million. That is one of the largest in the country, and it is why we were included in the new hospital programme in the first place. Our town was therefore appalled that the Conservatives put our hospital to the back of the queue when they were in office, and Eastbournians are further outraged that this Government are keeping us there in wave 4. In fact, having been born in that hospital 31 years ago, I will be nearly 50 by the time it is set to be completed.

In the light of the mismatch between the size of our maintenance backlog and our place in the queue, my key ask of the Minister is whether the Government will review our wave 4 position in the programme as it stands. If they will not, what extra support will the Government provide to address the growing, nearly £500 million maintenance bill across our trust? Eastbourne needs answers and deserves action, and Eastbourne, together with campaigners such as Liz, will be listening very closely to her answers.

3.41 pm

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I welcome this Opposition day debate on hospitals and the state of the NHS, which is on its knees after 14 years of mismanagement by the previous Government, but I find myself blinking in the dappled light of a new reality.

Reading the motion as drafted, one could be forgiven for thinking that an unchallenged Tory Government over the last 14 years alone were responsible for the chaos that we witness but, pinching myself to wake from the dream, I recall that the Liberal Democrats were part of that Government for five long years. They may want to forget about it, but we remember it. We remember the rose garden, where the blue Tories and the yellow Tories harmoniously, hand in hand, drew up their plans to devastate our health and social care public services through the austerity programme. We

remember the bedroom tax, which was voted for multiple times by the Liberal Democrats. We remember the Lansley reforms and the Liberal Democrat spokespeople squirming in television interviews as they tried to justify the chaos into which they were about to plunge the NHS.

Under the previous Labour Government, we had the highest satisfaction levels and lowest waiting times, but what we inherited in July last year was an unmitigated disaster. The Tory-Lib Dem coalition tore up the last Labour Government's plans for a new hospital in my constituency as part of the austerity programme. The staff at that hospital do a remarkable job, and I put on record my gratitude to them, even when I was wandering around dressed as a giant bunny rabbit on Sunday.

The Tories and the Liberal Democrats—nobody else—are responsible for the 14-year delay in getting a new hospital in Watford. If they had not done what they did, we would have had a new hospital by now, but we do not. Not a brick has been laid. They should hang their heads in shame at this total betrayal of Watford's residents. The new hospital programme was not funded beyond March, and as the Prime Minister said in response to my question to him a few weeks ago, the hospitals existed only in the imagination of Boris Johnson.

I welcome this motion recognising the devastating state of the NHS, but let us be acutely aware that responsibility for that lies with the Liberal Democrats, who table this motion, and with the Conservatives in the previous Government. It is all very well to want to magic a hospital out of thin air, but it will be this Labour Government who finance and deliver it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Picturing the hon. Member in a rabbit outfit has woken us all up.

3.44 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I will focus my speech specifically on Hinchingsbrooke hospital, and highlight some key issues that will impact delivery of our new hospital in Huntingdon. During the general election campaign, I pledged to fight for the resources to rebuild Hinchingsbrooke, and I will continue to push this Labour Government to ensure that they follow through on the programme they committed to deliver.

In May 2023, the then Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), announced that Hinchingsbrooke was part of the Government's new hospital programme. Since that time, I have been concerned that this Government are not acting with enough haste to address the issues faced at Hinchingsbrooke. There has been a lack of clarity, particularly regarding the ongoing traffic issues around Hinchingsbrooke and the lack of a firm commitment to upgrade the road network as part of the project, which has caused concerns across my constituency.

While I welcome the fact that Hinchingsbrooke is rightly in wave 1 of the programme, we need clarity on the timeframe. Although this Government are aware of the RAAC issues, they have still not given a detailed timeframe as to when we will get our hospital built; there is a vague start date, but no completion date. Crucially, in September 2024, the Minister for Secondary Care confirmed in a written answer to me that the detailed structural assessment of Hinchingsbrooke hospital in 2022

"estimated that the remaining life of the RAAC panels"

extended to "approximately 2030", even after "the installation of fail-safe steelwork."

In February, she stated that this summer, the Government will publish a report

"assessing the clinical and operational impacts of the running of the existing hospital beyond the estimated life of the current hospital site".

With the delays already caused by road access and grid access, and the lack of clarity about a start date or a completion date, what assurances can the Minister give that my constituents will not find themselves in a condemned hospital building after 2030, with the DHSC simply owning the risk that it will collapse? If the new hospital is to be completed by 2030, we need plans, action, and focus on making sure that any changes are usable, safe and fit for purpose, with no more delays.

In short, the following issues must be addressed in order for Hinchingsbrooke to be delivered: the programme business case for the NHP must receive ministerial approval; a hospital 2.0-compliant design must be approved and delivered; a capital envelope of at least £900 million and a realistic contingency must be allocated; and mobilisation of the programme must be quick. It is clear that the 2030 target might now be unreachable, but mobilisation by spring 2026 seems realistic, and I will push the Government and all stakeholders to work towards that target. There also needs to be further work between Hinchingsbrooke and the NHP to develop a strategic outline case, and it is crucial that that case is then approved as soon as possible in order to complete the new hospital by as close to 2030 as possible.

We also need grid access that is fit for purpose, as the current grid access will not be sufficient for Hinchingsbrooke. Currently, the gap between sufficient grid space being approved and meeting that which is required will be a year—that is clearly not appropriate. There are issues regarding a vital new access road to alleviate traffic. Those issues are caused by land owned jointly by Cambridgeshire constabulary and National Highways. The Government must get all stakeholders around the table to reach a solution, given that they are public bodies.

To conclude, I reaffirm that I will do all I can to work with the Government, the NHS and others to make sure that my constituents get the new hospital they so desperately need.

3.47 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The very first thing I did when I came to this place was write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care—along with my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison)—about the state of Stepping Hill hospital. It is consistently the biggest issue raised with me by patients and staff, many of whom are my constituents, and there are few ways to see more clearly how the last Government let down my constituents than by considering the state of the buildings at Stepping Hill hospital. A number of buildings have had to be closed because they were deemed unsafe, placing more pressure on staff and services. The press reports that the repairs backlog at Stepping Hill exceeds £130 million, with millions needed to eradicate the most high-risk problems.

[Lisa Smart]

That sounds abstract—that amount of money is difficult to get your head around—so what does it mean to staff and patients? It means that my constituents write to me about having experienced major health issues, like cardiac arrest, and having been forced to wait in overcrowded areas without seating because there is not the space available. It means hospital corridors flooding and medics having to wade through the water to get to their patients. On one occasion, it means a constituent writing to me about what should have been the utter delight of having a baby delivered safely into the world—but 30 minutes before the baby arrived, the light fitting in the delivery suite fell down in the middle of active labour.

Stepping Hill sees about half a million patients each year. When I ask my constituents about their experiences of Stepping Hill, many tell me that they are worried about the buildings, but so many of them praise the phenomenal staff. I will share a few of those remarks with the House. Chris said that the staff could not have been kinder or more efficient.

Alan said:

“All staff at Stepping Hill, from top to bottom, were absolutely brilliant”.

Brenda said that the staff remained dedicated despite the state of the buildings. Amanda said,

“Without Stepping Hill and the wonderful doctors and nurses there, my son would not be here today”,

and Sheila said:

“Staff were run ragged but were amazing.”

The previous Government failed to provide the funding that Stepping Hill needs, and despite the huge repairs bill, it was left out of the new hospital programme. The legacy of that decision and of the failed Conservative Government hangs over my constituents, who deserve better. That Government broke their promise to my constituents, and I will continue to work with this and any future Government to get Stepping Hill what it needs. In part, that involves a new site in Stockport town centre. I am working closely with Stockport council and the trust to push for that. It could act as a diagnostic centre and an out-patient centre, and it is surely part of a strong, long-term solution to ensure that patient needs are met and my constituents get what they need.

The health of our nation is directly linked to the wealth of our nation and my constituents, whether patients or staff, are looking for the Government to have their back, to fund the repairs in Stepping Hill and to deliver the new additional site in the town centre.

3.50 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I am going to change the tone of the debate a little bit from the hon. Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine) and welcome the Minister's comments about a strategy for hospital building that is based in reality and not on a fantasy programme that had no funding behind it. It is also good to hear that capital funding will be ringfenced.

When Labour came into office, it promised to end sticking-plaster politics, but that seems to be exactly what it is offering to Torbay hospital: a small sticking plaster to hold together a gaping wound. Torbay hospital serves a critical role for my largely rural constituency of South Devon and faces immense pressure every single day. Nearly all of the hospital estate is currently unfit

for purpose, yet under the Government's timeline, construction on a rebuild is not due to begin until 2032. That means seven more years of staff working in outdated, inadequate conditions and patients receiving care in a facility that no longer meets the basic standards expected of a modern health service.

The case for urgent and sustained investment could not be clearer. The total cost of eradicating the maintenance backlog at Torbay hospital now stands at £53.6 million—small beer compared with some colleagues' constituencies. Of that, £4.6 million is needed to address high-risk issues, which are those, in the NHS's own terms, that pose a direct threat to the safety of patients or the day-to-day functioning of the hospital. Nearly £1 in every £10 needed for repairs is to fix problems that are considered an urgent threat to health and safety. That is simply unacceptable in any modern healthcare system.

Last year, the ear, nose and throat department was forced to cancel a full week of out-patient care after a sewage leak. The main tower of the hospital is literally being held together by scaffolding, which costs £1 million a week. Operating theatres lack adequate temperature control, and the pathology department, which plays a critical role in cancer diagnosis and other urgent care, is operating out of a rotting portacabin with holes in the walls. That temporary accommodation has been in place for more than 40 years. This hospital is operating at 98% capacity—far above safe levels. It is running at full tilt every day under conditions that make effective, safe care more and more difficult to provide. I have to give a huge shout-out to the incredible staff at Torbay hospital who keep that place going. The situation is not sustainable and nor should it be acceptable.

The current Government's decision to delay urgent repairs is not just a poor decision, but a false economy. We are spending so much money shoring up a hospital, when fixing it would cost less than holding it together with scaffolding. Keeping hospitals such as Torbay going with temporary fixes and emergency maintenance is far more expensive in the long term than investing in the proper infrastructure now. We need the Government to find innovative ways to finance critical repairs. Patients and staff in Torbay and across the country deserve better than another decade of waiting.

3.53 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I am proud to declare my interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital. The Royal Berks is an incredibly important place for me. I have been treated there many times, friends and family work there, and my constituents rely on the dedication of its hard-working staff. The way that this important community asset was treated by the previous Conservative Government is a scandal. They have left a record of broken promises and a building that in many places is literally crumbling.

Looking at the Conservative legacy, before the 2024 general election, they introduced a seven-year delay to the construction of the new hospital in 2023. That is a seven-year delay for something that was never funded in the first place. The Conservatives' dithering and delays have resulted in £7 million being wasted at the Royal Berkshire hospital on surveys, investigations and the development of a hospital programme that was never going to go anywhere, and the Conservatives knew that all the time. Their behaviour over the last five years has been shameful, and they have deceived my constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) has highlighted many of the issues at the Royal Berkshire, so I will not repeat his points, but there is a maintenance backlog amounting to £102 million, and staff have recently told me that an additional £300 million is needed for maintenance. Will the Minister confirm that there will be a proper maintenance programme for the next 20 years? I have to thank her for her guarantee that when the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust requires funds to purchase land for the new site, her Department will provide those funds. I would be grateful if she could confirm that that position has not changed, and also that the planned cuts and savings at the trust to balance its budget will have no impact on its ability to deliver vital maintenance at the hospital site.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Danny Chambers to wind up the debate for the Liberal Democrats.

3.55 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It seems that Members on both sides of the House have been experiencing similar problems in the hospitals that they represent. Years of under-investment has left many hospitals with leaking roofs, for instance. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) spoke of sewage in clinical areas—I thought that sewage was the subject of the next debate; it is outrageous that we should be discussing its presence in our hospitals—and my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) told us about a room full of incubators which had to be removed because the ceiling was at risk of collapsing. It is crazy that operating theatres and hospital rooms are unused not because of a lack of staff, but because they are not safe enough for people to work in.

Like many other Members, I regularly meet hospital leaders and managers—in my case, at our local hospital in Winchester—to discuss the problems that they are experiencing. Despite the heroic efforts of the staff at the Royal Hampshire County hospital, they are facing a set of issues similar to those that have been raised time and again this afternoon, including, again, leaking roofs over treatment areas. Like the hospital mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), ours has old, outdated lifts that fail, making it difficult to transport patients from wards to the operating theatre. It has no back-up power generators, so there is a risk to patients' safety during power cuts.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): My hon. Friend has mentioned faulty buildings and roofs. In Musgrove Park hospital in Taunton, staff are fainting in temperatures of 30°C in temporary buildings where there is no cooling machinery, while mums are trying to give birth in the same ward. That is completely unacceptable. We need interim funding if the hospital—which was mentioned earlier today by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey)—is to survive until 2033, when the promised funding is meant to arrive.

Dr Chambers: It is indeed unacceptable, in respect of patients' safety but also health and safety at work, because the health of the staff is being put at risk as well.

These are not minor inconveniences; they are daily threats to patients' care and they cost us dear, so why are we not fixing them? Failure on the part of the last Government is no excuse for continued delay, and saying "We cannot afford it" when the cost of inaction is higher is simply nonsensical. The longer we wait, the more it will cost the taxpayer. Much has been said about trust in politics, and we will not forget what happened in our part of Hampshire when Conservatives stood on election manifestos promising to deliver a new hospital for which they never had any funds. There was no funding secured and no shovel-ready plan, but they campaigned on the issue repeatedly, hoping that the voters would not find out until it was too late.

Other Members have pointed out that GP surgeries are being particularly neglected. The Budget allocated funds to cover additional upgrades for just 200 GP surgeries out of a total of 6,000. With the Government's jobs tax hitting GPs, it is becoming harder for those practices to fund their own improvements. However, I was pleased that the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) mentioned the importance of primary care and mental health. This is, of course, a debate on hospitals and hospital infrastructure, but I know there is cross-party agreement on the fact that keeping people healthy in the community—whether that involves investment in primary care, mental health or public health services—is much more cost-effective for taxpayers as well as being better for patients.

We really welcome the Minister's warm words on social care. We had a social care roundtable just yesterday, and we heard that every pound spent on social care saves the NHS £3. We urge the Government to hold cross-party talks as soon as possible, because for every year that we delay getting a plan for social care, people are languishing in hospitals on delayed discharge which is costing us a huge amount of money.

We have to end the vicious cycle of false economies and fortunes being spent on papering over the cracks. The total repair backlogs at the delayed new hospital sites could reach an estimated £5.7 billion by the time construction starts. Are the Government really of the view that keeping hospitals on life support is a good use of taxpayers' money? Repairing and replacing crumbling NHS buildings is not just about treating more patients; it is about reviving and boosting our economy. Here is the truth: we will not grow our economy unless we reinvest in the services that support it.

Let us change course. We urge the Government to reverse the long delays in the new hospital programme, because many will not be open until the 2040s on the current timeline, and those hospitals have to be kept functioning until then; to set out a 10-year investment plan to fix hospitals and GP surgeries; to urgently release funds that have already been committed, to start construction straightaway; and to publish a plan to recruit and retain a skilled workforce to carry out the work efficiently. That is what investing to save looks like. It means improving care, lowering long-term costs and building a stronger, healthier economy. The Conservatives chose to cut investment, which led to higher costs. Our plan is to increase investment now so that we can lower costs in the future.

We urge the Government not simply to patch over the damage done to our NHS. As the Liberal politician William Beveridge, who was a visionary behind the formation of the NHS, said:

[*Dr Chambers*]

“A revolutionary moment...is a time for revolutions, not for patching.”

Let us be bold, and let us invest now. It will be better for the taxpayer, it will be better for patients, and it will boost our economy.

4.2 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It really is a pleasure to close this debate on behalf of the Government. I think there have been 33 contributions from hon. Members from across the House.

Nowhere is it more apparent that the NHS is broken than in our crumbling hospitals. Over 14 years, the NHS was starved of capital and the capital budget was repeatedly raided to plug the holes in day-to-day spending. Lord Darzi's investigation into the NHS in England made it clear that we have crumbling buildings and IT, mental health patients sharing showers in Victorian-era cells infested with vermin, and parts of the NHS operating in decrepit portacabins. Some 20% of the primary care estate predates the founding of the health service in 1948.

I thank the Liberal Democrats for bringing forward this debate. We broadly agree on the disgrace that the backlog of repairs, the decades-long cannibalisation of capital budgets and the unfunded fantasy of the new hospital programme had become. Where we disagree is on the cause and the solution. As we have heard today, the Liberal Democrats are completely silent on the part they played as members of the coalition Government. They were active and enthusiastic partners in the decision to impose austerity, and our NHS was starved of funding on their watch. The practice of raiding capital budgets to keep things afloat started in 2014, on their watch. The disastrous top-down NHS reorganisation, which wasted billions of pounds and contributed to record-high waiting lists, happened on their watch.

As for the solution, the Liberal Democrats are silent on how they would pay for and accelerate the new hospital programme. They are playing the same cynical game that we saw from the Conservative party: they are dangling the prospect of a new hospital while being unable to explain where the funding would come from or how the construction industry could deliver it within the timeframe. It is indeed opportunism, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) said. We all remember the Rose Garden, as my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine) said. The Liberal Democrats opposed the autumn 2024 Budget, which delivered record investment in our NHS. In sharp contrast, this Government are prepared to take the decisions needed to back up our promises with the funding needed to deliver them, and we are determined to rebuild confidence and trust in politics by promising only what we can deliver.

I have met many hon. Members in person and heard them in the Chamber today, and I know others are not here who would have wanted to contribute. As the Minister, let me say plainly that I agree with everyone's anger. I share that anger because, when I tour hospitals up and down the country—I did so recently in Doncaster and in Oxfordshire, where I visited the Warneford hospital—I often see equipment and infrastructure that

was procured 20 years ago when I was working for the NHS in Bristol. Seeing these physical reminders of the past when I tour hospitals fills me with a mixture of pride and shame. I feel pride because I was part of a generation of leaders who delivered hospitals fit for patients in the biggest hospital programme in NHS history delivered under the last Labour Government, and I feel shame because our legacy was squandered and patients have paid the price. We understand the legacy, and Lord Darzi was very clear that the task for us is to take action. That is why the Chancellor took the necessary decisions in her Budget to meet this challenge, and why we have put the programme on a firm financial footing.

As my hon. Friend the Minister for Care said, we are not just writing the wrong; we are taking pressures off hospitals, shifting the focus of our NHS from hospital to community, recruiting over 1,500 more GPs to take the pressure off A&E and harnessing the power of AI to help people who depend on care to stay at home. That point was well made by my hon. Friends the Members for Stroud (Dr Opher), for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith), for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) and for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn). As he made me sponsor him, may I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley good luck in the marathon this weekend? The challenge before us is immense, but every member of this Government is up for the fight.

Members made a number of points, and I will try to get through them in the time available. I could not agree more with those who made the point that we have to break out of the vicious cycle of false economy. This Government were elected on a manifesto to end short-termism, easy answers and sticking-plaster politics. When we came into government we were saddled with a bill of almost £14 billion in backlog maintenance. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has given us the funding this year to back NHS systems with over £4 billion of operational capital. A lifesaving cash injection of £750 million for targeted estate safety funding is a vital first step towards fixing our crumbling estate. That is crucial not only for patients, but for staff morale, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) said. There is also £440 million to tackle crumbling RAAC concrete, keeping patients and their families safe. We are opening new mental health facilities, with more in construction, and that state-of-the-art provision will give the best possible care outcomes.

Furthermore, I assure Members that, unlike the previous Government, we will never raid capital budgets to plug day-to-day spending, and the Treasury has updated its fiscal rules to make that impossible. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith) said that big promises with no plans are what got us into this mess, and that was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), who talked about the false hope and the waste of the past. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) echoed that point and reiterated the point about trust, which was almost shared by the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden).

Members have called on the Government to reverse course and commit to a timeline that is unfunded, unrealistic and undeliverable. That has been recognised by a National Audit Office report, which stated that

“some schemes publicly promised in 2020 now face substantial delays and will not be completed by 2030...with implications for patients and clinicians.”

The delivery of these hospitals existed only as a figment of Boris Johnson’s imagination and this Government are doing the hard yards of putting the new hospital programme back on track. The NHP previously received a red rating from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, now known as the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority. Its latest review, which it carried out in January, rated the NHP as amber. That reflects the measures that we took to put the programme on a firm footing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) rightly said.

Some Members, including the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), have asked us to publish the individual scores of each scheme following the outcome of the review, but may I just take issue with the hon. Lady’s use of the word “shady”? The Secretary of State and the Department will continue to co-operate with her Committee, but to be clear, as part of our analysis, schemes were prioritised into upper, middle and lower thirds, which gave a delivery schedule for the programme to align with the funding envelope, and there was no final individual score for each scheme. There is no formal delineation among schemes in wave 2, and schemes remain scheduled to start construction as outlined in our plan for implementation.

I briefly say to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) that it was a pleasure to meet Councillors McCabe and Garrod from her constituency and to understand their passion about the loss of resources. That is echoed in many low-income areas, and we have to reverse that loss of resources as we go forward with our 10-year plan.

We are taking a systematic approach to building the next generation of hospitals, known as Hospital 2.0, allowing trusts to benefit from economies of scale, provide excellent patient care and facilities, and ensure that staff are supported with technology for decent working environments. It contributes to our growth mission, putting more money in people’s pockets and supporting our supply chains. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis), we do abide by the Hospital 2.0 scheme. It is a systematic and centralised approach that will save taxpayer money, while driving innovation and laying the foundations for a new relationship between Government and industry. I am disappointed if it is official Liberal Democrat policy to oppose that approach.

I know the clock is against me but I want to end by saying that I completely understand why colleagues are so concerned about the plans, when previous Governments have so badly let them and their constituents down. I also hear the point made by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) about Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland benefits from the Barnett consequential for revenue and capital. It is devolved and it can look at alternative means. The Department will continue to work with all devolved Administrations across all issues, but they do have particular problems.

Staff and patients deserve better, so I want to offer them some reassurance about our record since July. We promised to sit down with resident doctors and end the damaging strike action—promise made, promise kept.

In October, we said we would recruit more GPs by April and we recruited more than we said—promise made, promise kept. We promised 2 million extra appointments in our manifesto and we smashed that target seven months early—promise made, promise kept. Last month, over 80% of patients in England referred for cancer had it ruled out or diagnosed within 28 days, the first time that target has been met for years, and waiting lists are now consistently falling.

We have gripped this critical issue since July, from day one with the review. The Secretary of State and I met MPs and the NHP team before the completion of the review. I met all colleagues the day after the announcement in January and I have had individual meetings. I will keep my promises to visit, when the diary allows. I am really looking forward to North Devon. I am also visiting Hillingdon, where I grew up, with my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), and possibly visiting some old haunts. I have committed to visiting Basingstoke, with my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy). We will progress at pace on RAAC and wave 1. I am committed to holding more meetings with wave 2 and wave 3 MPs in the coming weeks and months to keep colleagues abreast of updates and to provide them with the opportunity to ask questions directly of the team. That is how I will work with colleagues across the House to make sure the programme happens.

Finally, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) talked about her experience of the PFI scheme she worked under and the nonsense she had to deal with. Her Government could have changed that at any point. My experience of a PFI scheme in Bristol was waking up about a year ago after I had had my melanoma removed, in an almost brand new hospital with fantastic facilities in a single, individual ward with my husband beside me. Maybe it was the drugs that made me feel a little bit bleary-eyed, but what I thought then was how proud I was to have been part of the development team, as part of the primary care trust board, bringing forward a fantastic hospital for north Bristol that serves patients so well. That would never have happened under another Administration. We rebuilt the hospitals under the previous Labour Government. I am proud of that record. We did it before; we are going to do it again. That is what a Labour Government do.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 77, Noes 307.

Division No. 171]

[4.13 pm]

AYES

Adam, Shokat	Chambers, Dr Danny
Allister, Jim	Chowns, Ellie
Amos, Gideon	Coghlan, Chris
Anderson, Lee	Collins, Victoria
Aquarone, Steff	Cooper, Daisy
Babarinde, Josh	Dance, Adam
Bennett, Alison	Darling, Steve
Berry, Siân	Davey, rh Ed
Brewer, Alex	Dean, Bobby
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Denyer, Carla
Cane, Charlotte	Dyke, Sarah
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Farron, Tim
Chadwick, David	Foord, Richard
Chamberlain, Wendy	Franklin, Zöe

George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Harding, Monica
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jones, Clive
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Helen
 Mathew, Brian
 McMurdock, James
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen

Morrison, Mr Tom
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Olney, Sarah
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Roome, Ian
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Sollom, Ian
 Stone, Jamie
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Charlie Maynard and
Mr Will Forster

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David

Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna

Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor

Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sewards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David

Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Gerald Jones and
 Christian Wakeford

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
 That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House regrets the appalling state of repair of NHS hospitals across the country; notes that the NHS maintenance backlog rose to £13.8 billion in 2023-24; further notes the sustained pattern of cannibalising NHS capital budgets to keep day-to-day services running; condemns the previous Government's record of starved repair budgets and exploding maintenance backlogs, which made sewage leaks, cracked walls, crumbling ceilings and sinking floors commonplace; further condemns the previous Government for launching the New Hospitals Programme with no realistic plan to fund or deliver it; also notes that the Chancellor has announced new fiscal rules to ensure capital budgets can no longer be cannibalised, with transfers from capital to resource budgets not permitted; recognises that the previous Government left a New Hospital Programme which was unfunded, unrealistic and undeliverable; welcomes that the Government has taken action to review that Programme and has published the New Hospital Programme Plan for Implementation, to put the Programme on a sustainable footing; supports the Government's investment in the Plan, which will increase to up to £15 billion over each consecutive five-year wave, averaging around £3 billion a year from 2030; and further supports the work being done to bring forward construction of the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete replacement schemes wherever possible, to ensure that patient and staff safety is prioritised.

Karin Smyth: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, could you advise me whether it is in order that the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who opened the debate for the Conservatives, was not in her place for the close of the debate? I think that is discourteous to the House, and I would like your advice on how we rectify this matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The point of order is most definitely on the record. It is a point of courtesy to be here for the close of a debate if you are here for the opening. No doubt, Opposition Front Benchers will make that very clear to the Member.

Sewage

Madam Deputy Speaker: I inform the House that the Speaker has selected amendment (a) tabled in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.28 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the persistent scandal of raw sewage being dumped by water companies into rivers, lakes and coastal areas; notes with deep concern that just 14% of rivers and lakes in England are in good ecological health; condemns the previous Government for letting water company bosses get away with the scandal while paying themselves millions of pounds in bonuses; further notes the potential benefits of Blue Flag status in improving responsibility and accountability from water companies, through compliance checks and stringent environmental standards; and calls on the Government to take urgent action to end the sewage scandal, including the introduction of a new Blue Flag status for rivers and chalk streams, to give them greater protection against sewage dumping and ensure the public knows when rivers are clean and safe.

It is an honour to open this debate. For me, serving the people of Westmoreland also means defending its natural beauty and purity, which are important to our national heritage, farming industry and tourism and hospitality economy. Our proposal aims to highlight the scandal of the pollution of our waterways and calls for practical solutions that will make a difference.

The Government's recent Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 was a step in the right direction after the failure of the last Conservative Government to take meaningful action, yet it was surely also a missed opportunity to bring in the radical transformation of regulation and ownership that is essential if we are to clean up our waterways and clean up the water industry as a whole. Sir Jon Cunliffe's review gives us hope that a second, more ambitious water Bill might be coming, but there is no guarantee of that, so our job as the constructive Opposition in this place is to hold the Government to account and urge them to make the big changes that Britain voted for last July.

The need for radical action was made all the more clear recently when the figures for sewage spills in 2024 were released. Those figures were horrific: a 106% increase in the duration of spills in our lakes, rivers and seas in just two short years.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Over Easter in Torbay, we had five sewage spills according to the Surfers Against Sewage app. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is extremely disappointing to say the least that, rather than colleagues just getting their cossie and towel to go swimming at their favourite swimming spot, they must now also check the sewage leak app? It is outrageous.

Tim Farron: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a really good point about his own communities. That is what we are trying to address today by bringing practical solutions to prevent this outrage.

That 106% increase in the duration of sewage spills in just two years has been explained away on the record by water industry bosses as the consequence of climate change, because it rains more than it used to. Yes, that is absolutely true, but it did not rain 106% more in 2024

than it did in 2022—not even in the Lake district. The reality is that the failure of water companies to invest in their infrastructure and the failure of Ofwat to force them to do so mean that the scandal is set to continue despite the Government's new legislation.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): There were 754 spills in my constituency last year alone. We do not want to see those numbers anywhere, but in a constituency that does not have a major waterway, that is absurdly high. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we want to start genuinely holding these water companies to account, a great place to start would be replacing Ofwat?

Tim Farron: My hon. Friend anticipates where I am going next, but yes, it takes some doing to have such figures in a constituency lacking in water—certainly lacking in it compared to my neck of the woods.

I confess that I am doing this job not just because my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) asked me; I would volunteer for all this stuff, because for me and my communities water is seriously personal. We are home to much of the English Lake district—Windermere, Ullswater, Conistone water, Grasmere, Rydal water and many more—and to a beautiful stretch of Morecambe bay and some of the most ecologically significant rivers in the UK, including the Kent, the Eden and the Leven. Yet the data for 2024 shows that we are the third hardest hit constituency in England when it comes to the duration of sewage spills, with 55,000-plus hours of spills and 5,500 individual incidents.

The catchment of the River Eden going through Appleby, Kirkby Stephen and many beautiful villages saw over 7,000 hours of spills on 705 occasions. The River Kent catchment saw 5,300 hours of spills on 455 occasions. Windermere alone had 38 spills over 123 hours.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The “constructive Opposition” spokesperson—I do not know what that makes the Conservatives—is making a powerful speech. I look forward to having an opportunity to visit his constituency, because it sounds beautiful. Does he agree that it is disgraceful that while this sewage is being leaked, the chief executive officers of water companies are still paying themselves exorbitant bonuses?

Tim Farron: The hon. Member would, of course, be enormously welcome to visit the lakes and the dales. He makes a key point, which I will seek to address, about the injustice of people being paid huge bonuses for failure at the top of these organisations. That is also money leaving the system and the industry that could have been invested in putting some of this right.

I have talked about my patch, but colleagues across the House, from every party and from every corner of the United Kingdom, will have seen the data for their communities too, and they should rightly be outraged.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) *rose*—

Tim Farron: I am sure my hon. Friend is outraged.

Jamie Stone: My hon. Friend talks, quite correctly, about a beautiful part of England. I, too, represent a very beautiful part of the world. Here is an unbelievable

fact for him—I have written it on my hand: in 2023, there were no fewer than 1,439 sewage spills in the highlands. What a disgrace that none of the Scottish nationalists, the governing party of Scotland, are here today.

Tim Farron: My hon. Friend makes an important observation from a constituency vast and rural—my constituency is the second largest in England, but it is bijoux and compact compared with his. He makes a good point about the Administration in Scotland.

As the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) alluded to, sewage spills are not the only things that have increased; so too has the money leaking out of the system. Water company bosses received a total combined pay last year of £20 million and more, and the water companies responsible for these failures paid out £1.2 billion in dividends. Surfers Against Sewage, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), has led the way on this issue for many years, since before many others were even talking about it.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Talking about dividends, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is completely wrong that tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, also leak out on high interest on the internal shareholder loans of those who own the water companies?

Tim Farron: I will talk later about why privatisation of the water industry was such a colossal mistake, and that is one of the consequences—a predictable consequence. The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point.

Recent research by Surfers Against Sewage covers all the water companies, but I am bound to pick out United Utilities as an example. United Utilities paid out £320 million to investors last year, while its customers—my constituents—will pay 32% more in bills. By the way, 11% of every one of my constituents' water bills is going to service that company's debts—debts racked up in part by borrowing money in order to give huge, undeserved paydays to their investors.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): In South Devon last year, we had an astonishing 49,904 hours of sewage leaks, or 5.69 years-worth of sewage pouring into the glorious Dart and Avon and into the sea around South Devon. Meanwhile, my constituents write to me about bills that have gone up by as much as 50%. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is an outrage that the privatised water companies are able to carry on increasing bills, increasing dividends to shareholders and paying multimillion-pound salaries to CEOs while this obscenity of sewage pouring into our rivers, seas and lakes continues?

Tim Farron: My hon. Friend represents an utterly beautiful part of the country and she fights for it admirably; her constituents are lucky to have her. She makes an important point. I mentioned that 11% of the bills paid by my constituents in the north-west of England goes to service United Utilities' debt, but that is one of the lowest levels. For many other colleagues on both sides of the House, their local water companies will be using up to 30% of the bills charged just to service their debt. The sewage scandal is an environmental scandal, but it is also a financial one—an affront to justice and fairness, as well as to our ecology.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): It is also a health scandal. What water companies are doing by allowing sewage to seep into our coastal waters and rivers means that many people who enjoy that environment for swimming and so on fall ill, and many of them lose days at work. As well as covering the cost to the taxpayer of cleaning up the environment, the water companies should really be making a contribution to the Exchequer to cover sick pay and the costs to the NHS.

Tim Farron: My hon. Friend makes an important point on behalf of his coastal and island communities in the far south-west. They are also very lucky to have him speaking up for them.

The Windrush Against Sewage Pollution and Save Windermere campaigns worked together on a recent report showing that the use of funds for capital projects by water companies around the country was at best wasteful and negligent and at worst, dare I say it, deeply suspect. They focused on the proposal by, again, United Utilities to spend almost £13 million of local bill payers' money on an extension to a sewage outfall pipe into Windermere. WASP found this to be "excessive" and said it seemed unreasonable that 43 three-bedroom houses could be built for the price of putting a mere 150-metre sewage pipe into a lake. The report shines a light on what WASP considers to be inflated capital spending costs at water companies around the country, and it rightly asks what Ofwat is doing by signing this stuff off—signing off huge bill increases when water companies are not spending that money wisely.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): My hon. Friend has outlined the outrage and the scandal of sewage leaking into our rivers, lakes and seas. It is also the case that sewage is spilling out on to our streets, and groundwater infiltration causes much of the problem. Thames Water in my area has so far refused to do anything about "Poo Corner" in the parish of Berrick Salome. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is another issue we need to address?

Tim Farron: Until now, I always thought "The House at Pooh Corner" was a good thing; obviously that would not be so in this case. I have seen the same thing in my own patch. In the village of Burneside we are finally, after 20 years of campaigning, getting some additional new sewage infrastructure, which will hopefully prevent poop literally coming up on to the pavements in light rainfall where the local kids catch the bus to go into Kendal to school, which is an absolute outrage. My hon. Friend is right to campaign, as he does very well, for his communities on this issue.

We should already know not to take water companies at their word, I am afraid, given their shoddy record on data transparency. For example, the chief executive of United Utilities, Louise Beardmore, among others admitted at the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee not very long ago that they had refused to release spill data until WASP appealed to the Information Commissioner. Furthermore, in 2022 United Utilities was listed as the best performing water company in England, for which it was allowed to raise its bills as a reward. However, the BBC reported whistleblowers at the Environment Agency claiming that United Utilities had been wrongly downgrading dozens of pollution

[Tim Farron]

incidents. So we can surely be forgiven for being a little cynical when those water companies propose huge sums for projects like the one I have just mentioned.

That is why our key criticism of the Government's new water Act is not of anything that is in that legislation, but of what is missing from it. The situation whereby water companies can be responsible for record levels of sewage pollution and be shown to make bad use of bill payers' money, with inflated capital costs and inflated dividends, could not happen if they were regulated properly, but they are not.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): In my constituency in March, phosphate levels in the River Mole surged by 50% and nitrates doubled. This is pollution that can cause algal blooms and suffocate wildlife. Does my hon. Friend agree that we urgently need a clean water authority with real enforcement powers to protect our rivers, before it is simply too late?

Tim Farron: I completely agree, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to make that point, particularly given the experience she has in her constituency. She rightly fights very forcefully for her communities and to clean up her waterways. She will have seen, like all of us, that the principal problem is a failure of regulation. There has to be an answer to that and the Liberal Democrat proposal, which I will come to in a moment, would certainly make it more likely that this would be dealt with effectively—and if it solved the problem, that would be great.

The water industry regulatory framework is fragmented and weak. The regulators lack the resource, the power and the culture, it would appear, to make a serious difference. That is why the Liberal Democrats propose a new clean water authority so that water companies stop running rings around multiple regulators and begin to act in the interests of the British people and of the waterways that we love.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I represent a very beautiful part of the Yorkshire dales, in Wharfedale, and Yorkshire Water has been responsible for hundreds of thousands of hours of sewage spills into the rivers. It was fined £47 million by Ofwat for its poor performance in 2023, only for that to be repeated in 2024. Will the hon. Gentleman welcome the action that the Government have already taken through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025—which is more than the previous Government ever did to tackle this disgusting problem—and also recognise that we do see the problems with regulation and the fact that we need stronger regulation of the water industry to protect the environment and public health, and that is the role of the Cunliffe review?

Tim Farron: I absolutely welcome the Act, as I said at the beginning of the debate. It is a step in the right direction; I just do not think that it is enough, and the hon. Lady makes the case as to why it is not enough. Her water company, Yorkshire Water, is one of four water companies that between them owe Ofwat £164 million in fines because of their failure, and Ofwat has so far claimed zero—none of that. There seems to be an awareness among water companies that Ofwat is not a

regulator to be feared and therefore not one to be responded to. That is among the reasons why we need a new, much more powerful regulator that has the power, and uses it, to refuse to sign off on spending plans that prioritise the investor over the consumer and the environment.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman and his party for bringing the motion. It is important that we improve the quality of our rivers and seas. Does he share my concern that in the Water (Special Measures) Act the Government refused to allow local areas to retain the money fined from water companies to improve the environment in that area? Were they able to do that, that would lead to a real improvement in the quality of our environment.

Tim Farron: I agree, and the hon. Member can check the record and see us voting with the Conservatives in Committee. He makes a good point: the communities most damaged by pollution should be the ones that receive investment from the fines—if, indeed, Ofwat ever bothers to collect them.

Alongside the need for regulatory reform, we propose a radical transformation of the ownership model. Privatisation of the water industry has been an expensive failure—35 years of huge debts and payouts to investors, 35 years of inadequate investment in our infrastructure. The Conservative promise of Britain becoming a shareowning democracy has turned into the predictable nightmare reality of British public utilities owned by billionaires and foreign powers—what an absolute disgrace. The end result is the rivers, lakes and seas in which we swim, fish, canoe, sail, work and play polluted by an industry now owned by those who took but would not give. Water companies need new models of ownership, transitioning to public benefit companies that are focused on environmental good, not profiteering, with funds from customers' bills pumped back into upgrading and repairing infrastructure, not draining away in dividends.

We welcome the independent water commission chaired by Sir Jon Cunliffe, though we remain impatient given the time it will take to publish the commission's findings, the further period of time it may take for the Government to do anything about them, followed by a legislative process and implementation period—we will be at the end of the Parliament before we know it. To be fair, with the commission the Government provide themselves with a second chance to bring in the ambitious changes that are needed, and we urge them not to miss this chance.

Ministers will remember with deep joy the 44 amendments that the Liberal Democrats proposed to the water Bill. In our submission to Sir Jon, I have sought to turn those amendments into a single set of proposals to restore our water industry to environmental and financial health, and to harness the amazing power of citizen scientists and volunteers up and down the country. It is why we called for the inclusion of water campaigners, such as WASP, Save Windermere, the Clean River Kent Campaign, Eden Rivers Trust and South Cumbria Rivers Trust, on water company boards. It is why we call for the Government's welcome new sewage spills database to be a searchable tool, including retrospectively, so that we do not hamstring those brilliant volunteers who seek to hold the water industry and its regulators to account. Tens of thousands of people are

giving their expertise, time and passion to clean up our waterways. Let us let them off the leash, equip them and empower them. I was sad to see Conservative and Labour colleagues refuse to support these measures during the passage of the Water (Special Measures) Act, but I hope that they will have a change of heart today.

In the motion before us, we specifically urge the establishment of a new system of blue flag status for rivers and chalk streams as a practical way to force water companies to be more accountable for the safety of the swimmers who use them and for the ongoing protection and flourishing of precious habitats and ecosystems.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Tim Farron: I will give way first to the hon. Gentleman—and then to several others.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Voting for the recent Water (Special Measures) Act and serving in Committee with the hon. Gentleman was one of the highlights of my first six months in this place. [HON. MEMBERS: “Aw.”] For constituents in my coastal community, it is so important that we get this right, so it is right that we take a long-term transformative approach. Does he agree that it is not just the safety of residents and tourists that will benefit from the Government’s changes to clean up our water, but the selfless volunteers from organisations such as the RNLI in places like Weston-super-Mare, who deserve to do their vital lifesaving work in the cleanest and safest water possible?

Tim Farron: I completely agree—and the feeling is mutual. I appreciate that I am going on a bit and that a few Members wish to intervene. We will have to go by hands up. [*Interruption.*]

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a typically good speech. Does he agree that water from areas where one cannot swim still ends up in areas where one can? The Roden and Perry rivers in my constituency suffered over 2,000 hours of sewage spills in the past year—the Perry is affected by a spill into the Common brook near Oswestry. Not only does that water go past farmers’ fields, but it ends up in Shrewsbury, where there is a designated swimming area. I want to swim in it. Does he agree that the blue flag status would clear up the whole catchment, not just the places where people go swimming?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before you get back to your feet, Mr Farron, I remind you that you can speak as long as you want, but the longer you speak, the less likely it is that colleagues will be able to contribute.

Tim Farron: I appreciate your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will allow maybe only two more interventions. I am coming towards the end of my remarks. I am trying to be not selfish but generous by getting the balance right. I do not want to squeeze people out altogether.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD) *rose*—

Tim Farron: I give my hon. Friend one of the last two berths.

Manuela Perteghella: Last week, I joined constituents involved in citizen science projects testing water quality in the River Stour. The findings were deeply concerning: the very high levels of phosphates and nitrates in the water are clear evidence of the ongoing damage to our waterways. Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the important work of volunteers in citizen science projects, and does he agree that the Environment Agency must be properly resourced to monitor water quality in our rivers, brooks, streams and seas?

Tim Farron: I agree. The Ministers are really lucky in so many ways. They are in the best the Department and—like few others in government—they have an army of volunteers to call upon who will be their arms and legs out in the community. We ask the Government to empower those volunteers even more. If there is one more intervention, I will take it. [*Interruption.*] No? Then I will now plough on to the bitter end, which is not too far off, I promise.

People have talked about blue flag status. That is one of the key proposals in the motion. The point of blue flag status for rivers, chalk streams and lakes is that it is a practical way of forcing water companies to be more accountable for the safety of swimmers and for the ongoing protection of precious habitats and ecosystems. We call on the Government to introduce a blue corridor programme for rivers, chalk streams and lakes to ensure clean and healthy water through the creation of a new blue flag status.

Many rivers and lakes have sites with bathing water status, including near Coniston and Windermere in my own patch, but what will surprise many people is the fact that having bathing water status means just that a location will be tested more frequently; it does not automatically mean that it is any cleaner. There were over 24,000 sewage spills last year into our bathing waters alone, for a duration of over 179,000 hours. Surfers Against Sewage found that the Government’s new bathing water feasibility test lacking. It said:

“This step could mean that sites that are deemed too polluted risk being immediately denied this designation, and therefore unable to receive the monitoring and investment needed to make blue spaces cleaner and safer”.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) pointed out recently, that gives water companies a loophole to get away without cleaning up a bathing site that people use regularly because it is too polluted anyway. If it is a popular swimming site, it must be cleaned up.

In contrast, blue flag status would be granted only at those sites where the data showed that the water is clean and safe. We would give swimmers and other river users proper evidence-based confidence in the safety of the water. If evidence were needed that our proposals are desperately needed, Surfers Against Sewage received 1,853 sickness reports from contact with our waterways in 2024 alone—that is nine years of sick days.

As a brief aside, because it is so important and central to what we are trying to achieve, we want to provide special protection for our chalk streams. They are rare, ecologically unique habitats that are often referred to as England’s rainforests, yet even they have

[Tim Farron]

come under threat from sewage dumping in recent years. Blue flag status for chalk streams would drive their recovery after years of abuse.

To conclude, to represent the precious lakes and dales of Westmorland and Lonsdale is a massive privilege, and it is also a huge responsibility. We know in our community that it is our collective calling to steward the epic slice of creation that surrounds us, including the stunning waters, meres and tarns of the Lake district, our coasts and our rivers. They are not ours to keep; they are ours to preserve for the people of these islands and beyond, and for the people of this generation and the generations that we shall never meet.

Politics is also a great calling. In this case, it allows us to establish the structures that will enable that stewardship of our waterways to be effective, to be more than just words and to mean practical change for the better. Our motion today gives the House the opportunity to do practical good, and to do so now, without further dither or delay. Residents in every community of our country want us to listen to them and to act to end the sewage scandal. We must not let them down.

4.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to end and insert

“recognises that the Government inherited a broken water system, with record levels of sewage being pumped into waterways; welcomes the Government’s rapid delivery of its promise to put water companies under tough special measures through the landmark Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which has introduced new powers to ban the payment of unfair bonuses to water bosses who fail to protect the environment and to bring tough criminal charges against them if they break the law; supports the Government’s work to secure over £100 billion of private sector investment to upgrade the crumbling sewage infrastructure; and backs the largest review of the water sector since privatisation, aimed at tackling inherited systemic issues in order to clean up UK rivers, lakes and seas for good.”

I welcome the chance to set out the action that the Government are taking to end the sewage scandal in our waterways once and for all. The staggeringly high level of sewage pouring into our rivers, lakes and seas is a national disgrace. The beach in Deal that I visited just a couple of weeks ago was forced to cancel its Boxing day swim because of toxic levels of sewage in the water. The world-famous boat race between the Oxford and Cambridge University boat clubs earlier this month was, yet again, overshadowed by concerns about water quality in the Thames, so much so that rowers were told not to throw their teammates into the river.

Freddie van Mierlo: The Secretary of State mentions the boat race, but in 10 weeks we will be welcoming the world’s rowers to the Henley Royal Regatta. Does he share my concern about the amount of sewage being dumped in that part of the Thames, which is blighting the event?

Steve Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I share his concerns. Wherever it is happening and damaging people’s ability to enjoy our rivers, it is a disgrace and a scandal, and we want to work across the House to put that right.

Parents across the country should not have to worry about letting their children splash about in the river or paddle in the sea on a sunny bank holiday weekend. I recently met campaigners at Windermere, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who told me that they are sick and tired of the sewage flowing into the iconic and beautiful lake on their doorstep and that, a few years ago, that sewage caused algal blooms that turned it bright green.

Up and down the country, the public are furious about water pollution. So am I and so is this House, so how did we get into this situation? I am afraid to say it is the toxic result of years of failure by the previous Conservative Government. Instead of fixing our sewage system before a problem turned into a crisis, the Conservatives stood back and let water companies divert millions of pounds of their customers’ money into the pockets of their bosses and shareholders. Over £25 million was paid in bonuses to water company chief executives during the last Parliament alone. The Tories left our water infrastructure to crumble into ruin.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): Putting party politics aside for a moment, I point out to the Secretary of State that Southern Water was fined a record amount of £90 million for dumping raw sewage in 2021. Last year, it received another fine for dumping sewage in rivers near Southampton. This year, bills have risen by almost 50% for residents in Fareham and Waterlooville. Southern Water now proposes to recycle effluent water in Budds Farm near my constituency, to distribute drinking water to residents in Fareham and Waterlooville. Will the Secretary of State do the right thing and reject Southern Water’s proposal, which is expensive, disruptive and dubious? I do not trust Southern Water, and my constituents do not trust it either.

Steve Reed: I hope that the right hon. and learned Lady will work with the Government and support the reforms we are bringing forward to improve the functioning and performance of the water sector and all the water companies up and down the country, so that we can prevent the kind of concerns she speaks about.

Let us look at the record of the past Government. If somebody sees a crack in the wall of their house and they leave it for 10 years, the problem gets much worse and it costs much more to put it right. That is exactly what happened with our sewage system. The result is that rivers, lakes and seas across this country are choked by record levels of raw human filth, and bills are rising to repair damage that could have been repaired at a much lower cost if it had been done earlier. I am afraid that the Tories polluted our waterways and left bill payers to pay the price for their failure. It is no wonder that they stand condemned as the sewage party.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): My constituency is served by Thames Water, which is the largest provider in the country. Every week in my surgery, it is fair to say that I have people who have frankly given up on this issue ever being fixed. Will the Secretary of State provide my constituents and the rest of the country with the reassurance that this Labour Government will fix the issues left by the Conservatives?

Steve Reed: As my hon. Friend will have seen, we have already passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which gives the regulators more teeth to enforce against the polluting water companies. We look forward to Sir Jon Cunliffe's review for the Independent Water Commission; we will get the interim report next month and the final report the month after that, which will lead to further action to reset this sector once and for all.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): On the subject of the Act, it is wonderful to hear the Secretary of State say that he wants to take criminal action against water companies and water bosses, but I tabled an amendment to do just that that was rejected by the Government. Now that the Act has passed, it is interesting that the Government are so keen. Why did they not just accept my amendment, or a similar one? The Act does not mention criminal charges or what they will do, as my amendment did, but it passed without that measure being put in place. The Government are now saying from a point of retrospective gleefulness at the Dispatch Box that they would like to put that in. Is that actually going to happen?

Steve Reed: With the greatest respect, the hon. Lady's party had 14 years to take action, and did nothing.

Although I am grateful to the Liberal Democrats for calling this debate, and I think there are many points of similarity between our approaches, I must gently point to some of the opportunities they missed to take action when they were in government. For instance, the Environment Agency had its funding cut by more than half between 2010 and 2019, leading to a fall in prosecutions against water companies and other polluters, and there were Liberal Democrats in the coalition Cabinet that started those cuts. The coalition Government published a report in 2011 that wrongly and, in my view, bizarrely concluded that water regulation

"works and is not fundamentally flawed".

Of course, under that coalition Government, a Liberal Democrat Minister was responsible for the water sector between 2013 and 2015, and disappointingly they kept in place the very system of regulation that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale quite rightly just criticised.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Would the Secretary of State recognise that the Budget papers for 2009 and 2010 show that the then Labour Chancellor was projecting bigger capital cuts in expenditure than were carried out under the coalition Government?

Steve Reed: I do not think that decisions taken by the coalition Government were the fault of the previous Labour Government. I am merely gently pointing out that the Liberal Democrats did have a chance to reset regulation in the way that this Government are now doing. Where they offer their support for that work, I am grateful for it; by working constructively right across the House, we can make sure that we now reset a water sector that has failed the public, consumers' investment and the environment for far too long.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): In my constituency, the Cut runs from Binfield all the way through to the Thames. That river had 615 hours-worth of sewage pumped into it last year, and my constituent

Danny's dog had to be put down, having got so ill from swimming in that water. Does the Secretary of State agree that no matter how many fines we levy against Thames Water, which ultimately come back to our bills—we have to pay for them—they will do absolutely nothing to deter the shareholders and make them invest properly where needed?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman makes a very powerful case for why reform is so desperately needed. My condolences to the owner of the dog—that is a terrible thing to happen to anybody.

Anna Dixon: Bill payers in my constituency of Shipley are facing an 18% hike in their bills. By 2030, the increase could be as high as 35%. About 19% of those bills already goes towards servicing the debt of the holding company that owns Yorkshire Water. Is it not the case that our customers are paying the price for the failure of the Opposition parties—plural—to address the problems in the water industry during their time in government?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am angry about the bill rises, as she is. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House are angry about them, but in a very real sense, people are being forced to pay the price for 14 years of Conservative failure.

Previous Governments let the sewage scandal spread; this Government will end it once and for all. That work began as soon as we came into office. Within one week of the general election, I invited the water company chief executives into my office, and I ringfenced money earmarked for investment in water infrastructure so that it can never again be diverted for the payment of bonuses or dividends.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I welcome the rapid action that this Government have taken to hold failing water companies to account. Does the Secretary of State share my view that it is simply disgraceful that water company CEOs such as Yorkshire Water's Nicola Shaw—who paid herself a £371,000 bonus—were able to pay themselves multimillion-pound bonuses while overseeing record levels of sewage spills?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, which is why we have given the regulator new powers through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. The Conservative party could have done so at any point during its 14 years in power, but at no point did it take that common-sense action. We passed that landmark piece of legislation, which became law in February. It gives the regulator tough new powers to hold water companies to account, bans unfair bonuses when water company bosses fail to meet high standards, and imposes stricter penalties—including up to two years in prison—if water company employees obstruct investigations by environmental regulators, as well as severe and automatic fines for wrongdoing. Environmental regulators can now recover costs for successful enforcement, meaning that the polluter pays and the regulators gain new resources to enforce more effectively.

Jamie Stone: I suggest to the Secretary of State that the problem may be more deep-seated than we realise. He mentioned algal blooms in the Lake district. Not

[*Jamie Stone*]

only do those blooms turn the water a strange colour; they suck the oxygen out of the water, leading to the death of wildlife in the water. Furthermore, sewage contains heavy metals and other toxic substances that can kill fish or affect their ability to reproduce, so we may find ecosystems that have been damaged over a much longer term than we realise.

Steve Reed: I recognise the catastrophe that the hon. Member is talking about. It is not just that the water is polluted; the water becomes toxic, and it is killing ecosystems and damaging the wider environment. Those are all reasons that we need to move ahead quickly with the reforms that this Government are working towards.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Steve Reed: I will give way two more times and then I had better make some progress, or Madam Deputy Speaker will chastise me as she chastised the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to outline the legislation he is bringing forward, but on the ground there is still frustration about pollution in rivers, such as in Botley in my constituency. We are still seeing overflows—not from sewage but from development pollutants going into the river—and parish councils are identifying them quickly and coming to me, but the accountability structures behind water companies such as Southern Water will not answer to elected Members like me. We are still not seeing the improvement that the Secretary of State is advocating at the Dispatch Box. Will he agree to meet me and my parish council to hear our concerns? Can he outline briefly how the sewage legislation that he has just brought forward will add to that accountability for parish councils and local residents?

Steve Reed: The hon. Member makes an important point. One issue that Sir Jon Cunliffe and the water commission are looking at is how we can increase accountability and responsiveness directly to customers and, indeed, to authorities such as the parish councils he has just talked about. I would be happy to arrange a meeting for him with the appropriate Minister.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Secretary of State referred to rare ecological rivers that can be damaged by sewage pollution. In my constituency, we have a very rare chalk stream, the River Ver. Thames Water says that many of the sewage spills happen because the pipes are old and porous. Part of the solution is to line them, but when Thames Water is lining pipes, it is not prioritising pipes that are close to rare chalk streams. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss my Chalk Streams (Sewerage Investment) Bill, which would make water companies prioritise those pipes that are close to chalk streams, because of their rare ecological status?

Steve Reed: I know the River Ver very well; I used to walk past it every day on my way to primary school at the Abbey primary school at the bottom of the abbey

orchard. I would be happy to make sure that the hon. Lady gets a meeting with the appropriate Minister to raise those points.

The additional new resources that our reforms will give to the regulators are underpinned by mandatory monitoring of storm overflows and pollution incidents. Water companies in England and Wales must now publish information on the frequency and duration of discharges from every single storm overflow within one hour of the discharge happening. We have extended that to emergency overflows, so that all spills will be publicly reported in near real time. We expect water companies to monitor 50% of them by 2030 and the rest by 2035. Companies are now required to publish their annual pollution incident reduction plans and implementation reports to outline the progress they have made and show the public that they have a credible plan to end the scandal of water pollution. Those measures give the water regulators new powers to hold water companies to account and ensure that customers and the environment always come first.

We can and we will turn the water sector around. We have secured more than £104 billion of private sector investment in the water sector over the next five years. That is the biggest investment in our water sector in its history, and the second biggest investment in any part of the economy over the lifetime of this Parliament. It will build and upgrade water infrastructure in every single region of the country, cut sewage spills by 45% compared with 2021 levels and drastically improve the quality of water in our rivers, lakes and seas. It will allow us to move ahead with nine new reservoirs and nine large-scale water transfer schemes, and reduce leaks from crumbling pipes, so that we have a reliable water supply for the future.

This vast investment will create tens of thousands of jobs up and down the country, allow us to go ahead with building 1.5 million new homes, support 150 major infrastructure projects and power new industries with high water usage, such as data centres. This is the regional economic growth that the country voted for last year; this is the Labour party's plan for change in action.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I think that Members in all parts of the House agree with much of what the Secretary of State is saying. I am fortunate enough to have the beautiful River Trent in my constituency, along with the Sow and the Penk, but new housing developments, which he mentioned, are a big issue, because the run-off from them is not properly attenuated. How could that best be dealt with? Building homes for the right reasons sometimes has unintended consequences.

Steve Reed: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right, and I have asked Sir Jon Cunliffe to consider measures that we could implement to start to address that and, indeed, wider issues involving nutrient neutrality in our waterways.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Steve Reed: I will make some progress, because I do not want to take up too much of the debate.

Last month the Water Minister and I toured the country to see where and how the investment will be spent—from Windermere to the Wye, from Hampshire to Yorkshire, and to Suffolk, Northumbria and Somerset. In Windermere, we are working with local groups and organisations to eliminate all sewage discharges into the lake. That includes schemes that allow owners of septic tanks to connect them to the mains sewer network so that they no longer discharge directly into the water. On the River Wye we are running a £1 million joint research initiative with the Welsh Government to tackle water-quality issues across the catchment. We are working with local farmers, environmental groups and citizen scientists to investigate the sources of the pollution so that we can tackle them effectively.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Steve Reed: I will make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind too much.

The south-east of England will face severe water shortages by 2030 if we do not act urgently, so we are supporting new infrastructure such as the Havant Thicket reservoir, which will store nearly 9 billion litres of water when it is completed.

This is just the start of our wider plan to fundamentally reset the water sector so that it is fit for the future. I am grateful to Sir Jon Cunliffe, the former Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, for undertaking the biggest review of the water sector since privatisation. He is supported by an advisory group of experts covering the environment, public health, investors, engineering, customers and economics. The failures of regulation and governance that allowed our water system to decline into scandalous failure must never happen again. This summer, Sir Jon will publish his findings on how we can build the robust regulatory framework that we need to clean up our waterways, build infrastructure for a reliable water supply and restore public confidence.

Martin Wrigley: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Steve Reed: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will make a little more progress, because I have already taken up more than 20 minutes of other Members' time.

Sir Jon is looking into how we can embrace a catchment-based approach to cleaning up our rivers, and our farming road map will help farmers to make the transition to more nature-positive farming methods that will reduce agricultural run-off into our waterways. I hope that many Members have shared their views as part of the Independent Water Commission's call for evidence, which closes at the end of today. The Government will respond and consult on the commission's recommendations, and we intend to legislate so that we can completely reset our water sector for the future.

The Water Minister has announced reforms to shake up our water bathing regulations for the first time in more than a decade, so that more people, whether they are swimmers, paddleboarders or surfers, can get outside and enjoy our waters safely. Our proposed measures would remove the fixed bathing season dates from the regulations to better reflect when people actually use our waters, and would allow greater flexibility in monitoring.

Martin Wrigley: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Steve Reed: I will this time, because the hon. Gentleman has been very persistent.

Martin Wrigley: I thank the Secretary of State. I have just been reading about his core reforms, and I note that, as he has said, core reform 3 changes the way in which the season for bathing is determined. However, it continues the principle that water is not tested by the Environment Agency throughout the year. This is an important omission that must be rectified. During a bathing season, the water can become polluted. Will the Secretary of State consider introducing all-year-round testing for our Blue Flag areas?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Secretary of State responds, I would like him to consider the fact that more than 30 colleagues wish to contribute. The longer he speaks, the less likely it is that they will all get in.

Steve Reed: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will not take any more interventions. I hear the hon. Gentleman's point. Public health is a priority in the reforms that we are making.

The Environment Agency must consider public safety and the environment when it assesses applications for bathing waters, and remove the harmful automatic designation of bathing waters so that we can continue to invest in and improve these sites. Applications for new bathing waters will open next month, adding to the more than 450 bathing waters around the country. Details of how to apply are online.

The sewage scandal ends with this Labour Government. Our groundbreaking Water (Special Measures) Act will give the regulators tough new powers to hold water companies to account. They will no longer get away with polluting our waterways and rewarding themselves with undeserved bonuses for what they have done. This is a fresh start for the water sector—a fundamental reset that will clean up our waterways, create thousands of jobs, grow the economy and give us a reliable water supply for decades to come.

Exciting progress is already being made. The Thames tideway tunnel was fully activated in February—an amazing feat of British engineering and entrepreneurial spirit that will reduce sewage spills into the Thames by around 95%. Since coming into operation, the tunnel has captured enough sewage to fill Wembley stadium five times over and stopped it pouring into the river. I want to see innovation like that not just in London but right across the country, bringing investment, driving regional economic growth and cleaning up our waterways for good.

Many of us cherish memories from childhood of summer holidays on the beach, exploring rock pools or splashing about in the waves. Today's children deserve to make the same magical memories. This is our moment to give our children back the future that is their birthright, to restore pride in our rivers, lakes and seas, to end the sewage scandal and to clean up our waterways for good. That is the prize, and this is the Government who will make it happen.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Because the Front-Bench contributions have been so substantial, Back Benchers will now be on a time limit of three minutes. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.22 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I respect the fact that this is the Liberal Democrats' Opposition day debate, so I have been cutting parts out of my speech. I therefore hope the House will forgive me if I do not take every intervention that is offered to me.

I thank the Liberal Democrats for choosing to debate this important issue. We all know and agree that there are fundamental problems facing the water and sewerage industry. A drainage and sewerage system that was first built in the Victorian era does not meet the needs of the population it must now serve, or the pressures of more frequent and severe weather events. To fix the problem, we must first diagnose it and measure it. That is why the previous Government took the essential step of radically overhauling the monitoring of storm overflows.

On previous occasions, the Secretary of State has dismissed the significance of that data collection and monitoring. That is unfair, because when we came into government in 2010, the Labour Government had left us and the Liberal Democrats in the coalition Government with a water system that was out of control; just 7% of storm overflows were monitored. In other words, people across the country were swimming and playing in water without knowing that it had been contaminated with raw sewage. I had the pleasure of going to school in Blackpool, and there were certain times of the summer season when locals would not venture into the sea, because we knew the consequences of daring to do so.

The point I would make to everyone in this Chamber is that this is a long-standing set of problems. To pretend otherwise—I know some people get a little carried away with their advocacy—does not do the public, our constituents or, indeed, our waterways the justice that they deserve. We are proud of the fact that by the time we left government we had met our ambitious target to ensure that 100% of storm overflows were monitored. The importance of that is emphasised—

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will just finish this point, and then I will take the intervention.

The importance of that is emphasised by the interventions we have already had, because Members across this House have been citing the very stark and shocking statistics on storm overflows, sewage overflows and so on in their constituencies. They have rightly relied on those figures already in this debate, and I have no doubt that they will rely on them in their speeches as well. In the dark days before 2010, their predecessors would not have had that information. [*Laughter.*] I see a Labour Member—the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove)—laughing about that. I do not know why she is laughing at knowing more through data collection so that we can correct the situation.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the shadow Minister for giving way. Monitoring sewage overflows does not immediately improve the health of our environment or of the public. It is the first minimum

step to be able to take meaningful action, but I am sorry to say that the previous Government failed to take meaningful action. Between 2021 and 2023, Dewsbury and Batley experienced a massive number of sewage spills, totalling 4,604 incidents with a total duration of a staggering 28,383 hours or approximately three and a quarter years. Does the right hon. Member agree with me and my constituents that the privatisation of the water industry has been a total and abject failure, causing significant harm to our environment, public health and wildlife, and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Member will know that interventions need to be brief, and should not be prepared and read out from a script.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who has in fact lined up the next paragraph my speech—it is extraordinary—because this improved knowledge must lead to action.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Atkins: No. I will come to the hon. Gentleman in due course. I have said that this is the Liberal Democrats' Opposition day debate, and I will give them the respect that they deserve.

The improved knowledge must lead to action. As I am delighted the Secretary of State acknowledged, one of the most tangible improvements in the past decade is just a few metres away under our feet—the Thames tideway tunnel. Sadly, he did not have the generosity of spirit to acknowledge the role that the Conservative Government played in that. This multibillion-pound infrastructure project, announced and delivered by the Conservative Government, has already stopped 500,000 tonnes of sewage flowing into the River Thames since it started operating in February. Over time, the 16 mile pipe is expected to stop 95% of sewage spills that would previously have polluted the River Thames. That meaningful action is already making a real difference to our nation's capital—built on the data that some laugh at—and I ask genuinely: where is Labour's plan for more?

In government, we also wanted to clear up the water industry and our environment. It was the Environment Act 2021, passed by the last Government, that gave stronger powers to regulators and imposed strict demands for tackling pollution. We set legally binding targets to improve water quality and availability, and to reduce nutrient pollution. We rolled out catchment-sensitive farming to all farms in England. We stepped up the requirements for investment, including investment from water companies, and storm overflow improvements.

After 14 years in opposition, the Labour party should have come into office with a plan of what more needs to be done to fix this century-old problem and, what is more, have set that plan in action last summer with energy and gusto. [*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State is chuntering from a sedentary position, but may I say what a delight it is to see him in the Chamber? Normally, he is running frit from farmers. Instead of a plan, we have had an underwhelming trickle—a review, yet another talking shop forum that has done nothing other than have a meeting, and a Bill which, as we said during its

passage, sets out much of what was already happening. As with every other part of this Government, Ministers had no plan, and they are now trying to come up with one.

Dr Arthur: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will give way in a moment.

For example, the Secretary of State recently pledged to clean up Lake Windermere so that only rainwater flows into it. It was a laudable ambition. Who can disagree with that ambition? However, he gave no timeframe and no plan for delivering this vision. I have also visited the constituency of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I met local residents and farmers—something I do not think the Secretary of State managed to do—and business owners recently. *[Interruption.]* Well, they do notice. They are not holding their breath for action because, rather like his no farming policy, it is all talk and no action.

A significant amount of the Government's supposedly groundbreaking water legislation, including the measures on monitoring, blocking bonuses, and fines, was already brought in by the previous Government. Sadly, they rejected our amendment to maintain the important water restoration fund to protect waterways, including chalk streams, many of which are in my constituency. I genuinely hope that they will reconsider that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy)
rose—

Victoria Atkins: I am very happy to give way if the hon. Lady is going to support and carry on our work—delighted, in fact.

Emma Hardy: I would never wish to be impolite and I will not be now, but I think the right hon. Lady will find that our argument on the water restoration fund was that it did not need primary legislation to happen. What has happened since then, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that everyone who has been successful in applying for the water restoration fund has been contacted and the money has already been offered, so I think the right hon. Lady's information might be slightly out of date.

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to hear that. I gently suggest that that was not the response the hon. Lady gave when we were debating it and pressing her to put it in the Bill. It is precisely because we did our job of scrutinising the Bill and trying to improve it that, I am delighted to hear, she has now put that into action.

Another example—I am happy to take another intervention from her—is that we tabled an amendment to limit the amount of debt that water companies could accumulate, as well as an amendment to protect bill payers. Sadly, both were rejected. The hon. Lady is welcome to intervene. Is she doing that? No intervention. Well, we have not got that commitment. I am genuinely happy to give way to her, because I want to improve her legislation.

Emma Hardy: The right hon. Lady is rather keen to hear from me and I am happy to offer to intervene. The water commission is looking at levels of debt. The shadow

Minister, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), will know, because we had the conversation many times in Committee, that that is part of what the commission is looking at. I gently remind the right hon. Lady that, as much as I accept that she is super keen for us to have achieved everything she failed to do in nine months, she had 14 years to do it.

Victoria Atkins: Wow! Where is the energy? Where is the gusto? Rewriting history seems to be a theme this week for the Government, but there we go. That is a little bit delicate for Labour Back Benchers, given the discussions this week.

We banned bonuses for the bosses of water companies that have committed criminal breaches and water companies that illegally pollute our rivers can be prosecuted, making it clear that polluters will pay for damage to our natural environment. I hope that in her wind-up, the Minister will answer the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) about fines being ringfenced for local areas, and the important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) about the amendment she tabled to the Water (Special Measures) Act.

The Secretary of State, as is his nervous tic, merely fell back on whatever they say about the past, rather than setting out his vision for the future. I can always tell when I am getting to him, bless him. We quadrupled water company inspections and set in place a plan to have 4,000 inspections a year by April 2025, increasing to 10,000 a year from April 2026. Will the Government commit to that vital work, or will the Chancellor cut the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs budget so starkly that they are cancelled?

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): We have the stunning River Derwent running through Derby, but it was polluted by sewage 2,675 times in 2024, lasting over 15,000 hours. I invite the right hon. Member to take responsibility for cutting the Environment Agency budget by half, leaving it without the powers and resources to combat this kind of sewage.

Victoria Atkins: It is a brave rural constituency MP who defends the activities of the Environment Agency. With some of the disappointments that local residents have had with the Environment Agency, particularly in my part of the world, there is real work to do there.

Catherine Atkinson *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I am still answering the hon. Lady's first intervention. Of course, she is relying on the data—that is exactly the point. Again, I come back to the point—I am trying to be constructive and collegiate in the way I am dealing with this. *[Laughter.]* The public will hear the laughter; that is what Government Members do not understand. I am trying to be constructive. We managed to collect that data and we had significant infrastructure investment in the Thames tideway tunnel, as I have explained.

However, as I have always said at this Dispatch Box, there is more to do, so we genuinely will support constructive efforts by the Government. That is why we scrutinise their legislation so carefully and why we put forward perfectly proper amendments to the Water (Special

[Victoria Atkins]

Measures) Act. I am delighted that the Government have taken our suggestion on the water restoration fund so seriously and have enacted that. However, we must not conduct this conversation with quite the emotional distress that the Secretary of State seems to be in at the moment.

Of course, the Liberal Democrats know the scale of the challenge, as there was a Liberal Democrat Water Minister for a large part of the coalition Government. That fact seems to have been missed in their motion today—I am sure it was just an oversight. The Liberal Democrats want to see even more progress with the blue flag scheme, and we agree with them on that. Since 2010, the number of designated bathing waters has increased, and we have seen a significant improvement in water quality ratings, with more water rated as excellent or good, and an increase in blue flag beaches. As a proud coastal MP, I want to see many more blue flag beaches like Mablethorpe and Sutton on Sea on our glorious Lincolnshire coastline, and I will, of course, support meaningful efforts to achieve that.

If I may, I will just ask for a point of clarity from the Liberal Democrats. In 2023, they called for a ban on bank holiday sewage discharges—again, a laudable ambition. However, it was pointed out to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) that this policy would result in burst water pipes and sewage backing up into people's homes. When these laudable ambitions are put forward—indeed, we all want to see them—will the Liberal Democrats ensure that their own policymaking would not have unintended consequences, including, as I say, sewage flowing back up into people's homes?

I will finish on this point, Madam Deputy Speaker. I emphasise again that we all care about the quality of our waterways. As we showed with the Water (Special Measures) Act, we will work constructively across the House to improve our waterways and the legislation put forward by the Government. I am proud to be leading the policy renewal work for farming, food, fishing, environment and water for the Conservative party with my excellent shadow ministerial team, my hon. Friends the Members for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) and for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore). We will be watching and scrutinising the Government's work on water carefully. The promises the Secretary of State is making now will be remembered by our constituents, by colleagues across the House and by voters, as, I am afraid, his promises are remembered by our farmers.

5.38 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I thank the Liberal Democrats for securing this important debate. They are asking the Government today for three key commitments: to take urgent action to end the sewage scandal; to provide greater protection against sewage dumping; and to ensure that the public know when rivers are clean and safe. I have some great news for the Liberal Democrats, because we have pretty much delivered all that already.

This Labour Government acted urgently to bring forward the Water (Special Measures) Act—it was one of our first pieces of legislation in our first King's Speech

and became law this February—to end the disgraceful behaviour of the water companies. The legislation does exactly what it says on the tin: it puts our disgraceful water companies into special measures, just like a school that has failed its Ofsted exam. The Government are wading in to ramp up regulation and enforcement of these companies. We will ensure that their focus is back on consumers—their experience, their service level and their bills—so we have been working on additional regulation.

The Liberal Democrats talked about a lack of resourcing, but from what we have heard today—this is also in the Water (Special Measures) Act—it is very clear that the polluter will pay and that water companies' fines will come back into the EA to put the much-needed resourcing where it should be.

Sean Woodcock: We heard the shadow Secretary of State bemoaning the laughter from Labour Members. I think the laughter was at the idea that people in this country should be grateful to the Conservatives for the condition in which they left our waterways. Does my hon. Friend share our amusement at that ridiculous thought?

Victoria Atkins *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The shadow Secretary of State will know that she cannot intervene on an intervention, which, by the way, was far too long. I think we will go back to Julia Buckley.

Julia Buckley: I thank my hon. Friend for his amusing intervention, but more important is the measure in the 2025 Act that bans bonuses when the high standards of our environmental protections are not met.

Victoria Atkins: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Labour Back Benchers should know this by now. The hon. Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) fell into error—I will be kind to him—by mischaracterising the comment that I made about him and the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) laughing during the course of my speech, when I was talking about the importance of data monitoring. It was not in any way—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The shadow Secretary of State will know that that was not a point of order, but a point of debate. Perhaps we had best return to Julia Buckley.

Julia Buckley: I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your excellent chairmanship.

Our important Bill has not just banned bonuses, but introduced criminal liability, which will mean that, finally, chief executives and senior leadership figures can end up in prison for up to two years. We have also introduced mandatory electronic sensors, which monitor the overflows in real time. This is objective data that is measured in real time, and, crucially, as this is an important question from the Liberal Democrats, that data is available to the public.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Julia Buckley: Forgive me, but I must make some progress.

We have also forced the water companies to deliver on their five-year investment plans for sustainable urban drainage to rectify the inadequate infrastructure, which has not kept pace with capacity over the past 30 years. In Shropshire, which I represent, that means an additional investment of £500 million to rectify our sewage drainage over the next five years.

I have been an MP for only a few months, but in that short time I am proud of the Government's swift and decisive action to immediately curtail the excesses of the privatised water industry. In my constituency of Shrewsbury, we have significant sewage outflows in the town centre, as the beautiful River Severn completely loops round the centre, with over 30 combined sewage overflows. Underground, we have inadequate Victorian infrastructure, which has been ignored under our cobbled streets. The Water (Special Measures) Act could not come quickly enough for my constituents in Shrewsbury. It has already delivered all three asks of the Liberal Democrats in today's debate: we have taken urgent action; we have legislated to protect consumers against sewage dumping; and we have ensured that the public have the information they need. No one can question this Government's commitment to cleaning up water. The only question is why the Liberal Democrats voted against this important Act.

5.43 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): The pollution of rivers is an issue that strikes close to home for many of us. Just last November, Wessex Water was fined half a million pounds for pumping raw sewage into Clackers brook, a small river rising in Bromham and flowing 5 miles through Melksham in my constituency. This incident resulted in the deaths of more than 2,000 fish, including all aquatic life within a 1 km radius of the leak. The systems in place simply cannot handle the pressure brought to bear by the increasing volatility in rainfall levels seen in recent times.

I have also been to visit the home of one of my constituents in West Lavington, where a manhole had been lifted from its housing as a result of a downpour. Toxic sewage then polluted a nearby chalk stream, damaging its unique ecosystem that is home to a variety of species, including trout. These kinds of incidents cannot be allowed to persist.

The current antiquated piping system does not satisfy modern demand. Water companies must update and future-proof these systems, and we need them to do so now. I was pleased to see Wessex Water—credit where it is due—invest £2 million in a sewage storage facility in Bradford-on-Avon to ensure that it can mitigate increased pressure on sewage pipes. However, it is clear that more must be done to protect our vital aquatic ecosystems.

We must be clear that this is not just a problem for water companies. Developments in farming practices have led to detrimental impacts on both soil quality and river health. Acreage dedicated to the production of maize trebled between 1990 and 2000, making it one of the UK's fastest growing crops. However, maize allows for high levels of surface run-off, causing soil degradation and the pollution of our rivers. That makes it one of the most damaging crops.

The rise in intensive poultry units is another area of concern. Chicken manure contains far higher levels of phosphates than manure from other farmed animals, and it starves fish and river plants of oxygen. Run-off from chicken farms or indeed fields spread with chicken manure is catastrophic to our waterways.

We must expect better from our water companies. Investment in infrastructure must rise with the demands of the modern world.

Dr Opher: In Stroud, Severn Trent has invested £25 million to stop overflow of sewage into the River Frome. Together with natural flood management from our district council, we have made rivers cleaner, and as a keen swimmer I am grateful for that. Would the hon. Member acknowledge that some water companies have been investing heavily?

Brian Mathew: As I have just said, in Bradford-on-Avon, similar investments have been made—credit where credit is due.

I will come back to the important issues about farming. We should also approach the issue of river pollution in a far more holistic manner, acknowledging the various factors, including agriculture, that contribute to the fact that just 14% of our waterways are in good health.

5.47 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): We have had a wonderful surf around the UK's rivers, lakes and seas this afternoon. Every single one of us in this House will have a waterway in our constituency, and we have all had to endure the worst impacts of the 14 years of negligence and failure that almost killed some of our rivers.

The Wye and the Usk, which run through my constituency, are two fantastic examples of waterways that sadly have been affected for too long. Run-off from agriculture, liquid waste from industry and sewage resulting from inadequate investment by failing water companies have all added up to increased phosphate levels in our rivers.

Tests in the Usk have shown scarily high levels of e-coli in the water, which made it unsafe for bathing and stopped local people enjoying the river in the ways they should be able to—splashing through streams and jumping into the sea, as the Secretary of State spoke about earlier. We should all be able to swim, kayak and canoe without fear of nasty infection. Tourism has suffered, as have businesses like the one run by Angela Jones, whose livelihood depends on the river in Monmouthshire.

I want to pay tribute to the brilliant citizen scientists and campaigners in my constituency who tirelessly work to save our local rivers, including Friends of the River Wye, Save the River Usk, and the Wye Catchment Partnership. Members of our communities up and down the UK are testing and monitoring rivers for pollution and are coming up with innovative cross-border solutions.

The good news is that this Government have paid attention to people in Monmouthshire and all over England and Wales. The last Government had an unfunded, pie-in-the-sky action plan for the River Wye that only looked at England. Water flows across borders, and I am so pleased that, as the Secretary of State so eloquently mentioned, the two Labour Governments in Westminster

[Catherine Fookes]

and Cardiff have made progress and put £1 million into the River Wye so that we can clean it up once and for all.

The Water (Special Measures) Act has made extraordinary progress in making sure that polluters are accountable. It will strengthen Ofwat's powers so that it can better hold water companies to account and bring tough criminal charges against those who break the law. This is only the beginning. We know that there is much more to do, and the upcoming Cunliffe review will help us to do that, but I am so proud that the Labour Government have achieved more in nine months than the previous Government did in 14 years—and, notably, more than the Liberal Democrats also did in coalition.

5.50 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): My constituency contains the source of the Thames, so I could, in theory, row from my constituency to the House. I would like to celebrate the opening of the Thames tideway tunnel, as mentioned by the Secretary of State. Back in 2013, I was campaigning for the tunnel, which included frowning at a sewage outflow under Putney bridge, so it could be said that I have been in the excrement for quite some time. Sadly, the situation has not improved in the 12 years in between. Just this morning, I had Ben Thornbury, an impressive young man, in my office to commend him on his work cleaning up the River Avon in Malmesbury. Sadly—let no good deed go unpunished—he had picked up sepsis from the pollution in the river. I am grateful to say that he made a full recovery, but, still, that is a sign of the times.

Perhaps surprisingly, I would like to use a word rarely heard in the context of the water industry: hope. I would like to highlight some ways in which good things are happening, largely at the grassroots level. First, there is citizen science. Eighty pollution incidents were reported by citizens just in my constituency in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire last year. Citizen science can often highlight pollution incidents up to three days before official sources of information.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): In my constituency, I am lucky to have Friends of the River Frome and Frome Families for the Future who do lots of citizen science in testing the river, but does my hon. Friend agree that we should not be relying on such groups to test the water quality and that we need to empower and resource the Environment Agency to be doing that? We cannot rely on areas that are lucky enough to have these groups.

Dr Savage: I completely agree. Although I commend those grassroots efforts, that is not their job. I was delighted to hear from the Secretary of State that we will soon have real-time reporting on water pollution, and I look forward to seeing the visible—and smellable—results of that. It is also the Earthwatch WaterBlitz this weekend, so hon. Members may still have time to get their water testing kits do their own bit of citizen science.

Secondly, again, I applaud local efforts, and especially the Malmesbury River Valleys Trust and the Cotswold Lakes Trust, for doing such exemplary work in taking care of our waterways and our wetlands in the South

Cotswolds. I recommend to hon. Members across the House that we use our power to convene to bring together people around these issues. In the South Cotswolds, we recently held two fruitful summits—one on the Gloucestershire side and one on the Wiltshire side—bringing people together on the issue of flooding. They yielded a lot of enthusiasm, expertise and actionable solutions. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine) mentioned, we cannot leave it all to the grassroots. We have a deeply dysfunctional water industry in this country, and we need to get upstream of these problems to the source.

Mr Angus MacDonald: We have been hearing all about monitoring in one hour and the huge amounts of discharges. We do not have any of that information in Scotland as it is not a requirement for Scottish Water to release that and the SNP Government are not taking any steps to do so. We have no idea about the extent of the problem, but we know that it is substantial. Will my hon. Friend back me in supporting the cause for the Scottish Government to release the same information as there is England?

Dr Savage: I would be more than happy to back my hon. Friend's calls for an equivalent system in Scotland.

Finally, I thank the Government for everything they are already doing to reform the water industry and look forward to seeing real results in our waterways. I will add that, while I welcome the Cunliffe review, I was disappointed to find out that the ownership of water companies is outside its scope.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I sit on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and we are also making submissions to the Cunliffe review. I do not believe ownership of water is outside the scope of the review. It will be looking at how our water is owned—maybe not nationalisation, but certainly other methods of ownership.

Dr Savage: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. That was not what I had been led to believe from a roundtable with Sir Jon Cunliffe, but maybe I misunderstood.

The truth is that the profit motive has no place in a vital public utility such as the water industry. We are one of only two countries in the entire world that has a privatised water industry, and clearly it is not working and needs to be reviewed.

5.55 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in such an important debate, particularly as I represent one of the most beautiful counties, and the largest constituency, in England—as the Lib Dem spokesman, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), has already hinted at. Rivers define my constituency and the county I grew up in. From the Tyne to the Coquet to the Allen Valleys and all the way to the River Rede, we cannot go throughout Northumberland without coming across rivers and the communities that are named for them and depend on them. They drive tourism, wildlife, and our local economies.

Protecting those rivers is not a luxury or a nice to have; it is a fundamental duty for those of us who represent those communities. I am incredibly proud to be the MP

for such a vibrant and active constituency with such fantastic grassroots campaigners, including Dr Stephen Westgarth and the “Clean Tyne” campaign. Conservative Members will be aware that he was at one point a Conservative county council candidate—I enjoy working cross-party with people, although probably not quite as much in the week before the local elections as in the week after. I also pay tribute to a retiring Green party councillor in my constituency, Dr Nick Morphet, the councillor for Humshaugh. He has done an excellent job and, despite running against me in the general election, was always good company when I met him on the doorsteps.

Coming back to slightly hackneyed party politics, I recognise quite how much the sewage issue raises hackles and confirms just what a state of stagnation and decline the country has fallen into. During 2024, my constituency was polluted 3,991 times, with spillages lasting more than 27,000 hours. Dumping sewage is not waste management; it is environmental destruction and environmental vandalism, and it is particularly devastating in the rural north-east, where so much tourism relies on water.

When the Minister comes to wind up the debate—she is not in her place, but I hope she will hear this—I hope she will dwell on those communities that rely on water, particularly the really isolated communities such as those in Kielder, where they deal with the practicalities of living so sparsely. I often talk about Hexham having a very rural population, but when I go to Kielder, they look at me coming from Hexham as if I had come from Vegas. I was at a Kielder parish council meeting—it took an hour to get there—where one of the farmers said that if she is feeding her cows, she cannot have a shower. That is the kind of sparsity and rurality we are dealing with. I urge the Minister, when she comes to her feet, to address that point. If she came to meet the “Clean Tyne” campaign to discuss the difficulties it faces and the work it is doing to combat some of the challenges we face on the Tyne, it would be massively appreciated in my constituency.

5.58 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is wonderful to follow the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), who is my parliamentary twin, as it were. Our names are so similar that we often get confusing correspondence. He must love that as much as I do.

The sewage in our rivers is of great concern to my constituents in Beaconsfield, Marlow and the South Bucks villages, as well as to my parliamentary twin on the Government Benches. In my constituency, I have worked closely with local action groups in Little Marlow and Farnham Common to secure a planned sewage upgrade for the Little Marlow sewage treatment works, through persistent lobbying of former Conservative Ministers and current Labour Ministers. I have repeatedly called for criminal sanctions against water company executives for breaches of their duties, but I have always said that more needs to be done; in particular, I urge the Minister to look again at strengthening the protection for water sports.

Earlier this year, I tabled two amendments to the Water (Special Measures) Bill: one to introduce criminal sanctions for water company bosses who fail to report discharges and another to extend protections for water

sports to match those for swimming waters. These are serious, meaningful changes needed to further strengthen our oversight of water companies and our waterways.

In my constituency, we are rich in water sports along the Thames. We have Marlow Rowing Club, Marlow Canoe Club and the Upper Thames Sailing Club, to name just three wonderful examples, and our local schools regularly use the river for water sports. My secondary schools are out on the Thames on a daily basis, including rowing and using the river, and it would be wonderful to have to protect aquatic sports in legislation.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The wonderful River Nidd runs through my constituency, which similarly has paddleboarding, kayaking and all sorts of wonderful activities—including the Knaresborough bed race, which runs through the river at one point. Does the hon. Lady not feel regret that the Conservative Government did not take the steps she is outlining now?

Joy Morrissey: I have been lobbying for these changes for many years, and now that I am in opposition I have been able to table my own amendments, Lib Dem style! I was happy that the Lib Dem spokesperson spoke in support of my amendment during the Bill Committee. I love that cross-party support and am learning from their wonderful example of taking amendments forward when not in power; that is fun and enjoyable for us all. I did not table as many as their 42 amendments, but I did put forward two so I am working my way there.

I want to see the provisions I have mentioned move forward in any way possible, because they are so important for aquatic sports and for the rivers that we all benefit from and use. I want the same protections for water sports as those proposed for bathing waters, and I would like discharge from emergency overflows blocked within a 1-mile radius of areas used for aquatic sports, particularly by secondary schools and by children.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech about water sports, but does she agree that angling is also vital for our rivers? I met members of the Farnham Angling Society on the River Wey some weeks ago, and they were obviously very concerned about the effects of pollution on the angling stocks, which are vital for our rural life.

Joy Morrissey: Angling is a very important sport that we should be protecting, including by making sure our waterways are clean. A key way to know if our waterways are clean is that the aquatic life comes back.

Clubs in my constituency would really benefit from the changes and protections I have mentioned. I would like to see them introduced and I hope that the Secretary of State will change his mind and adopt something similar to my amendment. The Government can feel free to take credit and pretend it is their amendment or change, but I would really like to see those changes brought forward. Unfortunately, my two amendments were not accepted, but I will continue to press for them, Lib Dem style, at any opportunity I can possibly find, because I believe that they would be good for the UK and for our waterways.

I hope the Government will look seriously again at protecting water sports. I would be delighted to work with them or any party to practically develop the legislative steps needed for that to happen.

6.3 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): First, I should declare an interest: I have close relatives working in the water sector, although in science rather than in the water industry. I rise to speak in favour of the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and other Ministers. Our rivers have suffered from serious sewage pollution over many years and I am pleased the Government are now taking action to address this terrible problem. I want to discuss the nature of the action and to raise some important constituency matters.

As we have heard this afternoon, for far too long water companies have ignored residents' concerns and continued to pump sewage into our rivers, lakes and seas. Reading is particularly badly affected because it is downstream of many of the pumping outlet stations further up the Thames, as colleagues from the Thames valley area have hinted at.

I strongly support the measures taken in the Government's Water (Special Measures) Act, which tackles the issue. The legislation received Royal Assent on 24 February, and introduces tough new penalties, including imprisonment for water company executives when companies fail to co-operate or when they obstruct investigations. Notably, it also bans bonuses for CEOs and senior leaders within such companies unless high environmental standards are met, consumers are protected and the company is financially resilient. The Act ensures that each emergency sewage overflow outlet is independently monitored, which is an important step forward. That will make it quicker and easier for regulators to investigate and punish wrongdoing. The measures will increase transparency by requiring water companies to publish real-time data for all emergency overflows in England—again, a clear and important step forward.

We heard earlier—my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) from the Select Committee mentioned further details—that the Government have commissioned the Cunliffe review, which is another important step forward in tackling these problems. It will look in much greater detail at how companies are held to account for non-compliance and at a number of other matters.

I am conscious of time, but I would like to raise some local examples of sewage pollution and other matters related to waterways in the Reading area. I have seen—as I spoke about during the debate on the water Bill—some appalling incidents of sewage pollution in my area, including seeing a tributary of the Thames turn a lurid green after a sewage incident in Hampshire, which fed into Foudry brook, which is a tributary of the Kennet, which ultimately flows into the Thames.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): On Friday, I will be testing the water quality in Christchurch harbour because we need a conservation policy there, as suggested by the Christchurch Harbour and Marine Society. I am also concerned about the River Stour in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Environment Agency could set higher standards for water quality and, in so doing, help to establish the data that shows where areas are falling short? I am particularly concerned about the River Stour, but I know he too will have rivers that he is concerned about.

Matt Rodda: I would of course like to see further work carried out by all agencies. My hon. Friend makes a good point about the river in his constituency. In my own constituency, there are a number of rivers, including the Thames and the Kennet. Many flow through heavily populated areas and places where people enjoy walks by the river, and—as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) mentioned—rowing, swimming, sailing and many other activities.

I have also seen the way that sewage pollution can interfere with wildlife. In one case, I saw the stark and appalling contrast of visible pollution in the river—foam from sewage and other nitrate pollution—next to a kingfisher. It is sad to see the way that these beautiful rivers are polluted by appalling outflows.

Sean Woodcock: Like me, my hon. Friend will receive hundreds of emails and bits of correspondence on the performance of Thames Water. Does he agree that that company in particular should take the Act as if they were being put on notice and that further action may follow if necessary to improve standards?

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is right on cue and entices me to the next area I want to talk about, which is the general problems with Thames Water. Those of us who represent constituencies in the Thames Water area know that it is an appalling company. I do not want to criticise individual members of staff—the head office is in my constituency and many local people work hard there—but, in my experience, the company is poorly managed.

I was going to mention a number of other incidents, including two where water was cut off to large parts of Reading's suburbs and where residents are still waiting for compensation. I have had to write to Ofwat to ask it to investigate. I have had other incidents, including the creation of a sinkhole due to a water leak, which has caused severe distress to residents; I appreciate that that is not sewage, but it is part of the wider water provision network, so I hope that it is in the scope. In this case, residents are having to wait for concrete to be pumped into the chalk in order for the road next to their homes to be stabilised. I have seen a series of wider problems with flooding and other concerns about watercourses not being maintained.

Tom Hayes: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Matt Rodda: Of course.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The time limit has been reached. The hon. Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) ought to have concluded his remarks rather than taken another intervention from the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes).

6.9 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): We welcome the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, but we urge the Government to go further, particularly with regard to the protection of chalk streams. That is very personal to me and to many Members across the House. I have campaigned for many years to stop the dumping of raw sewage and for the better protection of our chalk

streams, alongside campaign organisations, the Cam Valley Forum, and the many local river action groups for the Mel, the Granta, the Shep, the Rhee, the Wilbraham, the Orwell and the Cherry Hinton brook.

Some progress has been made locally, with the hard-won award of a bathing water designation for the Sheep's Green section of the River Cam. That has secured much-needed financing for clean-up actions by Anglian Water of the small sewage treatment work upstream in Haslingfield. However, not all our chalk streams can have bathing water designation as a mechanism of protection, especially when they have to struggle and suffer with overwhelmed small sewage treatment works as a result of unprecedented housing growth and development in our area. That is why I bemoan the fact that the 2025 Act and the Planning and Infrastructure Bill do not get rid of the damaging automatic right to connect for developers, which means that water companies cannot say whether they have the capacity to manage sewage in the area.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): My hon. Friend talks about overwhelmed sewage works. The Markyate sewage works in my constituency has now had 3,000 hours of non-stop overflow, including sewage, which enters our precious chalk streams. Does she agree that that is why it is so important that we have blue flag status to increase the responsibility and accountability of water companies, which should not take our chalk streams for granted?

Pippa Heylings: I agree. In my South Cambridgeshire constituency alone, rivers and streams were polluted by sewage 728 times in 2024, lasting over 9,700 hours. That is the disgraceful legacy of the last Conservative Government. We need the protection that my hon. Friend mentions.

We bemoan the fact that the Secretary of State and the Government got rid of the chalk stream recovery pack. That is distressing to all those who care for chalk streams, and it is why we need practical measures such as the blue flag status, and for rivers and chalk streams in a blue flag corridor and water catchments to have the protections they need. That would give the public confidence in water quality and would enable regular water testing, biodiversity checks and better community involvement, boosting transparency.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Statistics published last week show that Welsh Water—the supposedly not-for-profit Welsh water company—had the highest number of sewage discharges across the entire UK, despite charging some of the highest prices for its water, in a country that has some of the lowest incomes in the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Welsh Government must stop letting Welsh Water off the hook? It must take responsibility for its actions.

Pippa Heylings: My hon. Friend makes such a compelling argument for the protections and accountability that are needed in Wales.

We need better protections for our chalk streams, which are unique habitats for nature. The Liberal Democrats will continue leading the fight against this sewage scandal.

We will continue standing up for nature, our rivers and our chalk streams, so that everyone—us and generations to come—can enjoy them.

6.13 pm

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): The future of our rivers, lakes and seas could not be more important, not just for us but for future generations, but after 14 years of Conservative failure to act—for a time, propped up by the Liberal Democrats—their future was looking lost at sea. I am proud that taking action to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas and to hold failing water bosses to account through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 was one of the first actions taken by our new Labour Government, and I was proud to serve on the Bill Committee.

I know the issue is hugely important to fellow residents across my Filton and Bradley Stoke constituency. Locally, we care deeply about our litter, our environment and the future that we are forging for the next generations. Walks along the River Frome or the Bradley brook should not only be safe and healthy, but enjoyable for all.

Our new Labour Government inherited a broken water system, with record levels of sewage being pumped into our waterways in towns, villages and cities across the country and along our glorious coastline. That has impacted health, tourism and how we see our places—declining and unloved by the previous Government, as profits only grew. This Labour Government are taking action and will continue to do so to turn the tide.

I find it remarkable how little was actually done—not talked about, but done—when the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats were in government together, yet how willing they are to claim credit for the actions taken by this new Labour Government, while confusingly seeming to say that not very much is being done. They cannot have it both ways.

Our Water (Special Measures) Act has introduced new powers to ban the payment of unfair bonuses to water bosses who fail to protect our environment, and to bring tough criminal charges against them personally if they break the law. The work of our dedicated Ministers has helped to open up over £100 billion of private sector investment to upgrade crumbling sewerage infrastructure. On top of all that, I was glad to hear the Secretary of State announce last autumn an independent water commission. The Cunliffe commission is the largest review of the water sector since privatisation. It is worth mentioning that anyone can contribute their views to the commission until 11.59 pm tonight, including people at home and Members of the parties on the Opposition Benches—

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Including the Liberal Democrats.

Claire Hazelgrove: Indeed. Listening, acting and thinking of future generations: this is clearly a new Government. Our plan for change will build the infrastructure that Britain needs to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good, and I look forward to supporting that every step of the way.

6.16 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for bringing this important debate to the House.

[Ellie Chowns]

As the Secretary of State said, we are all in furious agreement that the condition of our rivers, lakes and seas is an absolute scandal. It would be remiss of me not to point out that the problem is not just due to sewage, as the Minister knows. As colleagues have mentioned, agricultural pollution is a key factor in the condition of our rivers, lakes and seas, and we cannot fix the problem without addressing both sewage and agricultural pollution together. However, today's subject is sewage, so I will focus on that.

Turning to the motion before us, I am not against introducing a blue flag system for rivers and streams, but that is just tinkering around the edges of a broken system. A shortage of flags and targets is not the problem. Last year, the Environment Agency gave the water companies a collective target of a 40% reduction in sewage incidents, but what did we have? A 30% increase. Monitoring and targets are not enough if there is no meaningful action or sanction. I understand that the water companies have well over 1,000 criminal convictions between them—some companies have over 100 convictions—but they are still getting away with it.

At the same time, bills are going through the roof by an average of over 20% in a single year, and by even more for rural constituents, including mine. It is the bill payers, not the shareholders, who are paying the price. Customer bills provide an average of 35% of company revenue to pay the financial costs—the dividends to shareholders and the interest on loans—of the privatised water and sewerage companies in England and Wales. In the case of Scottish Water, a publicly owned company that may have other problems, those costs amounted to just 8% of revenue from consumer bills.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): In my constituency, raw sewage discharge increased by 75% in 2023, yet there are plans to raise bills by 32% in the next five years. It is clear that the British public are being ripped off. Does the hon. Member agree that while better regulation and investment rules may fix some of the issues, the only way to solve the whole problem is to bring the water supply back into public ownership?

Ellie Chowns: I completely agree. That is precisely the thrust of my argument.

Over the last three decades, shareholders have extracted £83 billion in dividends. They have invested effectively less than nothing, because the share capital and retained earnings in those companies are now lower than they were at the time of privatisation. The capital investment has been taken out of customer bills, yet customers are still paying through the nose. A professor at the University of Greenwich—I have his report here—has shown that the cost of the investment needed in the water industry would be much lower under public ownership than under private ownership. It is clear that, ultimately, public ownership is the only way to gain the control needed to ensure that this essential public utility works for the public benefit, yet the Labour party is unfortunately not willing to consider it.

The Government have the power to bring failing companies into special administration via the High Court, but during the passage of the Water (Special Measures) Act, the Minister said:

“Special administration must be a last resort, as it has significant consequences for a company's investors.”—[*Official Report, Water (Special Measures) Public Bill Committee*, 14 January 2025; c. 96.]

That speaks volumes about who the Government think our water industry is for. It is not for those so-called investors—actually extractors—who have taken out so many dividends paid for by debt while neglecting our infrastructure and killing our waterways with sewage. There should be significant consequences for them. The people of this country—the British people—do not want their water to be investable: they want it to be clean, reliable, affordable and in public hands. Public ownership is the key element of the solution to the sewage scandal.

6.21 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): As hard as it may be to believe, on Saturday I went surfing at Gwithian beach—well known to the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George)—in my constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle. I was invited to surf with the Wave Project, which is a national programme offering children with mental health challenges the chance to use the power of the ocean to lift spirits, build their confidence and chase away some demons. It was an incredibly rewarding experience overall, even for someone whose surfing skills were last on show more than 30 years ago. It was really sad that when we arrived I was informed that the only place we could use was on the western edge of the beach; the rest of the beach was too polluted with sewage.

Across the central and western area of Cornwall, 10% of all the Wave Project's sessions have to be cancelled due to sewage pollution. All along the north coast of my constituency, in Portreath, Porthtowan, Perranporth and St Agnes, which is the location of the head office of Surfers Against Sewage, we are regularly polluted. According to the House of Commons Library, in 2024 there were 142 spills at Portreath, lasting more than 2,500 hours. In total, there were 975 spills last year in my constituency, lasting for an estimated 8,847 hours. Those numbers are shocking to me and to my constituents, who have a right to clean bathing water and a safe natural environment.

However, I am delighted that this Government are taking action through new, tougher penalties for water executives, a ban on bonuses for senior leadership failing to meet standards, mandatory monitoring and reporting, and a model for cost recovery to better resource the Environment Agency, which had its funding slashed under the Tories. Although many discharges still go unpunished, we are acting to clean up the Conservatives' foul, stinking mess while the Liberal Democrats carp from the sidelines, making cheap but transparent pre-local election political points and stating the blindingly obvious as though it was some sort of political revelation, with the indignation of a party that has never had to worry about actually making Government policy. It is under this Labour Government that the Conservatives' sewage scandal will end.

6.24 pm

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for opening this debate for the

Liberal Democrats, and I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am an office holder in the all-party parliamentary water group.

It is one day short of nine months since the first Prime Minister's Question Time of this Parliament. On that day, it was my privilege to pose the first question to the Prime Minister, and I asked him about the levels of sewage being pumped by Thames Water into the River Evenlode in my constituency. He said that

"Customers should not pay the price for mismanagement by water companies",

and added that

"it falls to this Government...to fix the mess of that failure."—[*Official Report*, 24 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 661.]

However, since that date, Thames Water has pumped sewage into the Evenlode for a further 1,050 hours, while hiking bills for my constituents by over 30% on 1 April. As such, I regret that I cannot see that the plan put forward by the Government is yet working. I urge them to work with we Liberal Democrats to go further and faster.

The problem is that pumping sewage into our rivers and waterways is now routine—indeed, it is so routine that it happens even when there has been no excess rainwater or storms. On the River Ray, for example, there were seven and a half hours of sewage-spilling on 9 April. There was no rain that day, and neither had there been any in the previous week. This so-called dry spilling shows that the regulatory arrangements are a joke. My constituents were shocked to learn from Lib Dem freedom of information requests that Ofwat had not issued a single fine to water companies for their management of sewage treatment since 2021. In the past year, I have joined local residents and campaigners to participate in citizen science projects with the Evenlode Catchment Partnership and RiverWatch to look at the quality of our water. On every measure, the Rivers Evenlode, Ray and Cherwell are severely contaminated.

At the same time, Thames Water is failing its domestic customers in my constituency. These include Mark Hamilton in Garden City, Kidlington, who purchased pumps to try to keep sewage out of his and his elderly neighbour's home, but they were not enough; Colin Fletcher in Bladon, who had sewage flood into his garden in September and still awaits a repair from Thames Water; Ros Frangopoulus in Chesterton, who saw sewage lap against her house walls and was left with faeces and toilet paper in her garden when the water receded; and Martin Johnson in Yarnton, who could not use his toilet as it routinely overflowed into his home with sewage and now has a tanker stationed next to his house, loudly pumping 24/7 while Thames Water takes months to agree a sewer repair.

In short, we have a company that pollutes our rivers and waterways and the homes and gardens of its customers, while all the time rewarding its executives handsomely and spending an increasing share of billpayers' money to service excessive debt. The Prime Minister told me that his Government would fix this mess, but I regret that the Water (Special Measures) Act does not go nearly far enough. We need a powerful, effective and public-interested clean water authority to clean up the water companies' act.

6.27 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for bringing this debate to the House. I thought it might be helpful to give some context to the debate; it does not start with the last Conservative Government's 14 years of failure, which we have heard so much about. I want to talk about the 1980s, when—gripped by ideological fervour rather than the national interest—the Thatcher and Major Governments set off on a sales binge of our strategic assets and infrastructure. All these years later, that has left us almost uniquely exposed among the G7 to global events.

Only two weeks ago, this Government recalled Parliament to save British Steel, a vital strategic asset—not just for our economy, but for our security and defence. The Conservatives fragmented British Rail, which this Government are now taking back into public control piece by piece. Most relevant to today's debate, they privatised our water, not into a market of competing firms but into private monopolies, shielded from scrutiny and driven by dividends. In selling off the family silver, those Governments wreaked havoc on our public services. To be generous to them, at least they had a vision, which is more than can be said about the last 14 years of the Conservatives. For those 14 years, the Conservatives were asleep at the wheel, and sadly for five of those years, the Lib Dems were snoring away quite happily in the passenger seat. While raw sewage poured into our rivers, the Lib Dems and the Conservatives allowed cash to pour into the pockets of the wealthy through shareholder payouts and executive bonuses. While the Environment Agency cried out for resources, the Conservatives and the Lib Dems cut its funding by half. That was into the River Wye, the River Etherow, the River Noe, the River Derwent and Blackbrook, and equates to a sewage spill every five hours. That is a damning indictment of the failures of successive Governments.

As a consequence, just before the election, we in High Peak saw sewage pumped into our rivers 1,653 times.

By contrast, this Labour Government have passed the Water (Special Measures) Act, which introduced criminal liability for company executives who obstruct investigations. We have banned their bonuses, and we have given regulators the power to recover the costs of enforcement, ensuring that polluters, not taxpayers, foot the bill. We have mandated real-time public reporting of sewage spills. That is only the start. We know that wider reform is needed, and that is why we have launched the largest review of the water sector since privatisation. We know the size of the challenge to halt the decline, and we are the only party with a serious plan to do so.

6.30 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): In West Dorset, we are proud of our natural environment, but that pride is undermined by the relentless dumping of raw sewage into our waterways. In 2024, there were 4,196 sewage spills in West Dorset. Across our rivers and coastlines, that added up to more than 48,000 hours of raw sewage discharge. In 2019, just four of the 36 monitored water bodies in West Dorset were rated as having a good ecological status. While that all happened, water company executives paid themselves £51 million in pay and bonuses, and it is our communities who pay the price.

[Edward Morello]

West Dorset's economy relies heavily on tourism. In 2022, tourism brought in more than £300 million to our local area, supporting more than 5,200 jobs.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Chichester harbour in my constituency is the largest recreational boating harbour in Europe, but the damage being done to its ecosystem is stark. A recent study by the Clean Harbours Partnership found 105 pharmaceuticals, pesticides and recreational drugs in the water, with the amounts going up 100 times directly after a sewage spill. Does my hon. Friend agree that tourism is incredibly important for areas such as his and mine, and that therefore we must have clean water?

Edward Morello: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, those 5,200 jobs in West Dorset represent hundreds of families who depend on visitors choosing to come to Lyme Regis, West Bay, Burton Bradstock, Abbotsbury and any of the other numerous beautiful towns and villages that we have. How can those visitors do that with confidence when there is a real risk that they will arrive to find sewage warnings at the beach, and when residents and tourists alike have to check an app to see whether the water is safe to swim in?

In West Dorset, we are lucky to have some of the UK's rare chalk streams. Some have been mentioned already, and we have the River Piddle, the River Frome, Wraxall brook and the West Compton stream. They are home to delicate ecosystems and species such as the Atlantic salmon, which is in worrying decline. As it stands, even when new homes are built near these rivers, water companies do not have to be formally consulted. Making water companies statutory consultees on new housing developments is basic common sense. It would mean proper planning, proper accountability and the chance to avoid even more pressure on an already failing network.

The Liberal Democrats have been clear: we want stronger rules and tougher enforcement, and we want water companies to take responsibility and reinvest in the communities they have neglected. We are calling for the introduction of the blue flag status for rivers and chalk streams, just as we have it for our best beaches. That would mean clear standards of cleanliness, proper testing and consequences when companies fall short. It would also help the public to understand when a river is clean and safe, and not just when it has been tested. We also welcome the speeding ticket fines that the Government have introduced, with automatic penalties when water companies break the rules, but those fines need to be ringfenced to go straight back into the communities affected, such as in West Dorset, to fix the infrastructure, restore habitats and protect the public. We need action, we need proper regulation and we need a Government who will support rural communities.

6.33 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his opening remarks and the speed with which our Government are implementing these vital changes. It is welcome to have an opportunity to speak again on an issue that matters to me and my constituents in North West Leicestershire.

Sewage and pollution feature in many discussions on the doorstep, and this issue was the subject of one of my personal pledges to my community. It will continue to be so until the improvements from the Water (Special Measures) Act are felt. In my community, I regularly check in with those who have been adversely affected by sewage outflows, and I know how much it impacts on them day to day.

I also know how long it has taken for some of the issues to be resolved. For example, a sewage-related case in my constituency recently ended with Severn Trent offering an enforcement undertaking and giving the Trent Rivers Trust £600,000. That will support the restoration of the habitat and the natural environment, but it took two years to reach an outcome from such a significant spill—which is not really surprising, because on the watch of the coalition Government the Environment Agency's budget had been cut in half since 2010, leaving the agency without the necessary tools and funding to fight the skyrocketing sewage discharges. My constituents are angry, and they have every right to be.

I have said this before in the House, and I will say it again. In 2023, sewage poured into our waterways in North West Leicestershire for 15,000 hours—a 54% increase on the previous year. What a legacy; and still the Liberal Democrats voted against the Water (Special Measures) Act, which will provide the largest investment in water infrastructure in history, ban unfair bonuses to polluting water bosses, and help to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas.

Labour is the party that is fixing this mess. I was proud to serve on the Committee considering the Water (Special Measures) Bill and even prouder to vote for the Bill—and it is just the start. Our Government commissioned Sir Jon Cunliffe to undertake a review of the water sector, and if Members are quick, they can get their responses in by tonight. In a statement that he made after being asked to undertake the review, Sir Jon said that in his first job in the civil service, 45 years ago, he had worked on the issue of the industrial pollution of water, at a time when the UK was generally regarded as “the dirty man of Europe”.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I am a neighbour of my hon. Friend. She will know that Severn Trent received an £18 million reward for the quality of its PR19 plan, but in its “Water Quality Report 2025”, Surfers Against Sewage says that it failed to meet its targets every year in that period. Despite that, it has been awarded £93 million for its PR24 plan. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital for Severn Trent, which serves both our constituencies, to be held to account properly in the PR24 period?

Amanda Hack: As my hon. Friend says, Severn Trent serves both our communities, and yes, it must do its bit to clean up our waterways.

I was a child of the 1980s, although I know my hon. Friend cannot believe that. I grew up by the seaside, and I remember the impact that our polluted seas had on our local community. I saw the changes that a clean-up made, but we are back to that place again, where families cannot enjoy the seaside or the waterways. Sadly, after 14 years our communities are devastated by the quality of their water. I was therefore proud to vote for a Bill that would enable criminal charges to be made against persistent lawbreakers and introduce severe and automatic

finer for offences. I was proud to vote for the independent monitoring of every outlet, ensuring that there would be an unprecedented level of transparency, so that the public could hold water company bosses to account. That is the difference that a Labour Government can make, and I will support our amendment.

6.37 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): I am pleased to be able to bring the House's attention to my constituents' concern about the continuing discharge of raw sewage into our local seas and other bodies of water. In my constituency, we saw 529 such discharges in 2024 from just 14 storm overflow points. These incidents continued for a combined duration of over 6,200 hours. That is simply not acceptable. It poses a serious threat not only to public health and the environment but to our local tourism and marine economy, on which so many of my constituents depend. We must act decisively to improve our ageing water infrastructure, enforce stricter regulations and demand transparency from our water companies, from Ofwat and from the Environment Agency.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The hon. Lady has mentioned Ofwat. Last August, it recommended penalties for four water companies amounting to £168 million, but so far it has not collected one penny. Does she agree that Ofwat needs to be scrapped?

Alison Griffiths: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's diagnosis, but I do agree that the fines need to be collected and distributed.

The other issues that have been identified in my constituency—I imagine that they are wider issues, too—are illegal misconnections and cowboy builders, which we must crack down on. Without addressing those issues, we will not get the results that we need, and constituents need to know what is being done to stop them.

Since being elected, I have had constructive engagement with Southern Water and the Environment Agency's local team and head office. Having visited Ford wastewater treatment works and done a shift with the misconnections team in Bognor Regis, I know that work is being done to upgrade the network, but this issue requires a strategic, cross-agency approach—one that considers the serious impact of the Government's continued pursuit of house building on our floodplains on flood resilience and sewage discharges. When schools in my constituency are taking children to the beach and being told that they cannot swim in the sea, it is not just disappointing; it is disgraceful. It is not the legacy that we want to leave for the next generation—we owe them better.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions.

6.41 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I am delighted to speak on the issue of how we can fix our broken water and sewerage sector, and get serious about cleaning up our rivers and lakes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this debate.

My constituency of Witney, in west Oxfordshire, has borne the brunt of the sewage scandal. Many beautiful rivers flow through it, and the Thames bisects it. We have the Windrush and the Evenlode, Shell brook to the north, and the Ock to the south. They are all heavily and frequently polluted.

I welcome the calls from colleagues to introduce a new blue flag status so that we can guarantee that a river is clean enough to swim in. That would help to restore people's confidence in swimming, and the bathing place in Witney would be a fantastic example. It is just north of Early's mill, where generations of people have spent their summer swimming but no longer do so.

We know what a car crash our sewerage network is, thanks to the many campaigners who have gone to so much trouble in their own time, and often using their own money, to bring this issue to our attention. At the top of the star is WASP—Windrush Against Sewage Pollution—which is run by Professor Peter Hammond, Ash Smith, Vaughan Lewis and Geoff Tombs, who have worked tirelessly for the last five years to highlight what has gone wrong. I thank them and all the other citizen scientists in my constituency and beyond, who have done so much to bring this issue to national attention. We owe them all a huge debt of gratitude.

I will focus on failures of regulation—specifically, Ofwat's failures. Ofwat is responsible for holding water companies accountable against the terms of their operating licences. DEFRA has oversight of Ofwat, sets the policy framework and provides strategic guidance to Ofwat on key environmental and social policies. As many Members have said, Ofwat is clearly failing on pollution. The Environment Agency's own data shows that Thames Water discharged raw sewage for almost 300,000 hours in 2024—up by almost 50% on the 196,000 hours in 2023. That is well known.

Ofwat is also failing to enforce financial viability. Just like every other water company in the country, Thames Water, which serves my constituency, has to have two investment grade credit ratings, but it has not done so for nearly a year. It has been beaten with limp celery, but that is about it. It has £19 billion of debt and is quite possibly heading towards £23 billion of debt, and it has cash flows of just £1.2 billion. That obviously makes no financial sense, yet Thames Water is allowed to breach the rule with impunity. I have no doubt that other water companies, and companies in other sectors, take note of what Thames Water has been allowed to do and say, "We, too, can cross that line in water and other regulated sectors." How is that good news? It introduces a moral hazard that does enormous damage to our country. Who is ultimately paying the cost of all this debt, and the enormous interest and advisory fees that go with it? Of course, it is the bill payers.

Ofwat fails to provide value for money. As per the Water Industry Act 1991, it has a statutory duty "to protect the interests of consumers" and "to promote economy and efficiency" on the part of water companies. As WASP's recently published note on water companies' capital project costs states, the costs that companies are proposing are extraordinary. In some cases, they are almost an order of magnitude higher than those in comparator companies in countries such as the USA and Denmark. Why is this, and why is it being allowed to happen?

[Charlie Maynard]

Why are our costs so much greater? Is it because our regulatory capital value pricing model is based on asset values, and therefore gives an incentive to water companies to boost their asset bases? They do this through extraordinarily long depreciation periods for network assets such as pipes, which were installed 50 years ago, but somehow have depreciation periods of 100 years and are leaking like sieves. It also gives them an incentive to pour really expensive concrete. Why is it that something built over here costs eight times the price in Denmark? Why has, say, the Oxford sewage treatment works gone from £40 million to more than £400 million in planned spend in the last four years? What sort of inflation is that?

Ofwat fails to provide fair pricing. Water companies have a requirement to demonstrate fairness, transparency and affordability to customers, which, again, Ofwat is supposed to uphold. Water companies have been allowed to hike bills this year—in the case of Thames Water, by 31%, although some of my constituents have come to me and said they have received increases of 50%, 70% or even more than 90%—and what are bill payers getting for that? This is not fair when more than a quarter of the bills in Thames Water's case are just paying the interest—not paying down the debt, but just paying the interest. Again, Ofwat is continuing to allow the pockets of water company creditors to be lined at the expense of ordinary households.

Ofwat fails to be awake. It has a responsibility—bear with me on this one—for tracking who are the ultimate controllers of the water companies. That should be pretty simple; there are not many of them. In Thames Water's case, it is taking wilful ignorance to an extreme of utterly determined ignorance. Last May, Thames Water's largest shareholder, OMERS, wrote its stake in Thames Water down to zero and pulled its directors off the board. This has been widely reported in the press—it is not secret—yet I got a letter from Ofwat last month confirming that it believes OMERS is still the ultimate controller of the company. Why is Ofwat ignoring this, and why does it matter? Being the ultimate controller of the company means it has certain responsibilities. Those responsibilities are just being ignored, and Ofwat, which is exactly what is supposed to be holding the company to account, is hiding under a stone somewhere. It needs to stop doing this.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My hon. Friend says that Ofwat has failed to regulate the water system effectively, and is failing on environmental, public health and financial interests. In my constituency, Wessex Water leaked sewage for over 400,000 hours last year alone. Does he agree that the water regulator should be replaced with a clean water authority, which would bring together the environmental and financial regulation of water companies?

Charlie Maynard: I thank my hon. Friend, and, yes, I absolutely do.

Ofwat is also failing to innovate. It appears to do little, if anything, to push companies to do this. This is so critical because, if we are going to increase capacity in sewage treatment works, there are many better ways of doing so. There is a host of new technologies out

there from leak detection, pipeline monitoring and predictive maintenance equipment to trenchless pipe repair and pressure management technologies. Yet I have heard from firms in my constituency that it is easier to sell sewer technology solutions in the US and Europe than in the UK. This is where the issues of the dire state of water companies' finances and the sewage scandal intersect, because companies cannot make basic repairs, let alone properly innovate and improve, when so much of their revenue is going straight out of the door in interest payments.

The previous Government have a lot to answer for. It was on their watch that dumping sewage in our rivers and lakes reached record levels, as water companies piled up billions in debt. All the while, bosses rewarded themselves with generous bonuses for mismanagement and failure on so many levels. Many people who work so hard in those companies suffered under that mismanagement.

There is only so much point in looking backwards. What I am appalled by is that the new Government, who came into power with promises to get tough with the water companies and sort out the scandal, have so far shown themselves to be about as tough as Ofwat. The Water (Special Measures) Act—by the way, I say to the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) that it was not voted on by us—was, well, just about nothing. Government Members and Conservative Members rejected a whole host of basic common sense steps, proposed as amendments, which could have made the legislation genuinely impactful. I will give some examples.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I would just like to suggest that the hon. Gentleman bring his remarks to a close rather than give us some examples, because we want to hear from the Minister. He has 30 seconds at most.

Charlie Maynard: I will make that three. Thank you very much, and over to you.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Over to her. [Laughter.] I call the Minister.

6.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Thank you so much, Madam Deputy Speaker, and can I say that you are doing an incredibly awesome job in the Chair?

I would like to thank—if I can call him this—my hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for bringing forward this debate from the Liberal Democrats. I am really glad to have this opportunity to close this important debate. I pay tribute, if I may, to all environmental groups, all citizen scientists, and all those involved in campaigning on this important issue up and down the country. I would also like to pay tribute to and thank the people who work in the water industry; the people who have to go out and deal with sewage overflows, working on the frontline and sometimes facing appalling levels of abuse for doing the job they do.

I welcome the engagement we have had from across the House on the Independent Water Commission. As we have heard, the sewage spilling into our rivers, lakes

and seas is a national disgrace. It is the result of years of under-investment by the Conservatives. They left us with crumbling water infrastructure and a broken water system. Instead of fixing our water system, they let water companies use customers' money to pay out unjustified bonuses to their polluting bosses and shareholders. We will never let that happen. This Labour Government are turning the tide on sewage once and for all. Those are not just words. In this debate, we set out exactly how we will do that. Within days of coming to office, we ringfenced money earmarked for investment in water infrastructure so it cannot be diverted for bonuses or dividends. Where the money is not spent, it will be returned to customers.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): The Minister will remember that I recently raised with her the concerns of Staffordshire Wildlife Trust regarding the fines issued to Severn Trent Water in 2024 for its huge sewage leak in Strongford in my constituency. Does she agree with me that the Water (Special Measures) Act will make water companies pay for the damage they have caused, and that it is just the start of this Government's work to clean up our waterways?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is quite right: the Water (Special Measures) Act is a landmark piece of legislation, but it is just the start of what we want to achieve. It will give Ofwat new powers to ban unfair bonuses. It will introduce stricter penalties, including imprisonment. It will enable the regulator to impose automatic and severe fines for wrongdoing, and it will involve cost recovery and the mandatory reporting of emergency overflows.

But, Madam Deputy Speaker, we do not just want to give you that; we are going to give you so much more—more and more. We are going to go even further with the Independent Water Commission, because, as we heard from hon. Members across the House, that is not the extent of the Government's ambition. Sir Jon Cunliffe is currently undertaking the biggest review of the water sector since privatisation. He will be making recommendations to deliver long-term benefits, restore water bodies to good health, provide a reliable and efficient supply of water in a changing climate, and, ultimately, serve both customers and the environment. The independent commission will look to reset the water industry and tackle systemic issues to fundamentally transform the sector. The recommendations will form the basis of further legislation—I am already anticipating the amendments from the Liberal Democrats—to attract the long-term investment to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good.

In addition to such measures, Ofwat has announced £104 billion of private sector investment in the water sector over the next five years to build and upgrade water infrastructure in every region of the country, cutting sewage spills, improving water quality and giving us a reliable future water supply. It will also create tens of thousands of jobs around the country, help us to build our 1.5 million homes, support major infrastructure projects and power new industries. This is regional economic growth in action—the cornerstone of our plan for change.

I turn now to the contributions from my hon. Friends. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley), who is a champion in her community and has

raised with me her concerns around both flooding and water pollution, highlighted the importance of the “polluter pays” principle and how that money can be returned through to the Environment Agency. Of course, I share her love of SUDS.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for her work on the Water (Special Measures) Act and for the kind and persistent way she has lobbied me about the River Wye—she always lobbies so gently, Madam Deputy Speaker, with a smile on her face every time she sees me. That is why I was so pleased that DEFRA and the Welsh Government were able to give £1 million for research to understand pollution and the other pressures and to develop a plan to tackle the issues in the Wye catchment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), who is somewhere in the Chamber—[*Interruption.*] There he is! He is testing my eyesight this evening. The Minister for Nature, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), will be happy to visit his constituency to look at all the work he is doing up there to clean up in his area.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) is sadly not in her place—

Joy Morrissey: I'm right here!

Emma Hardy: Oh, there she is. Again, this is testing my eyesight—it is confusing me. I hope that the hon. Lady has seen and welcomed the changes we are introducing around bathing waters and the definition of a bather, and how that definition could also people involved in water sports. That is something she might be interested in.

Gideon Amos: Will the Minister give way?

Emma Hardy: I will not, only because I have just three minutes left.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) again for his support of the Water (Special Measures) Act and the commission, and for highlighting the impact that pollution has on wildlife and the importance of cleaning up our rivers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove), too, for her support for the Act. She is right to highlight the awful inheritance we received and the action we have taken.

My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) talked about the Wave Project, which provides mental health support. I am really keen to hear about that project, and I commend everyone involved for their work. It sounds like a wonderful—[Hon. MEMBERS: “He's not here; he can't hear you!”] He will hear me by osmosis.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce) highlighted that cuts have consequences, and indeed they do. Slashing the Environment Agency's budget by half certainly has had a consequence. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) again for her work and support on the Water (Special Measures) Act and for championing those cleaning up our water. Of course, I also love being by the seaside, which is why I have to say how delighted I am that our mayoral candidate for Hull and East Yorkshire is championing a plan to provide free bus services to coastal areas during the summer holidays so that people can enjoy the countryside—vote Labour.

[Emma Hardy]

We have reset the water sector. We are stopping the sewage scandal and transforming the water industry from one of decline to one of opportunity. We are seizing the opportunity to restore national pride in our rivers, lakes and seas and to secure a reliable water future supply for all. We are delivering our plan for change to create a better future for our country.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 77, Noes 302.

Division No. 172]

[6.58 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	MacCleary, James
Amos, Gideon	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Anderson, Lee	Maguire, Helen
Aquarone, Steff	Mathew, Brian
Babarinde, Josh	Maynard, Charlie
Bennett, Alison	Medi, Llinos
Berry, Siân	van Mierlo, Freddie
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Miller, Calum
Cane, Charlotte	Milne, John
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Mohamed, Iqbal
Chadwick, David	Moran, Layla
Chamberlain, Wendy	Morello, Edward
Chambers, Dr Danny	Morgan, Helen
Chowns, Ellie	Morrison, Mr Tom
Coghlan, Chris	Munt, Tessa
Collins, Victoria	Murray, Susan
Cooper, Daisy	Olney, Sarah
Dance, Adam	Perteghella, Manuela
Darling, Steve	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Davey, rh Ed	Ramsay, Adrian
Davies, Ann	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Denyer, Carla	Roome, Ian
Dyke, Sarah	Sabine, Anna
Farron, Tim	Savage, Dr Roz
Foord, Richard	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Franklin, Zöe	Shannon, Jim
George, Andrew	Slade, Vikki
Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Anna Sabine</i>)	Smart, Lisa
Glover, Olly	Sollom, Ian
Goldman, Marie	Stone, Jamie
Gordon, Tom	Taylor, Luke
Green, Sarah	Thomas, Cameron
Harding, Monica	Voaden, Caroline
Heylings, Pippa	Wilkinson, Max
Hobhouse, Wera	Wilson, Munira
Hussain, Mr Adnan	Wrigley, Martin
Jardine, Christine	Young, Claire
Jarvis, Liz	
Jones, Clive	
Lake, Ben	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Will Forster and
Bobby Dean

NOES

Abbott, Jack	Asato, Jess
Akehurst, Luke	Asser, James
Aldridge, Dan	Athwal, Jas
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Atkinson, Catherine
Alexander, rh Heidi	Atkinson, Lewis
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Bailey, Mr Calvin
Ali, Rushanara	Bailey, Olivia
Anderson, Callum	Baker, Alex
Anderson, Fleur	Ballinger, Alex
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Bance, Antonia
Arthur, Dr Scott	Barker, Paula

Barron, Lee	Eshalomi, Florence
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Esterson, Bill
Baxter, Johanna	Evans, Chris
Beavers, Lorraine	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Bell, Torsten	Falconer, Mr Hamish
Benn, rh Hilary	Farnsworth, Linsey
Betts, Mr Clive	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Billington, Ms Polly	Ferguson, Mark
Blake, Olivia	Fleet, Natalie
Blake, Rachel	Footy, Emma
Bloore, Chris	Fookes, Catherine
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Foster, Mr Paul
Bonavia, Kevin	Foxcroft, Vicky
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Foy, Mary Kelly
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Francis, Daniel
Brickell, Phil	Frith, Mr James
Buckley, Julia	Gardiner, Barry
Burgon, Richard	Gardner, Dr Allison
Burton-Sampson, David	Gelder, Anna
Byrne, Ian	Gemmell, Alan
Byrne, rh Liam	Gilbert, Tracy
Caliskan, Nesil	Gill, Preet Kaur
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Glindon, Mary
Campbell, Irene	Goldsborough, Ben
Campbell, Juliet	Gosling, Jodie
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Gould, Georgia
Carden, Dan	Grady, John
Carling, Sam	Greenwood, Lilian
Carns, Al	Griffith, Dame Nia
Charalambous, Bambos	Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Charters, Mr Luke	Hack, Amanda
Coleman, Ben	Hall, Sarah
Collier, Jacob	Hamilton, Fabian
Collinge, Lizzi	Hardy, Emma
Collins, Tom	Harris, Carolyn
Conlon, Liam	Hatton, Lloyd
Coombes, Sarah	Hayes, Helen
Cooper, Andrew	Hayes, Tom
Costigan, Deirdre	Hazelgrove, Claire
Cox, Pam	Hillier, Dame Meg
Coyle, Neil	Hinchliff, Chris
Creagh, Mary	Hinder, Jonathan
Creasy, Ms Stella	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Curtis, Chris	Hopkins, Rachel
Daby, Janet	Hughes, Claire
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Hume, Alison
Dalton, Ashley	Huq, Dr Rupa
Darlington, Emily	Hurley, Patrick
Davies, Jonathan	Hussain, Imran
Davies, Paul	Ingham, Leigh
Davies, Shaun	Irons, Natasha
Davies-Jones, Alex	Jogee, Adam
De Cordova, Marsha	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Dean, Josh	Johnson, Kim
Dearden, Kate	Jones, rh Darren
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Jones, Ruth
Dickson, Jim	Jones, Sarah
Dixon, Anna	Josan, Gurinder Singh
Dodds, rh Anneliese	Joseph, Sojan
Doughty, Stephen	Juss, Warinder
Dowd, Peter	Kane, Chris
Downie, Graeme	Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> <i>by Chris Elmore</i>)
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Kendall, rh Liz
Eagle, Dame Angela	Khan, Naushabah
Eccles, Cat	Kinnock, Stephen
Edwards, Lauren	Kirkham, Jayne
Edwards, Sarah	Kitchen, Gen
Efford, Clive	Kumar, Sonia
Egan, Damien	Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Ellis, Maya	Lamb, Peter
Elmore, Chris	
Entwistle, Kirith	

Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lowell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Poynton, Gregor
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Rhodes, Martin
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave

Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggum, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote*
cast by Adam Jogee)
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Christian Wakeford and
Gerald Jones

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
 That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 69.

Division No. 173]

[7.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil

Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah

Hamilton, Fabian
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame

Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Poynton, Gregor
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Rhodes, Martin
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred

Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul

Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gerald Jones and
Christian Wakeford

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bennett, Alison
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Dyke, Sarah
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Franklin, Zöe
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Harding, Monica
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jones, Clive
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus

Maguire, Helen
 Mathew, Brian
 Maynard, Charlie
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Olney, Sarah
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Roome, Ian
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Sollom, Ian
 Stone, Jamie
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Bobby Dean and
Mr Will Forster

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House recognises that the Government inherited a broken water system, with record levels of sewage being pumped into waterways; welcomes the Government's rapid delivery of its promise to put water companies under tough special measures through the landmark Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which has introduced new powers to ban the payment of unfair bonuses to water bosses who fail to protect the environment and to bring tough criminal charges against them if they break the law; supports

the Government's work to secure over £100 billion of private sector investment to upgrade the crumbling sewage infrastructure; and backs the largest review of the water sector since privatisation, aimed at tackling inherited systemic issues in order to clean up UK rivers, lakes and seas for good.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At Prime Minister's questions earlier, the Leader of the Opposition said that Anas Sarwar, the Scottish Labour leader "was whipping his MSPs to get male rapists into women's prisons". That is categorically and utterly untrue. Scottish Labour MSPs repeatedly called for the Scottish Government to ensure the safety of women prisoners. Please can you advise me how I can ensure that the Leader of the Opposition corrects the record and withdraws this disgraceful slur?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. He will know that Members are responsible for the accuracy of their remarks in this Chamber. He has none the less raised his concerns and I am sure they will have been heard on the Opposition Benches. If the Leader of the Opposition wishes to correct the record, there are mechanisms available for her to do so.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Fair Dealing Obligations (Pigs) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 13 March, be approved.—*(Martin McChuskey.)*

Question agreed to.

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

LEGAL AID AND ADVICE

That the draft Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (Legal Aid: Domestic Abuse) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 13 March, be approved.—*(Martin McChuskey.)*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Windsor Post Office

7.25 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): Further to my online petition, which received 1,594 signatures, I rise to present this paper petition on behalf of the residents of Windsor. I thank everybody who signed my petition to save Windsor post office, and in particular my constituent Sue Pendry for her help and campaigning on this issue.

While progress on a franchising deal is promising, it is subject to Government funding and may yet see the branch moved up to a mile away. Windsor cannot afford to lose this busy branch when the town centre already faces jacked-up parking charges, increased business taxes and, frankly, the poor state of the public realm.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the Post Office to ensure that the Peascod Street branch of the Post Office in central Windsor remains open.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Windsor, Declares that the popular Peascod Street branch of the Post Office in central Windsor has been earmarked for potential closure, which would take away vital mail, travel, driving, identity and money services from the town centre; notes that this is at a time when the town centre faces multiple challenges, including increased car parking charges, the state of the public realm and increased business taxes; and further notes that 1,402 people have signed an online petition on this matter.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the Post Office to ensure that the Peascod Street branch of the Post Office in central Windsor remains open.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003063]

Pension Funds

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

7.27 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Pension funds hold not just financial value but moral weight. How we treat our pensioners, and how we invest in the future of the hard-working people of this country, says everything about the kind of society we are. I want to bring to the House's attention one of the most concerning injustices faced by thousands of former HSBC employees, particularly women: the use of an outdated, punitive policy known as pension clawback.

I support the Midland Clawback Campaign, which seeks justice for the 51,000 affected members of the Midland bank pension scheme, now administered by HSBC, who were misled about the nature of their retirement income and are being short-changed as a result. Unlike most other institutions, which phased out clawback in the 1980s, HSBC continues to enforce it in its most punitive form. Clawback was originally introduced in 1948 to offset national insurance costs when the state pension was created. Midland bank introduced clawback to its pension scheme in 1975 as a cost-saving measure.

Former employees were told that they would receive a defined-benefit pension at two thirds of their final salary, in addition to their state pension. Instead, when they reached state pension age, HSBC began deducting a portion of their occupational pension, calling it a "state deduction".

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I have a constituent who has worked for 44 years at Midland bank and HSBC. They were promised a pension of two thirds of their final salary, but they now face a 16% cut—that is over £1,700 per annum—because of the so-called state deduction. They were never told that the scheme was integrated, and even private pension reviews failed to explain it. Does the hon. Member agree that that lack of transparency is unacceptable and that workers like my constituent deserve answers?

Manuela Perteghella: I fully agree. The term itself is misleading. The money is not being taken by the state; it actually goes back to HSBC. Had it been labelled properly, as an integrated pension deduction, many people would have asked questions much earlier.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Sue, a constituent of mine, is trying to obtain her full HSBC pension, but because of a clawback deduction by her former employer that has no alignment with the salary she earned, she is losing out on £244 each month. That is unfair and has plunged many pensioners—primarily women—into poverty. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister must seriously consider what support can be provided for people like Sue, who have been left with significant financial difficulties?

Manuela Perteghella: Absolutely. I will ask the Minister to take action later in my remarks.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My constituents Phil and Ann have contacted me about the so-called clawback policy, which would

see them lose about £2,000 a year from their pensions when they reach state pension age. They, like many former employees, believe that this is an unfair and morally questionable approach. Does the hon. Lady agree that that cannot be the right approach and that it must be reconsidered?

Manuela Perteghella: Yes. The hon. Member makes a good point.

The lack of transparency allowed this policy to persist under the radar. The formula used is regressive and unfair. For a start, the deduction is based on the full state pension rate one year before retirement, not on salary or actual state pension received. It is then divided by 80 and multiplied by years worked. The result? The longer someone worked and the less they earned, the more they lose. That injustice falls heaviest on women.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Former Midland bank and HSBC workers who had a defined-benefit pension saw deductions from their pension entitlement at state pension age, to take account of the payment of the state pension. Those deductions had no link to salary or pension received. Lower-earning staff members, mostly women, were particularly affected, including my constituent Angela Blockwell. Does the hon. Member agree that that inequality must finally be recognised and that pension clawbacks must be abolished for all?

Manuela Perteghella: Yes, the practice is a relic from the past and needs to be abolished.

Women have historically occupied lower-paid roles at Midland bank and HSBC. They have taken career breaks to care for children or elderly parents, or have been placed on new contracts with clawback attached—often without being told the implications for their pension rights. HSBC claims that there is no discrimination because the policy applies to all, but indirect discrimination is defined as a policy that appears neutral but disproportionately harms a particular group.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): A female constituent of mine who has worked for HSBC UK for over 35 years has seen her pension reduced by approximately £850 a year because of a clawback clause that she was never properly informed about when she joined the bank's defined-benefit scheme. Does the hon. Member agree that HSBC needs to engage properly with the affected employees?

Manuela Perteghella: I thank the hon. Member for that valuable point. I have a message for HSBC later in my remarks.

Campaigners have presented robust evidence, including research by the University of Exeter, showing the disproportionate impact on women and low-paid staff. One of the recommendations in the University of Exeter report is for policymakers—us—to consider the suitability of the equal pay provisions that have not been available to members of the post-1974 Midland bank pension scheme, despite evidence of the disproportionate impact on women. When campaigners turned to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Government Equalities

Office, they were passed from pillar to post. No one took responsibility; no one acted. Equality law does not cover pensions.

Let us not forget that HSBC's pension fund currently stands at £4.1 billion in surplus after liabilities, but the estimated cost of ending clawback is just £450 million. HSBC has the resources; what it lacks is the will.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): My Wellington constituent, Mike, who is a former Midland bank employee, has seen his pension go down in value by 13% because of the failure of HSBC to honour its obligations. He tells me that the state—in other words, the taxpayer—will be making up some of his income as a result. Given the level of profit that my hon. Friend has revealed, is it not totally wrong that the taxpayer is bearing the burden of the obligation that the corporate giant should be paying itself?

Manuela Perteghella: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is unfair and we need to ensure that HSBC is accountable.

In correspondence with MPs, the bank states that because clawback is lawful, its policy is acceptable, but I say: lawful does not mean just. This Parliament has a duty to act when the law permits injustice. We need to modernise pension legislation to ensure that it reflects today's values of fairness, transparency and equality. After the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—pension injustice, we must be alert to further pension scandals.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. The fact that there are so many hon. Members in the Chamber is an indication of the interest that she has created through her Adjournment debate, so well done to her. There were an estimated 12.95 million state pensioners in Great Britain in 2024-25. As the hon. Lady has said, the WASPI women have been hard done by because of Government decisions made without consideration. There is an onus on all of us in this House to ensure that pension funds are profitable and sustainable. Does the hon. Lady agree that in tandem with enforcing work-based pensions, we must ensure that state pensions can catch up, so that there will still be such a thing as state pensions for the 40-year-olds who are paying their national insurance today, believing that their state pension will be there for them when it comes to the time that they need it?

Manuela Perteghella: I thank the hon. Member for raising that important issue. Absolutely, we need to ensure that the Government have a long-term outlook, so that the young working British people of today will be able to retire on a comfortable pension.

We urgently need a full review of pension clawback practices. Many constituents have written to me about other unfair pension schemes, including former police officers and people on occupational pensions that are not protected from inflation.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Terry, one of my constituents, worked for a large American multinational company. As a consequence of the Pensions Act 1995,

he found his pre-1997 pension contributions decoupled from inflation. Because of the nature of inflation, his savings, which he now depends on, have been gradually eaten away and he finds himself in increasing levels of destitution. Will the Minister look at the issue with the seriousness that it requires? It cannot be right that pensioners in our country are suffering as a consequence of decisions made by multinational companies that remain hugely profitable. The issue has a particular geography because so many multinational companies were located in the south-east of England.

Manuela Perteghella: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. We need legal reform to ensure that pensions in payment are finally brought under the protection of equality law. We also need greater transparency and accountability from pension providers, especially those entrusted with the retirement futures of hard-working people. HSBC's clawback policy is discriminatory in its impact, misleading in its language and fundamentally unjust in its effect. I therefore urge the Minister to bring forward legislation to put an end to this outdated practice and to finally stand up for those whose voices have gone unheard for far too long. Clawback is just one part of a broken pension system; we must also ask where our pension funds are invested and what future we are buying with that money.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for laying out the case for change so well. She talks about the investments that pension funds are making. I worked for more than a decade in the investment industry, and many of my clients were big public pension funds. More recently, I served as a trustee of one of the largest public pension funds in the country. One of the things that pensioners contacted me about was where their money was going. They would ask, "Is it being used to fund fossil fuel extraction?" or "Is it being used to support some unsavoury regimes around the world?" Does my hon. Friend agree that pensioners should have more power to have a say over what goes on with their money?

Manuela Perteghella: I fully agree. It is really important that pensions reflect ethics and morality and that the people investing in them have a voice. It is no longer good enough to see pensions in isolation from sustainability, ethics or morality. Whether it is because of the way in which funds are clawed back from low-paid pensioners or the way in which they are funnelled into destructive, high-emission industries, the system is crying out for reform.

As we look ahead to COP30, billions of pounds of local government pension schemes are still invested in fossil fuels and in industries that drive deforestation, biodiversity loss and wildlife extinction. If we are to build a just and sustainable future, we must build a just and sustainable pension system that protects not only people in retirement, but the planet and generations to come.

7.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): Everyone deserves a secure retirement. For many, their occupational pension is an essential part of that. Having spent years paying into a

[Torsten Bell]

pension scheme, it matters to all of us that they get a decent pension out. It must be decent in the sense of being adequate for their needs and decent in terms of providing the benefits that they were promised.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) has secured this debate and spoken so well during it on a topic deeply relevant to all our constituents—after all, we are all either a pensioner or planning on becoming one at some point. I thank her and everyone else who has spoken. We have heard about a wide range of issues, relevant to different pension schemes and different pensioners. I will not comment in great detail on specific pension schemes, although I am sure that specific employers will have heard hon. Members' points this evening.

I will respond in more general terms to the points that the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon and others have raised. She raised the issue of integrated pension schemes, which are sometimes called clawback schemes. I appreciate that that type of scheme can be controversial, thanks to the change in the private pension income involved. All of us sympathise with anyone who expected a straightforward income increase when their state pension kicked in, only to find that things were much more complicated than that. I have read and listened to representations on this issue myself.

As with all defined benefit schemes, integrated schemes are required to pay out the full value of the promised pensions to each member, as set out in their scheme rules. That provides certainty, security and a base on which savers can build their retirement plans. Integrating an occupational pension scheme with the state pension was a core design of some schemes, and that has pros and cons. It used to be a common feature of final salary schemes, covering almost half of schemes, according to one survey from the early 2000s, although it is far less common today, partly for some of the reasons that the hon. Lady set out.

The original aim was to provide a smooth level of pension income throughout retirement that started before the state pension age was reached, with a higher amount of occupational pension paid before state pension age, followed by a reduction in the occupational pension when the member received their state pension. The amount of the reduction is required to be set out in the pension scheme rules, and it is therefore very important that the rules are clearly communicated to those involved, as my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) made clear.

While the aims of integrated pensions are clear, it would, of course, be a big shock to anyone to see their occupational pension reduced upon receiving the state pension if they had not expected it. It is therefore important for employees to understand the pension benefits they can get from their scheme, and the Government place great weight on the importance of that clear communication, without which no one can plan properly for the future.

All schemes are required by law to provide every member with basic information about the scheme, either before they join or very shortly afterwards. That includes an explanation of the contributions in the case of some of the schemes mentioned today, which were on the employer side only, but also how benefits were calculated—

exactly the integrated clawback mechanisms we are talking about this evening. If savers have not received clear communication in the form required by law, they must have avenues of redress. They can bring a complaint to their scheme's internal dispute procedure, but if that does not resolve the issue, the Pensions Ombudsman is there to act.

There have been some calls tonight for the Government to compel the withdrawal of integration arrangements—those calls have been common for some time, and I have heard them. I recognise some of the arguments being made, but I owe it to this House to be clear that we cannot retrospectively change the benefits schemes offered to their members. Any legislative change would affect all integrated schemes, risking the future of some that are less well funded. However, I do want to engage with the question of pension fairness, which so many Members from across the House have raised this evening. While the law is very clear that men and women must be treated equally within any scheme, I understand the points that have been raised about the effects of those scheme rules, which are felt very unequally indeed.

The inequality of pensions more broadly is a big issue for society, particularly for women and lower earners over the years. I want to celebrate some progress that has been made, but also recognise how much more there is to do. On progress, the new state pension introduced after 2016 by the previous Government has made a significant difference in closing the gap between the average amounts received weekly by men and by women, to equalise those amounts in practice. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the importance of the state pension—it is the bedrock of all of our pension savings—so that is progress that has been made. We have also seen significant progress on automatic enrolment, with 89% of eligible women now saving into a pension. That is a big change from the 2000s, when as few as 40% of women were saving into a pension pot.

However, there is much more to do. The gender pension gap, for which the Department for Work and Pensions now publishes figures the first time, is very large indeed. Some of that reflects some of the historical issues we have been discussing, but it also reflects our labour market. Women have lower employment rates, are much more likely to do part-time work, and are much more likely to be lower earners—for example, 3.9% of women work in low-paid work as opposed to 2.8% of men. Those underlying structural inequalities then manifest as pension inequality, which is one of the reasons why it is so important that reform of the state pension has moved towards a more equal treatment of women and men.

As for what the Government are doing about pension inequality, we will shortly set out a timeline for phase 2 of our pensions review, focusing on adequacy and, in particular, addressing some of these very important questions. Although people talk about pension adequacy on average across the whole population, it is very different for different groups, which is exactly why the pensions review will need to reflect on the questions raised. However, it also highlights the importance of some of the changes being brought through in the labour market by this Government, including through the Employment Rights Bill. That Bill will disproportionately benefit women, who are more often lower earners.

Turning to the question of indexation, some schemes do provide indexation above the legal minimum on a discretionary basis. Like the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), I sympathise with those members who had understood that they would receive ongoing discretionary increases, only to be let down. We take their concerns seriously; I have now met several groups of MPs on exactly this issue, and have asked the Department to work with the Pensions Regulator to understand why schemes are not making discretionary payments and to monitor trends.

Both trustees and employers need to think carefully about the effect of inflation on members' benefits—that is especially true on the back of the exceptional inflation in recent years. Pension scheme trustees, after all, have a fiduciary duty to scheme members—a duty they should apply when considering discretionary increases. That is directly relevant to recently announced reforms on the use of surpluses in defined benefit schemes, as several Members have raised. Those reforms will make it easier for individual schemes to make decisions that improve outcomes for sponsoring employers and members. That could include discretionary benefit increases, where trustees can consider the situation of those members who would benefit from such rises and whether the scheme has a history of making such payments. Trustees will, in negotiation with the employer, be responsible for determining how members may benefit from any release of surplus.

I thank Members who have contributed this evening, in particular the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon. We all benefit from the opportunity to address this important topic. As the Minister for Pensions, it is my priority to ensure that people who work hard can enjoy the retirement they are owed. That is what this Government will always do.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) asked whether pensioners might be given more control over where their pension funds are invested. That issue has also arisen recently in terms of whether pension funds can be invested in defence companies in the UK. Will the Minister comment on that?

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Member for the reminder to respond to that point. He will know that trustees already have a responsibility to invest in the interests of their members and that the law requires trustees of significant schemes—with more than 100 members—to set out a clear statement of their investment principles. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) mentioned some of the issues they will want to consider in that. That is how trustees provide clarity to their savers. There is also then scope for individuals, particularly in larger pension schemes on the defined contribution side, to make choices about where they invest their funds. We see that, for example, with the National Employment Savings Trust, the Government-backed pension scheme, where individuals make different choices on the grounds of ethical issues across the board, including defence, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord). I thank him for his intervention and for reminding me to come back on that point before concluding.

It is important that we offer people secure retirements. That is the job of this Government, it is my job as the Pensions Minister, and it is what our pensions review is focusing on doing. It is what this Government will always do.

Question put and agreed to.

7.51 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 23 April 2025

[SIR DESMOND SWAYNE *in the Chair*]

North Sea Oil and Gas Workers: Transitional Support

9.30 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transitional support for North Sea oil and gas workers.

I appreciate the chance to have this debate, Sir Desmond, because this is an incredibly important time for the oil and gas industry and those employed in and around oil and gas. I will lay out the context and where we are right now, and then talk about my key asks for the Government, given the current situation and people's worries about the direction of travel.

I want to start with a quote from the seventh carbon budget:

"As of 2021, direct employment in oil and gas in Aberdeen has declined by nearly one-third since 2015. Household disposable income has fallen and poverty has increased...Some estimates indicate that around 14,000 people in the region will need to have moved to other roles or sectors between 2022 and 2030."

That is such a stark comment from a well-respected organisation, which has produced an incredibly useful and informative report. It says that household disposable income has fallen and that poverty has increased, albeit not in line with the national average—everybody is feeling the pinch of the cost of living—but as a direct result of changes to the energy industry and the lack of pick-up in the renewables sector to compensate for that.

As a result of political uncertainty, the current situation and direction of travel, there is a real lack of confidence in the energy industry. We expect companies that have previously majored in oil and gas to fund a significant part of the renewables revolution. We expect them to put their money in and fund the offshore wind power that we will need. We expect their skilled workers to transfer into those industries. We are at the point now where we risk losing the significant edge that we have in skills, manufacturing capabilities and people. We risk losing that if the Government do not take action now to ensure that the transition is just and, importantly for this debate, managed properly.

As a result of the lack of confidence, final investment decisions by oil and gas companies, or companies working specifically in renewables and not so much in oil and gas, are being pushed back. Whether that is to do with their inability to get grid connections right now or the Government's changes to the energy profits levy and extension of the windfall tax—which, by the way, has been stopped in every other country that had such a tax—companies feel that the Government are not going the right way.

Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce's energy transition survey shows that political uncertainty and concern about the political direction of travel has gone from the seventh top worry to the top worry in just

two years. Whatever the Government think they might be doing, and whatever rhetoric they might use, the industry does not believe that they have quite got it right, so they need to change where they are going.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The hon. Lady speaks about the way in which other countries have ended their windfall tax, but does she accept that the basic rate of tax that was being applied by the previous Government to the oil and gas industry in the North sea was the lowest in the world, and that it is only with the windfall tax that it comes up to the global average?

Kirsty Blackman: I had concerns about the windfall tax in the first place. I thought that a windfall tax should be applied, but that it should have applied across the board to all those companies that made significant profits during covid, whether that was supermarkets, Amazon or oil and gas companies. Singling out the oil and gas industry was the wrong thing to do at the time. In terms of the comparative level of the tax, I do not know the answer, and I do not want to say something that is not right, but I felt that it was wrongly applied. A number of other companies made significant profits, and the oil and gas industry felt singled out, as though it was somehow different. I accept that it is different from other industries in a number of ways, but the levels of profit were not as high as they were in 2014, for example, and singling that industry out when supermarkets were making a much higher percentage profit than they had in previous years did not seem like the right thing to do.

I appreciate the Government's work on a skills passport for the industry. That is important, but there is no point having a skills passport if the jobs are not there. We have not seen the offshore wind industry increase at the pace we would like it to, and we cannot do all the work necessary to reduce the amount of oil and gas without those jobs for people to move to. In response to ET40, the 40th energy transition survey by the Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce, one company said that

"Forcing the end of oil and gas for our company before offshore wind is ready to replace the lost revenues"

is one of its biggest concerns. That is how a significant number of companies feel right now.

Companies are struggling to find people with the skills they need, whether in oil and gas or offshore renewables. The people who will be building offshore renewables will be working three-on, three-off shifts, in the same way that oil and gas workers do. It is really difficult to adjust to life on three-on, three-off shifts—it is not easy for workers to change their lives and ensure that someone is home looking after their kids if they have a family. Oil and gas workers have that transferability, because their lifestyle is already set up to do that.

We are at a tipping point. The risk is that these highly mobile, highly paid oil and gas workers will go abroad. The responses to the ET40 survey show that a significant percentage of these people are moving to postings abroad either within company or in other companies. Despite the massive disparities in disposable income, an unbelievable number of people who live in Aberdeen North have been on holiday to Dubai. The majority of Members in this room will not have many constituents who have spent holidays in Dubai, whereas I have

[Kirsty Blackman]

heaps, because they have that level of transferability and portability—they can up sticks and move to another country, because drilling is the same there. They might be doing it at a higher carbon cost and with fewer terms and conditions, but they are still getting a highly-paid job. They can uproot to do that, because they are used to moving around the world.

If we do not take control of the situation now, we will lose the skills we need to power the renewable future, which is incredibly concerning. One of the UK Government's founding missions is to grow the economy. We will not be able to grow the economy if we do not take advantage of this situation, and the time is now.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Member is making a very good speech, and I congratulate her on it. She talked about fabrication skills. We have those skills in my constituency, but they are ageing. There will come a time when these people retire, and then those skills could be lost.

Kirsty Blackman: We have a huge amount of work to do, particularly with young people. When I talked to Developing the Young Workforce North East recently, I was heartened to hear that a significant number of young people in north-east Scotland still want to go into engineering, which is incredibly important, whether that is in fabrication or not, because engineering is involved in all of it. I am worried that we will lose that, because the industry is ageing, and the same thing is happening in offshore oil and gas. People see that their uncle, cousin or grandad was made redundant in oil and gas, and they worry about going into engineering.

If young people are not excited and passionate about the future of renewables, we will not be able to build the amazing tech that we need to ensure that renewables deliver a profit and work commercially, so I am concerned about skills. One of the key things that the Government could do is ensure more UK content and fabrication. We have amazing fabrication works—not so much in Aberdeen, but around the north-east and the rest of Scotland and the UK. That is a point that I wanted to make: this is a significant problem not just for Aberdeen but for the rest of the UK, given that only 25% of the jobs in offshore oil and gas are in the north-east of Scotland.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as always. On fabrication, does she see the connection between the universities, colleges and education sector and the transition? There has been some excellent work on fabrication in Arbroath and Broughty Ferry and Dundee, but of course more can always be done.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree, and my hon. Friend would expect me to talk about the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University in my constituency. Along with North East Scotland college, they have been doing really important work as part of the Aberdeen city deal and the energy transition zone to ensure that we have skills for the future. Aberdeen council has created a significant number of jobs and things like foundation apprenticeships to encourage young people into the sector, but we need people to think about tech as well as make it. We have the right

ingredients, but we need to ensure that everybody has confidence in the commitments that are being made. That is where the gap is. I have spoken to the Minister about that, and I have no doubt that he is strongly committed to that, but my concern is that the industry does not believe that the Government are strongly committed to a just and managed transition.

About 12% to 17% of people in Aberdeen city are directly employed in oil and gas, and a significant number are indirectly employed, but there has been a massive reduction in jobs since 2014. We have recently seen an increase in offshore wind revenue, but there are 4,000 fewer jobs so something is going wrong. My key ask is that the Government listen to people and have a plan.

The world looks very different now from how it looked in July 2024. When the Government were elected, Donald Trump was not in the White House and we did not have the global uncertainty caused by that. Something like 20% of the liquefied natural gas that we import comes from the US, and we are involved in global trading markets for oil and gas, so the increase in global volatility means that we need to think more seriously about energy security. We have had to do that since Russia invaded Ukraine and since covid, but the situation is even more desperate now. To ensure energy security, we must take control of everything we can, and we must not rely as significantly on imports as we will if the Government maintain their current direction of travel, particularly given that we do not have gas storage and are basically using LNG ships as offshore floating storage.

My key ask is for the Government to listen to people. The Minister does go out and listen to people, but they are saying that the Government are not getting it right. They are perfectly happy with some of the rhetoric, but they are concerned that action will not follow. They do not yet trust the Government's commitment to a just and managed transition. Whatever the Government's views—whether they are committed to a just and managed transition or not—they need to ensure that people believe they are.

That is the gap, and my suggestion for dealing with it is in line with the North Sea Transition Taskforce's "Securing the Future of the Energy Transition in the North Sea" and Offshore Energies UK's most recent report: we must ensure that there is a kind of mission control, so that there is somebody in charge of this. I appreciate that the Minister, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland are talking about that and are willing to answer my questions, but nobody seems to be in control. There is no oversight at a governmental level; there is no one person in the Government about whom everybody can say, "That person is in charge of the just and managed transition." There is no group that has been set up.

We have all seen just transition plans from many organisations, including the Government, but nobody seems to be saying, "This is the just transition plan. This is what we are following. This is where we want to go." A commitment from the Government that they would be willing to look at the key asks from the OEUK and in the North sea transition plan would make a big difference. We need to say, "This person is designated the just transition mandarin"—or however we want to style them—"and they are in charge. This is

who we go to if we have a concern. This is who will ensure that decisions are being taken across Government to protect these jobs.”

There are other things the Government could do in terms of the £28 billion commitment and the spending review. There will be uproar if that £28 billion is cut during the spending review. I beg the Government not to cut that money. There is a Department for Energy Security and Net Zero consultation that has closed, and there is another consultation on the fiscal regime. My slight concern on those is about the timing. Oil and gas companies will make final investment decisions and plans for next year perhaps in August or September this year. If we do not have an outcome by that point, particularly on the fiscal regime, companies will say things are too uncertain and will not invest next year. Again, we will see the loss of jobs as a result.

The timing is key. The Government may not be able to announce their final decisions—around the fiscal regime, for example—but if they could give industry a direction of travel in advance of investment decisions and financial plans being made, we would not lose next year. I am really worried that we are at the point where we will lose next year and all the associated jobs as a result.

The Government are not yet getting this right. They need to do more listening and to ensure that they are taking control. The facts and the context have changed in the past year, because of the global changes and the job losses we continue to see. I am not asking the Government to row back on what they planned; I am asking them to consider that the context and the facts have changed and, therefore, that the plan needs to change to recognise that.

This is not about having to walk back from where we believe we should be. This is about ensuring that people in my constituency, and people across the country, who are employed in oil and gas—75% of workers are employed in the rest of the UK—have a secure future. We cannot see a gap as oil and gas jobs go down and renewables jobs go up, because we will lose all that talent and the incredible bonanza that we are at the best point to take advantage of. We might lose that just because people do not believe that the Government are committed enough. Now is the time to take these decisions and to ensure that people believe that the Government are committed to a just and managed transition.

9.49 am

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. My thanks go to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing this vital debate.

The fate of the skilled workers of the oil and gas sector hangs in the balance, and nowhere more so than in Grangemouth in my constituency. Once known as Scotland's boomtown, Grangemouth has refined oil for more than a century. The refinery has been a generational employer for local families—a destination that has provided transformational opportunity for local people. It has provided world-class training and good pay, leading to improving living standards and community prosperity.

However, the owners, INEOS and PetroChina—the petrochemical wing of the Chinese state—have decided to call time on Grangemouth and Scotland's refining

capability. The first set of redundancies start in just a week's time, and the thousands of job losses that will happen show the precarious position workers are in when private capital and a foreign Government own such a vital piece of infrastructure.

Regarding the refinery, I do not want to hear anyone insult the intelligence of the Grangemouth workers and utter the phrase “just transition”. Jobs will be lost, and the new energy industries are just not ready. That is the very definition of an unjust transition. I also do not want the Government to say that the £100 million growth deal for Falkirk and Grangemouth is the solution—not when the refinery is worth over £400 million a year to the Scottish economy. The £200 million from the National Wealth Fund that the Prime Minister announced at the Scottish Labour conference to entice new industries is welcome, but that money is conditional on private capital investment coming in with no planned Government ownership, meaning that workers, communities and Scotland will be in mercy of private capital and foreign ownership—again. Why are the Government not learning any lessons?

The refinery's influence goes beyond the town. Grangemouth oil keeps Scotland's 5.5 million people moving. I do not need to ask the Minister whether the refinery closing will compromise Scotland's fuel security, because it obviously will. Scotland will now order oil in from mainland Europe—it will arrive, go through a vastly reduced quality control process, and then be distributed from the new import terminal at Grangemouth. Scotland will be dependent on European transportation logistics; an energy-rich nation will lose self-reliance—a farcical and dangerous set of circumstances.

Grangemouth only wants consistency, and that means the Government treating Scotland's only oil refinery in the same manner as Scunthorpe steel. I put it to the Minister that the recall of Parliament showed that when there is a political will, things can get done. A Government can intervene and save jobs, a community and an industry. The argument that Grangemouth should be treated differently to Scunthorpe is total nonsense. The similarities are strikingly clear.

The Government could, and should, do the same for Grangemouth. It is the right thing to do for workers, communities and a nation's security. That should be enough reason to intervene, but if it is not, I suggest that the Government have a look at the political implications: Scotland is watching, and our party will get a rude awakening at the ballot box in May 2026 over this issue. The Government should step in, save the jobs and extend the life of the Grangemouth refinery until the new energy industries are ready.

9.53 am

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing the debate. To say that it is really important does not really do it justice; what we are seeing in the North sea—job losses, investment drying up and companies folding or choosing to end their UK operations—is not us being alarmist or pessimistic or over-exaggerating. As most of us in this room understand, although that is sadly not the case across the House, those are the cold, hard facts.

[*Harriet Cross*]

Across the UK, approximately 120,000 people are employed in the oil and gas sector; of whom approximately half are in Scotland. The average oil and gas worker is in their mid-40s. This is their transition—not a future transition—and it matters now. In the UK, one in every 200 people is employed either directly or indirectly in the offshore energy sector, and that is significantly weighted towards oil and gas work. Those people work offshore on rigs and floating production storage and offloading units or onshore as geologists, geophysicists and petrophysicists and in our crucial supply chains. That increases to one in 25 across Scotland, about one in five in north-east Scotland and one in three if induced jobs are included.

The impacts of a poorly managed transition will be felt not just in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire or north-east Scotland; the entirety of the UK will suffer. No other UK cluster has the energy capability of north-east Scotland—the skills, supply chains, university specialisms or experiences. If we in north-east Scotland lose our brightest, best, most innovative and most experienced energy workers in the transition from oil and gas to renewable energies, they will be lost to the whole of the UK.

We must not pretend, or mislead ourselves and others into thinking, that transferring to renewable energies is in any way incompatible with continuing to produce oil and gas from the North sea. It is not. More than that, continuing to support our domestic oil and gas sector will only help any transition to renewables to succeed. Will we still need oil and gas for years to come? Yes. It seems that that point is largely uncontested, and the Government have certainly confirmed it. So why—I still have not heard a coherent answer to this—are they effectively ensuring that we do not have a viable oil and gas sector? Removing investment allowances, increasing and extending EPL levels beyond those for any other mature basin and banning new licences do not support the sector, help domestic supplies or protect jobs.

OEUK suggests that 50% of domestic oil and gas needs could be supplied from the North sea until 2050, but only if there are policies to allow oil and gas to be extracted. Brent oil is today at \$68 a barrel—almost half the \$123 a barrel it peaked at in 2022, and below the EPL price floor of \$71 a barrel. Why does the Minister expect North sea businesses to continue in the UK when they are being penalised for their product, despite the Government's saying that we need it? As others have asked, how can the UK arms of multinational companies compete for funding and investment with energy sectors in other countries, which are so much more supported and encouraged and which offer far greater returns? When investment goes abroad, jobs follow, or are lost. It is that simple. I say it again: our oil and gas sector is vital to the UK's energy transition.

When I speak to people involved in or with the sector, the vast majority talk about timing. Timing is the most crucial thing in supporting the energy transition, and I would like the Minister to reflect on it in his remarks. For offshore wind, for example, the RGU Energy Transition Institute estimate is an increase from approximately 11,000 jobs in 2024 to 46,000 in 2025. On the face of it, that looks great—35,000 new jobs—but more or less all those jobs will come on stream post 2030, by which

time, on the current trajectory of job and investment losses, we are expected to lose 60,000 oil and gas jobs, 50% of which will be in Scotland. No skills passport will bring those jobs back. That is not a fair or just transition; for north-east Scotland, it is a disaster waiting to happen.

The issue is not just when the jobs need to come on stream; it is the type of jobs, as well as whether companies in the north-east will have remained afloat in the interim. At the moment, there are two main categories of jobs: the vast majority of our energy work is in operational activities, such as the day-to-day operations of the industry, while the remaining third—roughly—are in the capital expenditure, such as the building and manufacturing of kit. However, the manpower requirements for running and operating a rig far exceed those of, for example, a wind farm. Until the UK can increase its manufacturing base for wind infrastructure, allowing jobs to be created in capital work rather than just operational work, there is no prospect of transferring tens of thousands of workers from oil and gas to wind or other renewable energy sectors.

Similarly, timing is vital if companies are to keep their order books, if not full, then at least ticking over with traditional oil and gas contracts—again, assuming that the Government's policies are changed to support the sector—before offshore wind contracts truly pick up. I recently spoke to the chief executive officer of a supply chain company, who had very real concerns about a void in contracts, which the company would not be able to get across, in the next two to five years. What company can retain a workforce if it has no work? These companies are vital to the transition, and we cannot afford to lose them to an expedited, unmanaged decline of oil and gas.

The RGU estimates that 80% of the oil and gas supply chain is transferrable to adjacent sectors, but the reality is that the supply chain will survive only if the transition is managed. If we run down production too quickly and before wind is effectively scaled, the capabilities and expertise will be lost. I end with a brief quote from the North Sea Transition Taskforce, which warns:

“Unless governments act swiftly, there will be no transition; the old North Sea will fade away, along with the skills of individuals and the entrepreneurial skills of businesses in the North Sea supply chain.”

9.59 am

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I think this is the first time I have had the pleasure of speaking under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond; I am very pleased to have you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on securing this important debate.

It is said that if you remember the '60s, you were not really there—but if you were there in the '80s for the closure of the pits, you will never forget. You will never forget the violence; you will never forget the politicisation of the police; you will never forget the devastation of communities. That was an energy transition—I was not just picking up on the remarks of the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross).

This debate takes place at a key point in the transition away from oil and gas production in the North sea. With the Government's consultation on building the North sea's energy future under way, and with the clean energy mission driving forward at some pace, securing

clean energy generation and the wealth creation and jobs that will go with it is non-negotiable if we are not to repeat the same unjust transition as before.

It is a simple truth that the North sea basin is in terminal decline. That is not a political choice; it is a geological reality. For too long, the previous Government buried their head in the sand and watched as jobs supported by the UK's oil and gas industry more than halved over the past decade. That is why this Government are right to finally draw a line under new licensing and the illusion of endless new oil and gas.

The stone age did not come to an end for the lack of stone, and the oil age will not come to an end for the lack of oil. It will be because energy can be produced more cleanly and cheaply by renewable technologies. The demand for hydrocarbons is expected to peak globally in the next five years, but energy companies are still adopting business models focused on growing output volume rather than on maximising shareholder value. Creating the stranded assets of the future is bad management, and failing to build the skills base for tomorrow's future is bad business planning.

The myth that North sea licences are the answer to our energy security is a dangerous one. Hundreds of licences have been issued over the past decades and there has been just 16 days' worth of gas to show for it. We are lucky to have an abundance of renewable resources in the UK. That is the only route forward to deliver for the workers and communities who are tied to a declining oil and gas industry.

The current North sea transition deal is not fit for purpose. It places far too much responsibility on the companies themselves. Those companies are not delivering what is needed: a mere seven out of the 87 North sea oil and gas operators are even considering investment in renewable energy by 2030. We cannot outsource the future of our workers and our energy security to the very companies whose current business model is failing. We need a radical shift. The time for a coherent deal for the North sea is now. It is vital that the Government commit to bringing forward a bold and ambitious plan with the urgency that this time demands.

Beyond extraction lies an immense opportunity to build a world-leading offshore wind manufacturing sector here in the UK. Our existing wind farms, many of which are in Scotland, provide a fifth of global capacity. They prove what is possible. But it is a scandal—a scandal that the previous Government allowed—that the average North sea turbine is overwhelmingly built with material from abroad. We are exporting jobs and prosperity.

Great British Energy and the National Wealth Fund must be laser-focused on building up a thriving manufacturing sector. A properly resourced clean industry bonus is not just good policy; it has the potential to create 10,000 permanent, direct jobs and 13,000 indirect ones in areas that need it, such as the constituency of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North. Can the Minister confirm what conversations he has had with Cabinet colleagues about the clean industry bonus? Is there any scope to boost the funds behind the bonus to truly seize the moment?

Our renewable ambition is crippled by outdated ports and dockside facilities. The £1.8 billion in the National Wealth Fund is a good start, but if we are to truly lead

in home-grown energy, it is crucial that it be expanded. The funding must be safeguarded and expanded, and the Government should be taking equity stakes in ports as critical national infrastructure.

The unjust transition at the refinery in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) and the situation in Port Talbot are warning signs that early Government intervention and investment are paramount if we are to secure the future of our workers. They deserve to experience a smooth transition. Over 90% of the UK's oil and gas workforce have transferable skills, but they report a lack of support for transitioning into other industries. The energy skills passport is a start, but workers are footing the bill for their own retraining, which often duplicates their existing qualifications. The Government need to commit to streamlining the process. Crucially, the Minister should meet with the Treasury to deliver the £335 million-a-year training fund that unions and climate groups are rightly calling for—a fund that provides paid time off for workers to retrain.

We live in a volatile world. The era of relying on global fossil fuel markets is over. True energy and worker security lies in our own abundant renewable resources. The opportunity to create thousands of high-quality jobs in a new green economy is here. It is within our grasp. I urge the Minister to seize it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order. There will now be a five-minute limit.

10.7 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What a pleasure it is to see a fellow St Andrean in your august position, Sir Desmond. I am sure that the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) agrees.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on her comprehensive speech. It is greatly encouraging that one of our colleagues understands the situation as thoroughly as she clearly does—well done her.

I want to look at the historical perspective. I am of such great age that I can remember the time before North sea oil. Far too many in my class at Tain academy went south when they left school. They disappeared: they were part of the highland clearances, if you like, in latter years. My father said to me, "When you leave school, you'll find your best employment chances down south, not up here in the highlands." Then North sea oil came and everything changed massively. The Nigg oil fabrication yard was constructed near my hometown of Tain. There was one at Kishorn in Wester Ross, there was one at Ardersier near Inverness, and there were many other sites in Scotland and England. It meant that local people could find high-quality employment; they had not had that opportunity before. There were highly paid and skilled jobs. People learned skills such as rigging and welding, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North referred to.

I worked at the yard at Nigg. At the height of it all, no less than 5,000 people worked there, constructing the mighty Conoco Hutton production platform. Those were the great old days. Since then, as others have alluded to, the situation has changed. Today, like the hon. Member for Aberdeen North, I have many constituents

[*Jamie Stone*]

who work offshore. However, the same opportunity or perhaps necessity is there for those who are considering moving abroad. It is the same story. Very often they move south because it is easier to get to wherever they want to work, which could be in Kuwait or wherever. We face that old dread demon of highland depopulation—people leaving again. We have an ageing population, and we do not have as many younger carers as we would like. Families are beginning to go, and that is part of the tragedy.

The reason I came down on the Saturday when Parliament was recalled is that British steel means everything in constructing oil platforms, and possibly floating offshore wind structures. Safeguarding the industry is hugely important to me, which is why I made the journey there and back to vote in support. However, as the hon. Member for Brent West pointed out, far too many wind turbines are made of steel that is not made in this country. Far too many parts of those turbines are not made in this country either.

Our great, shining hope is that one day we will be using the skills to which I referred to train young people to start building turbines, cells and blades here in the UK. We are not doing nearly enough as we should, yet at Nigg we have one of the finest graving docks in Europe. It is a perfect site. Kishorn has been revived, yet we are still not making the bits and pieces that we should. Yes, we are putting them together and putting them into the North sea—the Beatrice field off my constituency is an example—but there is much more to do.

In the minute and a half that I have left, let me echo the hon. Member for Aberdeen North in saying that the world has changed since Putin and Trump. Oil is a strategic asset. We are lucky enough to have it. We should not talk it down all the time. We should look on the new discoveries as cash in the bank for the future. Oil is not just about burning hydrocarbons, but about pharmaceuticals and many other uses. We should always remember how fortunate we are that the good Lord gave us this strategic asset.

I will conclude where I began. So many of my class went away. In more recent decades it has been different: people have stayed. Every single job in oil and gas is crucial to remote highland communities. It is the people coming back from working three on, three off, or whatever, who keep the lights on in the straths and glens of some of the remotest parts of the highlands.

10.12 am

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing this important debate and for her thoughtful and passionate speech introducing it. Many colleagues have made excellent speeches, and I will not repeat their points.

The just transition must be both just and fair, so that sectors and communities are not left on the industrial scrapheap as they were during the Thatcher years. If the just transition means anything, it must mean something for the north-east of Scotland. It cannot be left to the market alone to sort those things out. To give one small example, I have recently been lobbied by the plumbing industry. A crisis is coming in a few years' time because

the financial problems facing the training and education sector mean that it cannot possibly meet its demands. One thing the Minister could do is nudge the private sector to invest in apprenticeships in those areas, so that we are preparing alternatives for young people as North sea basin declines.

The Scottish Government set up their Just Transition Commission in 2018 to provide scrutiny and advice on delivery. Northern Ireland is currently consulting on setting up its own commission; Wales established its commission in 2013. Where is the UK-wide just transition commission? The UK Government launched their North sea consultation in March as

“a dialogue with North Sea communities”

to develop a plan for making the best of this transition. I trust that in his closing remarks the Minister will tell us how that is going.

The chairman of GB Energy—perhaps the flagship project of this Government, with its headquarters in Aberdeen—described its work as “a very long-term project,” with the much-promised 1,000 new jobs taking perhaps 20 years to realise. Even then, it will be a mere drop in the North sea when it comes to replacing the jobs that will be lost in the years ahead. Unite’s Scottish secretary Derek Thomson recently said:

“If you look at how many jobs are going to go in the north-east, if GB Energy does not pick up the pace and start to move workers in there and start to create proper green jobs, then I’m afraid we could be looking at a desolation of the north-east.”

“Speeding ahead” is an interesting choice of words for the Secretary of State in this context, given that any decision on funding the Acorn project at St Fergus is now in a most uncertain position in the June spending review.

I have been asking about this since I was elected. The UK Government were able to find £22 billion for carbon capture schemes in Merseyside and Teesside last autumn, but they could not dig deep enough into their pockets for Scotland, which has much of the infrastructure already. I await June’s announcement with trepidation as speed and commitment to North sea communities in the north-east of Scotland have been thin on the ground so far from the UK Government. Will the Minister please give us a clue about the Government’s plans?

The Acorn project, the new power station at Peterhead and the investments in key strategic ports at Peterhead and Fraserburgh are key components of the just transition. A Robert Gordon University review of UK offshore energy workforce skills transferability showed that 90% of the oil and gas workforce have transferable skills to work in adjacent energy sectors. The just transition needs buy-in from the UK Government. It cannot be left to market forces, which are even more unpredictable in the current political climate, thanks to Trump and the ongoing energy crisis, and of course Putin too.

Households are facing a third rise in energy costs since Labour came to power. Indeed, the vast majority of the UK’s offshore wind capacity is owned by companies outside the UK. The typical North sea turbine contains more than three times as much material from abroad as it does from domestic manufacturers. The wider context is an energy market that is, paradoxically, working against both the interests of the consumer and the companies and investors who want to realise the green energy industrial revolution. If Members do not believe me, they should take a deep dive into zonal pricing.

The clean industry bonus, an extra revenue support in contracts for difference rounds, has the potential to bring quality jobs to the UK and in particular Scotland and the north-east of Scotland, but there is an absence of detail on whether specifics such as job quality will be a requirement for investors to receive financial support from the Government. Does the Minister acknowledge that private investment does not necessarily guarantee good, secure jobs? How will he ensure that the clean industry bonus delivers good-quality jobs in Scotland and supports workers currently reliant on the North sea oil and gas industry?

10.17 am

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I welcome the opportunity provided by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) to debate transitional support for oil and gas workers, who are already bearing the brunt of the North sea's disorderly decline as reserves have dwindled without a clear agreed plan. In my first ever job in the renewable energy sector in 2008—17 years ago now—I co-wrote a report on the huge potential of British North sea ports to move into the renewable energy industry as locations where offshore wind turbines and associated infrastructure are manufactured and then shipped. While some of that has been realised, a lot of opportunities were missed as jobs went overseas. The need for action is now urgent.

We already know that new oil and gas projects are incompatible with averting the worst impacts of climate catastrophe. If the goal is also to provide North sea workers and communities with the long-term security that they deserve—and it must be—new oil and gas fields are still not the answer. Even with hundreds of new licences issued and new field approvals granted in the past decade, jobs supported by the UK oil and gas industry have more than halved already, and multiple sources predict a continued decline. We must protect those workers and provide security for that workforce, but in a declining basin that will not come from desperate attempts to double down on new drilling.

Let us take the specific example of the Rosebank oil field. Setting aside the significant climate harm that Rosebank would cause, the claim that the project will create thousands of jobs is inflated. Equinor's own estimate suggests that only 255 direct jobs would be created in the UK over its entire lifetime. Equinor has decided to construct the main offshore vessel for Rosebank in Dubai, and unions are rightly furious that the project has yet to create a single UK design or construction job.

Meanwhile, analysis shows that properly investing in British clean energy supply chains could create over 20,000 jobs for workers in key areas such as Scotland's oil and gas communities, many of whom, as Members have pointed out, have a lot of the transferable skills we need. Rather than bowing to the industry's last-ditch calls for new drilling, will the Government do what is needed to protect workers? For too long, oil and gas companies have been in the driving seat of the North sea transition. Time and again, they choose to prioritise their own short-term interests over the long-term needs of workers and their communities.

As the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) said, alarmingly, just seven of the 87 North sea operators plan to invest anything at all in UK renewables between now and 2030. Instead, these companies are on a sunset

ride, maximising profits from oil and gas while they still can, regardless of what that means for the rest of us. That lack of investment has clear consequences for workers, who are demanding clear pathways out of high-carbon jobs and into the renewable energy industry, where they know they have a longer-term future.

Oil and gas companies like to blame the windfall tax for preventing them from investing, but they had been failing to invest long before that levy was introduced. We have also seen companies choosing to make workers redundant while simultaneously banking excessive profits and issuing their shareholders huge payouts—more proof that they continue to prioritise their own private interests over the workforce.

Does the Minister agree that it is time to stop betting on private oil and gas industry companies doing the right thing? How does he plan to ensure that the interests of workers and communities, rather than just those of oil and gas bosses, are served in the Government's plan for the North sea? The need for the Government to step in and manage the transition in the public interest is now urgent, and the current approach, which is overwhelmingly focused on de-risking private investment, is wholly insufficient to achieve that aim. It risks recreating the inequalities and failures of our current energy system, where wealth and jobs flow overseas.

The unjust closure of the Grangemouth oil refinery without plans to support workers is a damning indictment of that failed industry. To ensure good, secure jobs for workers and build wealth that lasts in communities that are already experiencing the sharp edge of the transition, we need an entirely new approach—one that plans ahead before private companies decide to abandon their workers. Alongside a clear, worker-led plan for the North sea, unions and climate groups are calling for the Government to commit to an emergency ringfenced funding package in the spending review. Will the Minister meet the Chancellor to ensure that those ringfenced funds are secured, and will he ensure that past mistakes are not repeated in the North sea transition?

10.22 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for raising this issue. Although we will not always be aligned on all things—I can think of one in particular—the need to support workers is something we can certainly share a view on. What an introduction by the hon. Lady, who set the scene so well with detailed information and incredible knowledge. It is a great pleasure to see the Minister in his place. His commitment is never in doubt, and I think we will be reassured by his answers. It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). We look forward to his contribution, too.

The North sea oil and gas industry employs an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 workers in the UK. A significant portion is concentrated along the east and north-east coast, but I remind everyone that, while that may be the thrust of where the industry seeks its workers from, I have a number of constituents who have worked in the North sea oil fields for 20, 30 or 40 years—probably all their working lives. Indeed, I was coming home on the

[*Jim Shannon*]

plane three or four weeks ago and the guy alongside me had previously been in Dubai, which the hon. Member for Aberdeen North referred to, and had also worked in the middle east. On the occasion I met him he was coming from Libya back to Northern Ireland. The sector employs people from all across Northern Ireland. I know about those from my constituency, but there are others from elsewhere too.

Although new projects and licensing rounds have been approved, they are unlikely to reverse the declining production and workforce in the North sea, as most of the remaining reserves are in existing developments. The industry also supports a larger workforce indirectly through the supply chain, so the impact will be felt across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Those workforce figures mean that the Government must seriously consider questions of our energy supply and their implications, and I believe that they are doing so; indeed, I know that this issue is on the Minister's agenda. The Government's own data on the situation is telling, most helpful and encouraging, and I know that he will sum it up shortly.

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero digest of UK energy statistics shows a 72% reduction in UK oil and gas production between 1999 and 2023, and the North Sea Transition Authority projects an 89% drop in UK oil and gas production by 2050. These statistics cannot be ignored; they show a trend. Analysis by the Office for National Statistics shows that direct jobs in oil and gas extraction fell by around a third between 2014 and 2023. Meanwhile, the findings of the 2023 Robert Gordon University study, "Powering up the Workforce", included an estimate that the offshore renewables workforce—including those employed in offshore wind, carbon capture and storage, and hydrogen—could increase to between 70,000 and 138,000 in 2030.

That last figure, which shows the potential that exists, cannot be ignored. Indeed, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North clearly set out the transition from where jobs are today to jobs for the future. The Robert Gordon University study also found that over 90% of the UK's oil and gas workforce have medium to high skills transferability and are well positioned to work in the adjacent energy sector. That cannot be ignored. It shows where we think we are; indeed, it has been the focus of everybody in this debate so far. The issue that the hon. Lady raised is clear. The Government are aware of the impending opportunity—or, if they do not take action, the impending unemployment problem. They must act urgently.

Oil and gas companies must have support for diversification training and help for staff to ensure that communities of oil and gas workers do not end up in a similar position to the coalmining communities who were abandoned when we knew of the difficulties, which took generations to combat. We have an opportunity today—the Government have an opportunity today—to act and see through the transition, taking advantage of the transferable skills that we have all referred to in this debate.

I believe that the North sea has more to yield than many Members have said today. Our opinions can differ on that, but we must be united in looking to the care of the sector in the near and medium term, and the

Government must take the lead on that today. It is important that we look at the bigger picture. I referred to those from Northern Ireland, including some of my constituents, who have worked in the oil and gas sector for some 30 or 40 years. Their sons and others will look for opportunities. I want to make sure that, when the Government bring forward their thoughts about what is taking place, the opportunities for training and jobs will exist for us all. I always say that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has many talents and much work to do together. Let us continue to do just that.

10.28 am

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing this critical debate and for her compelling speech, in which she laid out the situation in her constituency in terms of the number of job losses and the increasing poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) did later, she also talked about the loss of skilled workers and jobs to overseas countries.

Managing the transition from a North sea dominated by oil and gas to a North sea with a future for commercially viable renewable energy is critical to the UK's reaching its climate targets by 2030. The North sea can have a new and bright future if we get things right, which will enable us to strengthen our energy security, reduce skyrocketing energy prices for our households and businesses, secure the UK's global leadership in floating offshore wind and, importantly, rebuild our manufacturing and port capacity while delivering transitional skills, pathways and jobs for the highly skilled workers and for the thousands of people currently employed in the supply chains for oil and gas.

We Liberal Democrats are opposed to the new oilfields at Jackdaw and Rosebank, and we want the Government to commit to the winding-down of the oil and gas industry, as was agreed among all countries at COP28. The reality is that new drilling will not provide jobs or protect workers in a declining basin.

Harriet Cross: It is estimated that Jackdaw could provide 5% of the UK's gas needs. Would the hon. Member, and the Liberal Democrats, prefer that we imported that LNG from elsewhere instead?

Pippa Heylings: As I consistently said during the debate about the new oilfields at Jackdaw and Rosebank, none has provided the jobs predicted, which were all offshored to Dubai. On the gas dependency that we have talked about, it is critical that we make sure that we have homegrown energy so that we can take Putin's boot off our necks. That is the way.

After 50 years of intensive extraction, the North sea is now an ageing and expensive basin. The transition away from oil and gas production is already under way, with reserves in terminal and irreversible decline. Jobs in the UK's oil and gas industry have more than halved in the past decade: 227,000 direct roles have disappeared, despite the issuing of 400 new drilling licences and record profits for the major oil companies. Moreover, losses in supply chains far outnumber those in the industry. That is neither fair nor just. We must act now

to ensure that the transition ahead supports the workers and communities who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross so eloquently said, have powered Britain for generations, and ensure that they are not left behind.

The future of the North sea can be bright: we boast some of Europe's best sites for renewable energy. Our current installed capacity of 50 wind farms already accounts for about a quarter of global offshore wind capacity, and our offshore wind potential surpasses our projected energy demand, making it key to our energy security. However, the Liberal Democrats have always been clear that the only way to create long-term, secure jobs is to invest in supporting workers to transition into clean energy industries. The unjust transition of the oil refinery at Grangemouth is a clear illustration—a warning of what happens without early Government intervention and investment, showing that such decisions cannot be left to industry alone.

What jobs are we talking about? We are talking about new jobs within the new manufacturing supply chain and our own domestic green energy supply chain. The UK has consistently failed to seize the full economic benefits of our leadership in offshore wind. As we have heard today, the vast majority of Britain's offshore wind capacity is owned by foreign companies, and the typical North sea turbine still contains three times more imported material than UK-made content. We need to make sure that our turbines are manufactured here and that our port capacity, in both manufacturing and fixed and floating offshore capacity, is enabled, or that will also be given to other countries. That could create an estimated 23,000 good green jobs, both directly and through supply chains.

Barry Gardiner: I appreciate the hon. Lady's remarks. Does she agree that one way in which Britain could help ensure that the transition is not only just, but orderly and managed, would be to do what countries such as Denmark have done—join the Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance?

Pippa Heylings: Yes, we should join the Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance. We very much support that. Following COP28, we are looking forward to COP30. Hopefully, the UK can once again demonstrate global leadership, as part of an alliance of other countries that finally has a clear transition pathway.

Our UK port capacity is currently one of the key bottlenecks slowing our renewables roll-out. UK ports and dock-side facilities urgently require upgrades so that they can handle industrial-scale floating offshore wind, including access channel size, landside availability and crane capacity. The Government's proposed National Wealth Fund is welcome, but we need to see that it is secured and even expanded.

We need to make sure that workers are prioritised as part of the new manufacturing industry and the supply chains. Research has shown that over 90% of the UK's oil and gas workforce have transferable skills, but face a lack of support in transitioning to the clean pathway. As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on climate change, I was pleased to meet an oil and gas worker from Aberdeen last month as part of a roundtable to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing workers. She described how Aberdeen has an abundance of STEM skills ready to drive forward the transition to

clean energy, but workers are having to pay out of their own pockets to gain new qualifications, often duplicating qualifications that they already have.

It is clear that more concrete support is needed to support workers in finding and moving into alternative employment, from improving the energy skills passport to addressing training barriers and, more broadly, delivering a new deal for the North sea that has workers' needs at its core. Will the Minister commit and show us how the Government plan to ensure that clear, accessible pathways are in place to support workers to move between industries?

In conclusion, Putin's barbaric and illegal invasion of Ukraine exposes the risks of relying on countries that may seek to exploit our dependence on fossil fuels and use it to their advantage. Oil and gas workers built the foundations of Britain's energy system. As we chart a new path forward, it is our moral and economic duty to ensure that they are not abandoned but empowered, respected and placed at the very centre of that journey.

10.36 am

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on bringing such an important issue to Westminster Hall today and on opening the debate with such an eloquent and passionate speech on behalf of her constituents.

For many of us here today, this is a deeply personal debate. We all know or are related to people employed in the oil and gas industry off the north-east coast of our country. Finding a solution and ensuring that the transition is indeed just for those workers is vital for our constituents. We often talk about needing the North sea for our energy security, to produce the tax revenue for the Exchequer and to support supply chains and local economies. It sounds incredibly intangible at times, but for the 200,000 people employed in the oil and gas industry, directly or indirectly, the impacts of the transition in the North sea will be very tangible indeed. As the decline accelerates, we risk seeing lost incomes and lost futures in whole communities without a purpose. That is 200,000 employees up and down the entire United Kingdom: the oil and gas supply chain touches nearly every single constituency in the United Kingdom, but more than 68% of all direct employment is in Scotland, and more than 80% of that is in the north-east of Scotland, in and around Aberdeen.

In my own constituency of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, everybody knows someone who relies on the offshore industry for their livelihood. Just last week, during recess, I was in Westhill speaking to companies. That town is the subsea exploration capital of the world and home to Total, Technip, Tetra, Subsea7 and more. The oil and gas industry is the lifeblood of the north-east of Scotland. That is evident to anybody who visits.

Although I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North for the passion that she brings to the debate and her concern for her constituents, I cannot help reflecting on the rhetoric emanating from the Scottish Government over the past few years and their presumption against oil and gas, which has contributed to an increasingly pessimistic outlook for the North sea. When we engage with oil and gas companies, it is the language and the tone that we use to describe the situation in the North sea that they say is driving away

[*Andrew Bowie*]

the investment that they need to drive forward new technologies such as offshore wind, whether floating or fixed bottom. When we say “decline”, “ageing” or “terminal”, that does not give investors from overseas a thriving and attractive investment picture. We need to address that language.

Barry Gardiner: Does the shadow Minister believe that investors do not know that it is a declining field?

Andrew Bowie: Of course, the hon. Gentleman is right that it is a declining basin—everybody is aware of that—but we must be careful about the language we use about it. We should point out the positives that can be achieved through further investment and recognise the profits being realised by energy companies engaged primarily in the extraction and exploitation of oil and gas underneath the North sea. They will be investing in those new technologies, and they need to convince shareholders—who are deciding whether to invest in the middle east, south-east Asia, the United States of America or elsewhere in the globe—that the North sea is still an attractive place to invest.

The language that we use about that basin and the industry in the United Kingdom is incredibly important, so I urge the hon. Gentleman to engage with the industry and speak to individuals—as I have; I know that the Minister, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North and others do too—because that is exactly what they tell us. They want to contribute to the transition—indeed, they lead it—but they want the negative atmosphere overshadowing the North sea to change. That means changing some of the rhetoric and language used to describe the industry, which is so important to the economy of the north-east of Scotland.

Seamus Logan: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point about the choice of language, but will he confirm whether he and his party still believe in net zero and the drive towards achieving our climate targets?

Andrew Bowie: Yes, of course we believe in net zero, but not in setting arbitrary targets and dates that are unachievable without making this country poorer or more reliant on foreign imports for our energy supply. The fact is that imports of LNG have doubled just to keep the lights on as we actively accelerate the decline in our own North sea oil and gas industry. That is nonsensical—it is madness. It is an act of national self-harm. We should revert to our policy of maximum economic recovery from the North sea while doing all we can to ensure that the companies involved invest in new technologies.

Pippa Heylings: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie: I am conscious of time, but I will be delighted to give way.

Pippa Heylings: I could not resist; I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, given the time limit. He is talking about how important language is, but is it not considered to be an act of national self-harm to talk down the incredible opportunity for the North sea to be a global leader?

Andrew Bowie: I am not in any way trying to talk down the North sea. What we need to do is talk up those companies—especially those in the supply chain—the technologies and the skilled workforce, which rely at present on a successful and profitable oil and gas industry, because we will need them to develop new technologies in the North sea. The ships engaged in drilling for rigs, for example, will be used to work on the new offshore wind farms. Right now, as work is drying up in the North sea as a result of the accelerated decline, those assets are being sent to other parts of the world and being redeployed or redesigned.

When we call on those assets to help speed up the deployment of new offshore wind farms, they will not be there—the skilled workforce that we will need to develop wind farms and other technologies will be overseas because those people will be offered high-paying jobs in existing energy sectors in the UAE, Qatar, Australia, North America and south-east Asia. We cannot just flick a switch and expect all those workers and the supply chain to be there. That is why we need a profitable and successful energy industry. Like it or lump it, at the minute that is reliant on continued investment in our oil and gas industry. That is good for our energy security and the Treasury, so it makes abundant sense to continue to support it.

The highly paid jobs in renewables that are going to exist simply do not exist yet—that is a fact. We were promised that by 2020 there would be 130,000 green manufacturing jobs, but frankly only a fraction have materialised. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) talked about the need to expand capacity in our ports. Aberdeen South harbour, in the port of Aberdeen, was built specifically to take advantage of the investment that it was assumed would come from the expansion of the deployment of offshore wind, but still to this day only 1% of its overall profit is driven by offshore wind and renewables, whereas 60% comes from the oil and gas industry. Until the balance shifts, we need to ensure that the companies driving that investment continue to invest in the North sea, but I am afraid they will not do so if this Government’s policies continue.

We need a just transition. As ever, the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) spoke eloquently about his constituency. Workers in Grangemouth, who are looking with great trepidation at what the future holds, tell us that there is nothing just about the transition as it stands. It is incumbent on the Government to do what they can to ensure the safety and security of jobs, the continued profitability and investability of our oil and gas industry as it seeks to transition into the technologies of the future, and the economic success and sustainability of north-east Scotland and the Scottish economy as a whole.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), not just for securing this important debate but for the tone with which she introduced it. Her seriousness and passion came through in her contribution. I genuinely thank her for that, as well as for all the conversations we have had on this important topic.

It has been a wide-ranging debate, but at the heart of all the contributions have been three key things, which I will try to sum up. First, we may all disagree on the timing, pace and detail of the transition, but there is an acknowledgment and understanding that a transition in the North sea is under way. It is important to recognise that. Secondly, if we accept that, as it seems we all do, then we need a credible and detailed plan for how to manage the transition. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North put it well by saying that the transition needs to be managed properly, and I will come back to that point. Thirdly, the workforce must be at the heart of any plan and transition. The shadow Minister made the point well: this is deeply personal for anyone with a job in the oil and gas sector, but particularly in north-east Scotland, where there is a significant concentration of workers in the industry.

Many Members have spoken about the importance of oil and gas in our energy story. A few months ago, I was pleased to be at BP's headquarters to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the first licence being issued in the North sea, and there was a powerful video of the history of some of BP's offshore infrastructure. The engineering skill that it has taken to extract oil and gas from extremely difficult North sea waters over the past 60 years is extraordinary and, as I have said on a number of occasions, we should be very proud of that workforce and everything it has achieved.

Oil and gas will continue to play a critical role in our energy mix and economy for decades to come. However, as we and the world embrace the clean energy transition, I want us not just to be proud of the history of the North sea but to be hugely ambitious and excited about the opportunities in the next chapter of our energy story. Our clean power mission is about not just driving forward clean power in this country but creating the jobs in manufacturing and industry that go along with it, and it is critical that those jobs materialise in the communities that have been mentioned.

It is right that we recognise that tens of thousands of jobs have been lost in the sector over the past 10 years. The truth is that we should have been planning for this transition a long time ago. My hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) talked about Grangemouth. There is no greater example of the failure to plan for the transition than Grangemouth: we knew years ago that it was in a precarious position and should have been planning for the workforce at that point. My driving purpose in my role is ensure that we do not make the same mistake again in the wider North sea sector.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North asked whether the Government are listening, so I want to say how much we have engaged with the sector and how much time I have spent in Aberdeen listening to the industry—not just the oil and gas companies themselves, but the companies involved right through the supply chains, in decommissioning and in training. I had an interesting visit to a training provider and met apprentices who are working in oil and gas in the immediate term but will transition into renewables. They are being trained both on oil and gas platforms and on the renewables jobs that come next. Exciting work is going on, and we need to capitalise on it and speed up such projects across the city and the north-east.

We have a fantastic opportunity to utilise the skills that are already in Aberdeen, which many Members have mentioned. Given the global race for skilled workers and for much of the equipment and the supply chains for the clean power missions around much of the world, we have a real opportunity to capitalise on that in Aberdeen. I suspect that the ears of Robert Gordon University will be burning after this debate, given the number of times it has been mentioned. I had a fantastic visit there a few months back to go through some of the data in great detail, and it was fascinating.

Members made the point about the number of jobs that are transferable from oil and gas into renewables. That presents us with an enormous opportunity to provide long-term, sustainable jobs for people. The pace at which we do that, and the methods we use to support the workforce to transition, are key, which is why, when we came into government, we were determined to work with the Scottish Government and with industry to move forward on skills passporting, and we have launched the first phase of that. There is clearly more work to do on expanding the passporting process, but that is a sign that we are taking practical action to support the workforce to transition.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North asked about a plan for the transition, which was a good point to make. We have launched our consultation on the future of energy in the North sea. We were keen for that to be a genuinely open conversation with industry, communities and trade unions about what the future of energy in the North sea should look like—not a conversation focused narrowly on a series of specific questions. The consultation is still open: there is a week left for those who have not had a chance to submit their responses—I am sure that many thousands are watching this debate online—so please do submit them. It is a key opportunity. We have deliberately asked open, broad questions so that we can have a genuine conversation about the future of energy in the North sea.

The first section of the consultation deals partly with the data and the science about the decline of the North sea basin. The shadow Minister rightly made the point about language. I have always been careful about the language that I use, but it is important to recognise that the declining nature of the basin means that we have to start planning now for what comes next. As part of my engagement on the issue I have had a number of roundtables, including with trade unions a few weeks ago, to look at the specific support that is necessary for the workforce now.

Barry Gardiner: The trade unions and others have made a case for £335 million a year to be invested in skills and training to ensure that workers are not unpaid on their training days, among other things. What conversations can the Minister have with colleagues to ensure that that happens?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution to the debate. He is right that it is about not just the passporting and the training available but, importantly, the ability of workers to access it. I will take away that point, which also came up in the roundtable with trade unions. We have launched a number of skills pilots in four areas, of which Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire is one. The process there is slightly different from that for the other three, because skills are devolved to the

[*Michael Shanks*]

Scottish Government, so the UK Government's role is slightly different, but we want to work in partnership to ensure that we deliver. I will take away the point away and come back to it.

Andrew Bowie: I pay tribute to the Minister's continued commitment to and engagement with the industry and the region. It seems, given the amount of times he is in and out of the north-east of Scotland these days, that he may be buying a second home in my constituency. Of course, we welcome that, because any engagement with the Government is positive. The tone with which the consultation on the future of North sea energy was launched was incredibly positive and has been warmly welcomed. However, there is also an ongoing Treasury consultation on the post-EPL fiscal framework; what engagement is the Department having with the Treasury on what that will look like? Is there any opportunity to speed up the process by which we can replace the energy profits levy?

Michael Shanks: I thank the shadow Minister for making that point. We deliberately launched the consultation on the future of energy and the Treasury consultation on the future of the EPL at the same time, because we want to bring them together to give certainty about the future of industry. My hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary has been in Aberdeen a number of times and, indeed, we have we have had many of the same engagements, dealing with the fiscal forum and others and having the conversations. I engage with Treasury colleagues regularly on this question. The EPL, which has changed many times under both Governments, has not given industry the confidence it is calling for. We have been clear that it will end post 2030, and we want to put in place a regime that gives confidence about what the landscape looks like but still has the recognition of excess profits built into it. The consultation is open for, I think, another two or three weeks.

Barry Gardiner: The taxation regime is critical to the ability of companies to make profits in the North sea. We have the lowest base rate of tax on oil and gas production companies in the world, and it is only because we have the windfall tax that we take the rate up to the average. The Minister needs to look at the investment that would be available were we not subsidising the operations from the public purse. It is not quite the zero-sum game that he suggests.

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution, but he tempts me into both concluding a consultation and speaking on behalf of the Treasury—two things that I absolutely will not do. But he made an important point. The purpose of the consultation—again, it is an open consultation with all those in the sector—is to get to the heart of some of these questions.

Kirsty Blackman: Will the Minister agree to consider the timescale of the consultation outcomes so that people have the earliest possible notice, in advance of next year's budgets, if possible?

Michael Shanks: I was going to come to that point, which has been well made. In both consultations, we are looking internally at how quickly we can turn around the responses. Clearly, there is a balance to be struck,

particularly in respect of the consultation on the future of the North sea. It is a hefty document and we expect a significant number of responses, which is a good thing. There is also a balance to be struck between turning around a response quickly and having a credible, detailed look at all the evidence that has been submitted, but we are trying to move as quickly as possible with both consultations.

I want to turn briefly to the point about the future, and the points that a number of Members made about investment in clean energy. It is right to say that the future of the North sea has enormous potential for offshore and floating offshore wind, and for a number of other industries, such as hydrogen and carbon capture. Since coming into government we have moved as fast as possible to drive that forward, including establishing, as the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) mentioned, Great British Energy in Aberdeen—although I cannot help but notice that the SNP did not support that. It is all about driving investment, not just by creating jobs in Great British Energy's headquarters but through the investments it makes in supply chains and developments throughout the country, particularly in the north-east of Scotland.

We oversaw a record-breaking renewables auction and, as many Members mentioned, we are currently working through the process of the clean industry bonus, which is designed to reward investment in good manufacturing jobs and clean supply chains. This gets to the heart of the point made by many Members about how we bring the benefits of the clean power mission to the UK, delivering the industrial jobs that too often have been missing in our transition. Of course, the clean power action plan will drive £40 billion a year of private investment towards our goal of clean power by 2030.

I am conscious of the time, but I want to reflect on two brief points that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North made in her closing remarks. The first is about listening to communities, which is important, and I will continue to do that, as will my colleagues. The second is about the oversight and management of the plan, which is a question we are looking at. I am always slightly resistant to simply saying that setting up a taskforce or a commission is the answer, but the point that the Just Transition Commission made, and that the hon. Lady also made, is right: we need to grasp it at the heart of Government, and we are actively looking at that.

I again thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North for her important contribution. The future of the North sea is incredibly important for all our communities, particularly in the north-east, but also for our energy and our economy in a wider sense. We are determined to deliver a credible, just and prosperous plan for the future, for the workforce now and in generations to come.

10.59 am

Kirsty Blackman: I thank all Members, especially the Minister, for their considered comments. This issue is bigger than politics—it is more important than kicking around a political football. I am glad that so many people focused on the jobs. We want to ensure that we can take advantage of the opportunity and not just try to avert total disaster, because there is a prize to be won. I will finish with a quote from Paul de Leeuw from

Robert Gordon University, who has said that the “urgency has shifted dramatically.” Therefore, Minister, the time to take action is now, in order to protect those jobs.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered transitional support for North sea oil and gas workers.

Planning and Development: Bedfordshire

11 am

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered planning and development in Bedfordshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. Mid Bedfordshire—indeed, all of Bedfordshire—has played its part in delivering new housing. My constituency was once home to the world’s largest brickworks at Stewartby. Our communities bear testament to our brickmaking history, with former clay pits now finding new life as lakes and homes for nature in the Marston Vale forest, and with former industrial sites, including the brickworks at Stewartby and Kempston Hardwick, set to be repurposed as places to deliver the homes and jobs of the future.

In the past month we have also had confirmation of the Luton airport expansion, the announcement of the new Universal UK theme park at Kempston Hardwick in my constituency, and the publication of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. That comes on top of the recent announcement of East West Rail, work being done to develop local plans in all three of our council areas—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a Central Bedfordshire councillor—and the work of the Government’s new towns taskforce.

In this debate, I hope to highlight the ways in which the planning system can help shape the future of our communities in Bedfordshire, and some of the things that my constituents need assurance on from Government. I want to be clear at the start: I am not a nimby or a blocker, but if the Government are serious about building houses and critical infrastructure, we need to ensure that we do so in a way that is future-proof and resilient.

We need to turn blockers into builders, rather than create a new generation of blockers. In my experience, most of the people whom this Government have labelled as blockers are not ideological obsessives standing in front of the bulldozers of progress; they are people fed up with bad development. They are fed up of developers throwing up housing estates but not building communities, of soulless developments that could be found anywhere, and, most importantly, of developments that worsen quality of life.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing this debate. He has outlined some of the things being done in his constituency, such as using old industrial buildings for apartments. To add to his knowledge, in Northern Ireland we have been repurposing empty buildings in town centres, such as homes above shops—I said that to the Minister in a question just recently. Does the hon. Member agree that is something else that could be used to restore and build up our town centres while ensuring that we are not encroaching upon rural land, as so often happens across the whole United Kingdom?

Blake Stephenson: I absolutely agree. There is a lot of support for brownfield-first development, but also for gently densifying our towns and cities so that we have houses where people want to live within the existing infrastructure.

[Blake Stephenson]

The Government have been elected with a clear mandate to build, build, build, and I accept that. But I hope that they will do the hard yards to plan, plan, plan, and ensure that the 1.5 million houses that they build are the right houses in the right places, as part of the right communities and with the right infrastructure. It is in that spirit that I bring forward this debate, because Bedfordshire is not a place that is standing still.

I congratulate the Government on completing the negotiations, begun by the previous Government, to secure the new Universal UK theme park at Kempston Hardwick. That will be a game changer for our local economy, and I will continue to support the Government, Universal and our councils as it progresses through the planning system, but to maximise its potential, it will be important to get the infrastructure right. That means we need to plan for the planes, trains, automobiles and accommodation. Through the planning system, we need to see work done to deliver the right accommodation that will be available in Bedfordshire for people to come and stay, hopefully to enjoy Universal and then stay a while in our towns and villages, spending their time and money enjoying everything that Bedfordshire has to offer.

As I noted earlier, I understand that Government have a mandate to “just get on and build”. I have some sympathy for their frustration with Members of Parliament like me who they see as trying to put the brakes on that ambition, but I hope the Minister will recognise that that is not my intention. I believe as fervently as he does that we need to deliver new homes for young people growing up right across Britain, but I believe we must do so in a way that is sensitive to our countryside and our communities, and that delivers the right homes in the right places with the right infrastructure.

The current planning system is not working for anyone. Too often, it blocks good development and allows bad development—development that erodes local character, that builds houses but divides communities, and that comes without the right infrastructure, leaving new residents and old alike frustrated and unwilling to accept the further houses the Government want to deliver in their communities. As this Government’s planning reforms progress, I hope they will take time to consider how the planning system can more effectively protect the character of our towns and villages, and how it can seek to disarm those blockers that the Government are concerned about by addressing the things they are concerned about, not by tying their arms behind their backs. That is a harder job, I accept, but is anything that is worth doing in politics easy?

In Bedfordshire, I would like to see the Government give us the tools through the planning system to protect everything that makes our communities such special places to live—protections for our historic character and our villages, protections for our beautiful and unique countryside against unending and unplanned urban sprawl, and protections for the great British pub; indeed, I would like to see more of them built as our communities expand.

In Mid Bedfordshire, we have always done the right thing and taken our fair share of housing—we have even taken Luton’s surplus housing need. We have done everything we were supposed to do, but our communities

suffer the effects of bad development. Still, residents in Maulden see development crawling even further up the slope of the Greensand ridge, as their flood risk steadily worsens. Still, residents in Wixams find themselves fighting for a GP surgery that no one locally seems keen to take ownership of. Still, residents find themselves fighting developers who are keen to pocket the profits of development but less keen to deliver on their promises of well-maintained green spaces, proper flood protections and local amenities.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): As a fellow MP representing Central Bedfordshire, I know that while good people can have reasoned debates about the right locations for new housing, no one can defend the lack of infrastructure to keep pace with development that we have seen in parts of Central Bedfordshire. It is therefore all the more surprising that the council has one of the highest levels of unspent section 106 contributions in the country. Does the hon. Member agree that Central Bedfordshire owes it to its residents to ensure it is putting that money to good use, and that we owe it to the council to ensure we are removing all possible barriers to its providing the infrastructure that our residents are crying out for?

Blake Stephenson: Again, I must declare my interest as a Central Bedfordshire councillor. I learned recently of the sums that are held at Central Beds from section 106 contributions. The council is very good at collecting the sums but not necessarily at spending them, particularly in the right places and on the right things. Residents would be keener on development in their local communities if they knew that section 106 contributions would be spent there, not in some other part of the large unitary authority area. I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s intervention and thank him for it.

Worse still, these developers often put in planning applications for big developments, have those fights with the local community, make promises about local infrastructure, secure their planning permission, and then nothing happens. The community sits and waits while more and more other developments get planning permission around them, but the developers do not get on and build the things they have got permission for. Research by the Institute for Public Policy Research found that 1.1 million homes that were given planning permission between 2010 and 2020 were not built by 2024. That is 1.1 million homes that defied the Government’s blockers and got through the planning system but did not get built. So far, this Government seem to have failed to grasp that problem—there is nothing in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that even acknowledges it. If the Government are determined to block the blockers and back the builders, perhaps they should take some action to stop the blocker builders that are failing to build out planning permissions that they have received, because they are having a real impact.

In Central Bedfordshire, planning inspectors have twice concluded that we cannot demonstrate a five-year land supply in recent months. That means that our countryside now stands virtually unprotected against speculative development, yet our communities have taken more than 20,000 new homes in the past 10 years. The Central Bedfordshire local plan sets out locations for thousands more, but despite its passage four years ago,

key strategic sites in that plan sit without a single shovel having been put in the ground. This Government must hold the builders to account to get on and build things, and not put the blame for our broken planning system on my constituents' desire to avoid flooded homes or see a GP.

Looking ahead, this Government are asking our communities in Bedfordshire to take tens of thousands of additional new homes. That future housing pressure will put our communities under huge additional strain. We need the Government to work with us to do more to ensure that developers deliver what they promise—and deliver it at the right point in development.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. He has rightly pointed to the fact that Bedfordshire has been doing more than its fair share of growth for two decades. We are growing at two and a half times the national average, which has put pressure on public services, particularly GP services. Biggleswade in my constituency has been waiting years for a health hub to deal with the growing population. Does my hon. Friend, like me, want to hear a bit more clarity from the Minister today about new towns? The potential for new towns comes on top of the pressure we have from organic growth. Tempsford in my constituency has been highlighted for one of those new towns. We do not know whether the Government plan for that to be a community of 15,000 or 30,000; there are some reports of 250,000. We have no clue whether this Government are committed to infrastructure first, either. What are my hon. Friend's thoughts on what the Government should be saying now about new towns such as the potential one in Tempsford?

Blake Stephenson: I thank my right hon. Friend—

Richard Fuller: Honourable.

Blake Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention—I forget which positions people have had over the years. I absolutely agree. I will discuss new towns later in my speech; it is important that the Government provide clarity, and clarity soon, on where those new towns will be built. In my constituency too, people want the infrastructure to be built at the right time—before people move into houses, not afterwards. Those promises need to be fulfilled much earlier in the development cycle. I mentioned some of those points just now.

I would like to see the Government either commit to requiring developers to deliver new infrastructure right at the start of development, or consider a programme of investment whereby the Government provide capital funding up front for councils to deliver the promised infrastructure, which they could then claim back directly from developers' section 106 contributions.

I would like to see the Government go further on flooding, and commit to a ban in all circumstances on development on functional floodplains. New homes mean nothing if they flood. Rivers and valleys have been here longer than we have, and the water that flows through them will not simply get out of the way because of the size of the Government's mandate. We must ensure that our housing policy keeps houses out of the way and restricts floodplain to amenity and recreational land as part of proper local placemaking strategies.

We must also ensure that the sustainable drainage infrastructure that gets installed with housing is effective and properly maintained. Too often, we see and hear of sustainable drainage systems that are nothing more than overgrown and sometimes blocked ditches, which offer no protection when the rain starts falling. We need a proper strategy to manage them, for example with ownership devolved to properly funded internal drainage boards that can provide expert maintenance. We need to embrace nature-based solutions to flooding—an opportunity presented by the Government's proposed environmental delivery plans if they are strengthened to include a duty to consider such solutions.

I would like to see the Government commit to properly funding and empowering planners in urban areas with high housing targets to identify and release appropriate sites for urban densification—a point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). For too long, urban authorities have been able to restrict land supply and the duty to co-operate to foist urban sprawl on neighbouring rural communities. Development that builds dormitories on our countryside rather than densification in our towns and cities is development that fails us all.

We must end the easy fixes and see a focused strategy to densify our urban areas. In rural Bedfordshire, without such a fix we face a real and significant risk that our villages will be forced under the duty to co-operate to take thousands more homes for Luton in addition to the thousands of homes we took last time. Sticking-plaster planning politics where housing targets mean nothing because they are consistently and repeatedly delivered elsewhere does nothing to resolve the housing crisis and nothing to appease the Government's blockers, who rightly wonder how it can be fair that they must continue to pay the price for failures in urban areas to deliver targets.

11.16 am

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this debate and on so clearly setting out his case and his concerns about the type of development and infrastructure provision he wants to see in his constituency.

Sustained economic growth is the only route to delivering the improved prosperity our country needs and the higher living standards that working people deserve. That is why it is this Government's No. 1 mission and why our plan for change commits us to build 1.5 million new homes and fast-track 150 planning decisions on major infrastructure projects in this Parliament.

To support the achievement of those milestones, the Government are progressing an ambitious planning reform agenda. In our first six months in office we overhauled the national planning policy framework to reverse the anti-supply changes made by the previous Government in December 2023 and to introduce a range of new pro-growth measures. Our landmark Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which will speed up and streamline the delivery of new homes and critical infrastructure, had its Second Reading on 24 March and begins its Commons Committee stage tomorrow. We have made a series of other changes, including taking steps to implement a new plan-making system that will help to facilitate

[Matthew Pennycook]

sustainable growth, and we intend to announce, and in many cases consult on, further changes to the planning system over the coming weeks and months.

The hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire raises a wide range of distinct issues, and I intend to cover as many points I can in the time available. However, he will forgive me if I set out at the start that, as I know he will appreciate, due to the quasi-judicial nature of the planning process and the potential decision-making role of the Deputy Prime Minister, I will not be able to comment on individual local development plans or individual planning applications, or for that matter on how individual local planning authorities may interpret national planning policy.

We believe in a plan-led system. As I never fail to say, it is primarily through local development plans that communities can shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development that their areas need, and those plans must remain the cornerstone of our planning system. However, we are clear that local decisions must be about how to meet housing need, not whether to do so at all. As the hon. Gentleman is aware, through the revised national planning policy framework, published on 12 December last year, the Government implemented a new standard method for addressing housing needs to increase supply and better direct new homes to the areas where they are currently least affordable and therefore most needed. I certainly recognise—it is a point well made—the contribution that his constituency and neighbouring constituencies have made to housing supply over recent years.

The revised standard method is now the mandatory starting point for planning for homes. Local planning authorities, including those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, are expected to use it, although as I am sure he will be aware, they can seek to justify a lower housing requirement on the basis of local constraints on land availability, development and other relevant matters such as national landscapes, protected habitats and flood-risk areas. We expect local planning authorities to explore all the options to deliver the homes their communities need, including by maximising brownfield land—he will know that we have set out proposals for a brownfield passport to prioritise and accelerate the development of such land—and also by working with neighbouring authorities on cross-boundary housing growth and, where necessary, reviewing green belt.

It is probably worth touching very briefly on the specific areas the hon. Gentleman highlighted about villages and rural areas. The Government are committed to supporting rural communities to build new homes for local people and, in particular, to boost the supply of rural affordable housing. It cannot be right that young people in particular are often unable to remain in the villages they grew up in. That harms not only them and their families, but the vibrancy and long-term viability of those rural communities. That is why national policy promotes sustainable development in rural areas and why we want to see more affordable housing in them. That will also contribute to our wider ambition to deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation.

National policy makes it clear that local authorities should ensure that their planning policies and decisions respond to local circumstances and support housing

that reflects local needs. That includes promoting sustainable development in local areas and ensuring that housing is located in areas where it will maintain and enhance the vitality of rural communities.

We also want more affordable housing in rural areas, and have already taken steps to support the delivery of that. For example, our golden rules for green development will ensure an affordable housing contribution 15 percentage points above the highest existing affordable housing requirement that would otherwise apply to the development, subject to a cap of 50%. That will unlock new affordable housing provision in a range of rural locations. Other measures, such as rural exception sites, can also make an important contribution. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, they allow local authorities to address the housing needs of rural communities by creating sites where local residents and others with a strong family or employment connection can live in affordable homes in perpetuity.

We recognise the strong support for those measures and the potential for strengthening policy in this area. That is why we made clear in our response to the consultation on the revised NPPF that we are giving further consideration to how we can better support rural affordable housing, including through the use of exception sites. That will include consideration of how we can drive greater uptake of rural exception sites and introduce a more streamlined approach. I will set out further details about our thinking on that matter in due course.

The hon. Gentleman and others rightly spoke about the need for up-front infrastructure for development. We recognise the importance of ensuring that new housing development is supported with appropriate infrastructure. He was wrong to say that we have taken no action in this area to date. The revised NPPF, published last year, includes changes designed to improve the provision and modernisation of various types of public infrastructure. He was absolutely right that we need to strengthen the existing system of developer contributions to ensure that new developments provide the necessary infrastructure that communities expect.

Richard Fuller: I am very grateful for the Minister's thoughtful speech. One of the problems with the provision of public services in Bedfordshire—and, I am sure, some other high-growth areas—is that we are dealing with a backlog, due to the fact that for many years the population has grown too fast for us to provide the additional services. If the Government come forward with a new town in Tempsford, it is important that the Minister addresses the legacy issue—the backlog—as well as the provision for the additional houses that will come with the new town.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, which is well made. I will certainly note that. We have had discussions about the matter previously.

In general terms, I will make a couple of points about infrastructure provision. First, local development plans should address needs and opportunities in relation to infrastructure, and identify what infrastructure is required and how it can be funded and brought forward. When a local plan is being prepared, practice guidance recommends that local authorities use available evidence about infrastructure requirements to prepare an infrastructure

funding statement. I have mentioned some of the other changes that we have made in terms of the NPPF, and hon. Members know that the Government also provide financial support for essential infrastructure in areas of the greatest housing demand through land and infrastructure funding programmes, such as the housing infrastructure fund.

I want to be clear that what we have announced so far is just a first step. We recognise that there is more to do in this area across Government and with the sector to ensure that the right infrastructure gets built. I say gently to Conservative Members that the previous Government did not manage to find a solution to this thorny problem in 14 years. There is no simple and straightforward answer, but we are cognisant of the need to do more in this area, not least to ensure that we get more buy-in from communities for the development we need.

I agree that there is too much bad development, which unhelpfully plays into the yimby/nimby debate—I have never engaged in it because I find it reductive in many ways. Although there is a group of people in the country who want no development whatever anywhere near them—we will happily take them on—there is a far larger group that wants good development, with good amenities and infrastructure. We must therefore ensure that exemplary development is the norm, not the exception, as it is now.

I want to quickly touch on green belt, because the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire mentioned urban sprawl. The manifesto on which the Government were elected is clear that the green belt has an important role to play, and that a number of the intentions behind it, including preventing urban sprawl, have served our towns and cities very well over many decades. We will always look to brownfield first. Ours is a brownfield-first approach, as was the previous Government's, and as I said, we took measures in the NPPF last year to strengthen that approach to brownfield land. We are also consulting on brownfield passports.

However, we have also been clear that there is not enough brownfield land in the country on brownfield registers, let alone in locations that are viable and that can be brought forward, to meet housing demand and need in full. We therefore need to look for a more strategic and smart way to release the right parts of the green belt—primarily and in the first instance low-quality, grey-belt land. Then, because of the value that the public attach to the green belt, we need a clear quid pro quo in terms of golden rules to ensure that sufficient rates of affordable housing and infrastructure come forward.

In the time left to me, I will cover a couple of the other issues raised by the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire: the environment, new towns and Universal Studios, although I am limited in what I can say on that final point. He will know that when it comes to development and the environment, we are absolutely convinced that we can do better than the status quo, which too often means both sustainable house building and nature recovery stalling. Instead of seeing environmental protections as a barrier to growth, we want to unlock a win-win for the economy and nature. As he will know, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will introduce a new nature restoration fund, which will unlock and accelerate development while going beyond neutrality to unlock

the positive impact that development can have in driving nature recovery. He has submitted many written questions to me on this point, so he is familiar with our approach, but I look forward to his engagement as the Bill progresses.

Blake Stephenson: Will the Minister take this opportunity to talk about building on flood plains? He may be coming on to this matter, but it is close to the hearts of my constituents and, particularly, constituents in North Bedfordshire. It is important that we do not build houses in areas that are going to flood.

Matthew Pennycook: I will turn to that point briefly in a moment.

On Universal Studios, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has agreed in principle to consider any proposal. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, given that the proposals remain subject to a planning decision, I cannot comment on any proposal, because to do so could prejudice the position of the Deputy Prime Minister. However, should the Department receive such a request, it will carry out a proper and impartial consideration of the planning merits of the proposed development.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to address flooding. We are clear that all local plans should be based on the best available flood risk data. The revised NPPF, which we published last year, makes it clear that developments of all sizes should use sustainable drainage techniques where the development could have drainage impacts, and should have appropriate maintenance arrangements in place. These changes will mean that sustainable drainage technologies are taken up more widely in new developments, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we continue to explore what further changes might be necessary. On a related matter, to avoid the issue of existing sewers not being able to adequately cope with new developments—we had an extensive debate just a few weeks ago about the investment cycle around the water sector being somewhat out of line with the planning cycle—there is more we can do in this area, and we are giving due consideration to that.

Finally, hon. Members are aware that the Government are committed to bringing forward the next generation of new towns. This Government's new towns programme will include large-scale stand-alone new communities, as well as a large number of urban extensions and urban regeneration schemes, which will work with the grain of development in a given area. The unifying principle will be that each of the new settlements will contain at least 10,000 homes, although we expect a number to be far larger. Collectively, we expect that they could provide hundreds of thousands more homes in the decades to come.

As I have said in relation to development more generally, we want exemplary development to be the norm, not the exception. The next generation of new towns must be well connected, well designed, sustainable and attractive places where people want to live, and must have all the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving communities. The new towns code will ensure that they deliver to the highest standards and help to meet housing need by targeting rates of 40% affordable housing, with a focus on genuinely affordable social rented homes.

[Matthew Pennycook]

As hon. Members are aware, last year we established the independent new towns taskforce, which is chaired by Sir Michael Lyons, to support this mission. It will submit its final report, including its final shortlist of recommended sites—I do not have that shortlist to hand, so I cannot tell the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) whether Tempsford or any other site in the country will be the location of a new town—this summer, and then Ministers will select from the recommendations. There will be local buy-in where appropriate, but we are clear that we will make the decisions in the national interest where we need to do so.

Blake Stephenson: Will the Minister confirm whether new towns will contribute to current house building targets or be in addition to them?

Matthew Pennycook: I think I have answered a written question on this matter, but I put it on the record again, because I understand the need for clarity in this area. The Government have been clear, not least because the new towns will begin construction only towards the end of the Parliament, that new towns will deliver over and above the targets produced by the standard method. We will keep under review how the taskforce's forthcoming recommendations on new towns interact with housing targets across the country.

To conclude, I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire once again on securing the debate. I thank him for outlining his views on planning and development in his constituency. The Government are committed to establishing a planning system that delivers the homes—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Intellectual Property: Artificial Intelligence

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of AI on intellectual property.

It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms McVey. I am grateful to all colleagues who have joined us here today. None of us will wish to prevent the inevitable, exciting power of change. This is not about resisting that change, but about shaping it, determining what comes next, for what and for whom. The debate grows louder and louder, and more important by the day. Today, I hope that we can begin to mark a landing zone of shared positions.

Our creative industries, with their might and strength, remain deeply alarmed. Copyright is the foundation of their creations, our UK industry and livelihoods, across music, films, books, news, investigations, coding, games, paintings and much more. The Government have made strong commitments to our creative industries, but their upcoming industrial strategy for growth will fall well short of the priority placed on those industries if it does not ensure legal peace of mind and action on artificial intelligence for those creating some of life's greatest experiences.

The Government and the Minister have said continually that they want creatives to be better paid and better looked after, with licensing in the AI age to come. Given the agreement on the need for licensing and remuneration, why do the loudest AI tech companies expect to train their machines on human-created content for nothing? The Minister has referred to learning the lessons of the Napster age. I ask him: does he agree that it was the assertion of copyright that ensured we live with Spotify, for example, and not a music industry cannibalised by piracy?

Artificial intelligence is reshaping life as we know it. Its extraordinary potential must be built on integrity. Ignoring rights, abandoning trusted status or undermining commercial principles make for bad policy and worse law.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Is he aware of the Society of Authors' petition, which has 50,000 signatures so far, calling for action following Meta's use of 7.5 million pirated books from the illegal LibGen database to train its Llama 3 AI? That is a blatant infringement of the authors' copyright.

Mr Frith: My hon. Friend makes a precise and excellent point. Seemingly by the day, we learn of whole sections of our creative industries having their work ripped off. I will come on to what we need to do.

We need an assertion of first principles: economic fairness and an honest day's pay for an honest day's work—the cost of doing business and paying one's way. Our mission for our creative industries cannot mean creative industry submission. The opportunity plan will not work if our creative industries are the opportunity cost. As Labour, we back the working people who make our creative industries so powerful.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate, because many of my Slough constituents have contacted me with concerns about the impact of AI on the intellectual property of creatives. We have a thriving UK creative industry, which contributed more than £120 billion to our economy in 2022. Just down the road from Slough, we have Pinewood studios and Shinfield studios, which have given us global hits over the years. Does my hon. Friend agree that those industries must be listened to properly before any legislative changes, to ensure that the film, book, media and other creative industries can continue to thrive?

Mr Frith: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and demonstrates both the economic might of these industries—the sheer size of their contribution—and the fact that this is Britain’s best industry, giving some of the best life experiences. I know how well my hon. Friend is thought of.

Creative industries must not be expected to forfeit their legal rights for uncertainty. There is no doubt that AI will unlock huge gains in our society. The story some tell is selective, though. We are told that only if we deregulate will we unlock the AI economic growth, that the UK must hurry up or fall behind and that regulation will only slow us down, but the urgency to get the deal done is theirs. It is no coincidence that this hurrying up has intensified as the first US judgment has found that AI training is not deemed fair use.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the creative industries have shown us that they are willing to engage and embrace AI? The *Financial Times* was the first UK publisher to sign a licensing agreement with OpenAI, and Shutterstock has just this month signed a research licence with Synthesia, a London-based AI start-up. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should seek to create a framework that facilitates more of these deals and ensures that small, independent creatives can access them, too?

Mr Frith: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is fundamental to future coexistence that the licensing and legal peace of mind that the industry requires, and is seeking, is uppermost in any future position that the Government take.

Let us take a closer look. We know that behind the AI models being created and trained are massive datasets, which are not built on transparency and trust, but on the unpaid labour of creators. Our concern must be to grasp the progress that AI presents, but not by dismantling or destroying a sector already giving Britain such substantial economic, cultural and social capital, both here and around the world. We are the creative superpower and our cultural exports are world class. Our IP industries are high-value, high-skilled and globally admired. Creative industries are not seeking to change the rules of the game; all they want is their rights to be upheld—rights that underpin the very licensing and remuneration that the Government have assured us, in person, are fundamental to any settled position.

The problem, though, is not uncertainty in the law, it is the opacity in the technology. UK copyright law is clear: if someone uses someone else’s work without permission, that is infringement. Arguments that cite complexity in an age of AI ignore the capabilities of the very web crawling under way.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate—we can see how important it is by the huge amount of people who have come to see the debate and who want to speak in it. Is he aware of the recent DACS survey of visual artists, most of whom live on pay under the minimum wage? That survey showed that 84% of artists would agree to license their work for fair remuneration. That would require a technical solution that is embedded in the metadata that is respected by AI and platforms. At the moment, anything uploaded on to our social media platforms has that metadata scraped. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in looking for solutions, the Government need to make sure that we legislate with that in mind?

Mr Frith: I agree, and as I am about to say, there is ample proof of the stripping away of that very metadata, which could be the identifying feature when it is being used and scraped. With AI models, rights holders cannot see what is being used. This is not a crisis of legislation; it is an absence of transparency, attribution and recompense for the very content and resource that those giant machines are being built with and from.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. The problem is not copyright law, but transparency and enforcement. My constituent Marion Todd, the author of the Detective Inspector Clare Mackay novels, found herself subject to LibGen, which the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) referred to. Does the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) agree that we need a full response from Meta, and that the new clauses that the Lib Dems have tabled will address future compliance?

Mr Frith: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention; I will expand on her point about transparency.

We must have transparency, and it needs to be granular, enforceable and practical. AI developers must be required to disclose which copyrighted works they used to train or fine-tune their models. TollBit’s “State of the Bots” report confirms:

“Whilst every AI developer with a published policy claims its crawlers respect the robots exclusion protocol, TollBit data finds that in many instances bots continue scraping despite explicit disallow requests for those user agents in publishers’ robots.txt files”.

Many AI companies say that this need not hamper AI, and it is their voices that I wish to amplify today. This is about creating a fair, functioning market for training data that benefits all sectors. Last month’s YouGov survey of MPs and the general public agrees: 92% of MPs believe that AI companies should declare the data used to train their models, 85% say that using creative work without pay undermines intellectual property rights, and 79% support payments to creators whose work is used in training. The public expect us to do our best for our UK industries, and that is why we are square behind the Government’s instincts on British Steel. Let us apply the Government’s instinct here, too, as well as their strong record and rhetoric on digital images, deepfakes, online harms and the principle that if it is illegal offline, it is illegal online.

Big tech always begins on the fringes before being regulated to the centre. We saw that most recently with age verification on app stores. Will the Minister commit

[Mr Frith]

to table Government amendments to the Data (Use and Access) Bill, in recognition of these supermassive concerns, to introduce a power to regulate for transparency, consent, copyright and compensation?

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend is making a very hard-hitting speech. Any reforms we introduce should ensure that artificial intelligence companies are more transparent about the materials they use to train their AI tools. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would benefit the development of AI while ensuring adequate protections for the creative industries and individuals' intellectual property?

Mr Frith: It is absolutely imperative that we strike the right balance. This is not about pitting one side against the other; it is about coexistence and mutual interdependence.

Will the Minister consider introducing a stronger framework for personality rights under the data Bill, as proposed by Equity and the wider creative sector, to improve protections against the illegal exploitation of artistic works by generative AI companies? Will he also explain why the position is still to bundle transparency in with copyright?

The stories are increasingly familiar: entire creations and careers are copied and remixed into data, while the original human creator and rights owner is left out of the conversation entirely. One visitor I met from big tech likened the training of an AI on copyrighted work to the use of a library, but that argument dries up when we remember that libraries pay for their books, and it wilfully ignores the scalability differences between machine learning and human inspiration. If a warehouse traded in stolen guitars or paintings, we would expect action, but in digital form online, theft is somehow not just tolerated but to be expected. The logic that the creative industry feels it is being asked to swallow is that because tech saw it, read it or heard it, it can have it, own it and resell it.

Copyright is not an obstacle but infrastructure—a cornerstone of the British economy. As we have heard from colleagues, it makes possible the £124 billion contribution to UK plc. We should not be weakening it with vague exceptions or opt-out regimes. The Berne convention, signed by more than 180 countries, makes it clear that creators must not have to exert their rights for them to exist, and they should not have to sue to keep them. This violation of international copyright norms will undermine international relations and investment in our country. It will see capital take flight and cause economic damage.

I would like to introduce a new thought to the Minister: please consider the relationship with managed risk and the freedom of expression in a regulated model that creativity needs and relies on. Creatives take risks, and express themselves freely. For growth, we need an economy of risk takers with the freedom to express without fear that they will be ripped off. Without the legal frameworks that protect copyright, risk will not be embraced and creativity will dry up or move away. That is why there is so little faith in an opt-out model, or a strategic direction placing the burden on individual creators to prevent their work from being taken by tech. A technical solution

does not yet exist to make such opt-outs meaningful. As they emerge, the same concerns and questions will need answering.

Worldwide, there is no comparable territory where this matter is settled. No functioning rights reservation has emerged in the EU, and in the US, further litigation is rife. California, the home of silicon valley, has a carve out—they do not get high on their own supply. The Chancellor and the leadership of our Government are right to propose on the world stage that the UK is a safe and certain bet for investment, but being the UK branch for US tech demands will not deliver that. New growth must ensure net growth. Industrial-scale unregulated scraping is not innovation; it is infringement. It erodes the commercial certainty that serious investors need.

In the regulation space, we have exciting growth opportunities in the emerging AI licensing sector. They demonstrate that copyright is well understood, and that there are scalable possibilities for licensing and ethical AI here in the UK. The emergence of platforms such as Created by Humans, Narrativ, ProRata, Getty Images, Musio, Adobe and We Are Human, and relationships between Sony Music and Vermillio, Universal Music and SoundLabs, Lionsgate and Runway, and news publishers and Microsoft all point to new licensing with a duty of candour. With these examples, will the Minister confirm if the Government are considering building new foundational models led and built by UK AI firms?

In conclusion, this rapid technological change demands that we confront the decisions in front of us as a creative powerhouse. In this defining moment, we must stand with those whose creativity shapes our culture, economy and shared human story. Algorithms may calculate, but it is the human creativity behind it all that pours heart, history, hope and the human into and out of every note, frame and story. AI cannot be allowed to redefine the soul of creation. If we erode the rights that protect our creators, we risk not only economic loss but strangulation of those voices that tell our stories, reflect our struggles and inspire our futures. Let us affirm that in Britain we value not just innovation but the irreplaceable human spirit behind creativity, and protect the rights that mean that we thrive, for now and for generations yet to imagine, to dream and to create.

Several hon. Members rose—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. This is a well-attended debate, but I hope to get everybody in. I have spoken to the Front Benchers: the Minister will have 10 minutes, and the Opposition spokespeople have agreed to go down to five minutes, so there will be a limit of three minutes per speech for Back Benchers. I hope that all hon. Members will be suitably aware of their fellow Members who want to speak, and I ask that interventions be interventions and not speeches, or I will stop you.

2.49 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) not only on securing this debate, and an excellent opening speech, but on his birthday.

One of the saddest things about this debate, and the pickle that the Government have led us into, is that it inadvertently pitches the AI sector and the potential for growth against our world-leading creative industries.

That almost caricatures our creators as luddites against innovation, and that could not be further from the truth. There is no appetite in the creative industries to restrict this technology across the sector. They recognise the potential of AI—so many are already using it, and that is borne out in the statistics. In 2023, a Deloitte survey said that 74% of digital artists are already using AI, along with 67% of film and motion creatives. Those numbers will only grow over time.

We hear from almost every quarter about the serious concerns over our £130 billion creative industries—that AI, left unchecked, will represent an existential threat to their growth and very existence. Incidentally, that growth has outstripped that of the wider economy since 2010. Despite the potential of AI, we know that our creative industries are growing at an incredible rate. They are our global superpower—economically and reputationally, and that does not happen by accident. Those industries rely on the strength of a gold-standard British intellectual property regime, and they have made it clear to the Minister—and to every one of us in this room—that watering that down would rip the carpet out from under a tried and tested growth industry.

AI needs creators and the data they provide—but that data must be paid for, not stolen. Ironically, big tech relies on the strong IP regime as well; I am sure no one was more surprised than I was when Sam Altman at OpenAI noted, with irony, that DeepSeek had exploited its open-source model.

The Minister and I agree that the best way forward is to promote transparency across the AI sector. Where we disagree is on the Government's prepared proposal for an opt-out system, which is utterly unworkable. That has been proven internationally. If they press on with this madness, we must find a way to safeguard the rights of creators by explicitly demonstrating where their work has been used in a commercial setting.

AI growth must not come at the cost of our creators and our world-leading creative industries. The two do not have to be mutually exclusive; there must be an opportunity here for this to be a country where both can flourish, in a transparent and accountable environment where everyone's talents are recognised. I ask the Minister once again to think long and hard before he does anything that could rip up the potential of our world-leading creative industries. Both can grow collaboratively and make this country so much stronger.

2.52 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I first declare an interest: my wife is a professional photographer.

People who create art in any form add value to the world. They inspire people, provoke ideas and push boundaries—and deserve to be fairly paid for it. In East Thanet alone, we have the famous names of J. M. W Turner, Vincent van Gogh, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Jane Austen—all inspired by that constituency, all having called it home. Current creatives who live there must be paid to be able to do the same.

The image of an artist in a garret has become romanticised to the point that it is almost used as an excuse not to pay creatives properly. The Government are currently taking the Employment Rights Bill through

its legislative stages and, once introduced, it will be genuinely transformative for people in low-paid and insecure work.

Simultaneously, the Government are consulting on proposals that could actively take away rights and protections from creative workers. The right to have one's work protected by copyright law is enshrined in British law. Copyright exists to protect not just the wealth of the individual but the wealth of the nation. It is fundamental to the success of innovators, entrepreneurs and creatives—and it is fundamental to our economy. The claim that AI and tech firms will take their business somewhere else if they do not have free access to people's work is, quite frankly, extortion. We do not expect or allow other industries to do that, so why do we think it is acceptable to force creatives to accept this deal?

I am not here to defend the status of our copyright laws—we are not starting from a high baseline in this country. Sadly, creatives are all too used to being ripped off and taken advantage of. The Government have acknowledged that our copyright regime is out of date, and I absolutely agree. However, it cannot be right that the answer is simply to make it harder for creatives—to make low-paid work even less rewarding and insecure work even more insecure.

If we choose to modernise copyright law to increase protections for our national cultural wealth, we can turbo-charge the growth potential of this industry. Currently, we are on a path to undermine an industry that is already insecure. One of the staples of British values is fairness; if someone does a fair day's work, they get a fair day's pay. Not only is allowing creatives to have their protection eroded not fair, but it is simply not British. We ask for simple fairness, the right to permit or protect, and the right to be paid.

2.55 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) not only on this debate, but on his birthday—I hope he goes on to enjoy himself much more than sitting in Westminster Hall for the rest of the day.

Of all the issues that the Government thought they would be confronting nine months after being elected, I do not think they thought they would be in some sort of spat with the creative industries, finding that they, almost as one voice, have real difficulties and issues with the Government initiative.

First, we have to pay tribute to the wonderful campaign that has been mounted over the past few weeks and months from all our artists and creatives. When everybody from Thom Yorke to Rupert Murdoch, from Paul McCartney to the director general of the BBC is upset, there really are difficulties. The Government asked the creative industries what they thought of their proposals, particularly of their preferred opt-out plan, and like a finely tuned chorus, the creative sector came back as one and told them it does not like it one bit.

Our constituents have been magnificent in the way that they have responded. For the 20-odd years I have been in Parliament I have tried to evangelise about the role of IP and the value of copyright, but one thing that

[Pete Wishart]

has come out of this consultation is that, inadvertently, this Government's clumsy attempt to martial this debate has made our constituents realise the value of copyright. They have got behind it and started to understand it and see that it is the basis of all the wonderful works they enjoy throughout their lives. They know it is our gold-standard copyright regime that gives our artists protection and remuneration and ensures that they are rewarded for producing all these wonderful works. One good thing that has come out of this is that the value of copyright has now started to be seen by all our constituents.

The Government are sincere in trying to bridge the gap between artificial intelligence and the creative industries, and they want to satisfy all sectors, but we have to see what we are up against—just have a look at some of the big tech companies' submissions to the consultation. Have a look at OpenAI's submission—even the opt-out proposal is too far for it; it wants unfettered access to our cultural treasure trove, without any inhibitions or difficulty. The first thing that the Minister has to say to the big AI companies is that our creative heritage—everything we have built in the past few decades—is not there to be plundered and taken for nothing.

We must make progress, and I really hope that the Government now decide that they will not pursue the opt-out proposal—it cannot work; there is no way that it could be a technical solution. We have seen that within the EU. The Government have to drop it. Look at this licensing system—the Minister has talked about it consistently in the past few weeks and months. Let us make sure that we unravel the idea of copyright from that of transparency; we have to make sure that those are separated. Let us use the Data (Use and Access) Bill—it is there in front of us, so why cannot we use it to make real progress on this issue?

2.58 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) on securing this timely and important debate. I would like to draw Members' attention to my membership of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain.

I hope Members had a restful Easter break. Many writers particularly look forward to Easter every year, not least because of the eggs, but towards the end of March we see the payment from the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society land in our bank accounts. For writers who depend on payments for secondary uses of their work, that money is a vital income stream in what is a harsh freelance existence. I love seeing where my television dramas that I wrote many years ago have been shown; this year I learned that Swedish children had watched my UK-based science fiction series set in a world without adults. Creativity knows no boundaries but neither, it seems, does generative AI.

Collection societies such as the ALCS and those representing other creative working people ensure that we receive fair payment, and that our rights are respected. The ALCS has paid out £700 million to writers since 1977. The point that I rise to make is that many scripts end up on the internet, along with novels, books and other published work. The Government have proposed

the introduction of a text and data mining copyright exception that would allow AI developers to use copyrighted works without explicit prior consent. One of the arguments put forward for that exception is that we need it because licensing does not work—but licensing does work. Rights-holders have been licensing their works to commercial users for over a century, adapting to emerging technologies and meeting the demand for multi-territorial licensing. Moreover, licensing is proven to provide commercial users with the legal certainty required for investment, while also protecting creators and rights-holders from unauthorised exploitation.

We cannot allow a lifetime of human creative endeavour to be gobbled up for free by the bots. This is the opportunity for the UK Government to lead from the front by ensuring that the Data (Use and Access) Bill includes granular transparency requirements so that AI companies must disclose what they use for free, and to put a stop to the unregulated scraping of creative content online. Freelancers are looking to this Labour Government to ensure that they are fairly rewarded for their work. We must protect our creative working people and ensure that their work pays, too.

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) on setting the scene so very well.

I believe that we sit at the crossroads of cutting-edge technology and the legal frameworks that govern creativity with the different ways in which artificial intelligence impacts on intellectual property rights. In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we can boast a historically strong and thriving culture of creativity across a very broad spectrum of the arts, science and technology. It is very important that we consider this issue.

Advancements in AI raise important questions about the protection of intellectual property, because who owns the output of an AI system? Is it the user, the developer, or the AI proprietor? Such questions inspire debate in boardrooms, courtrooms and centres of policymaking across the United Kingdom. In 2020, a UK-based artist used an AI tool to create a series of digital paintings that drew significant attention at a London gallery. The question that arose was this: who owns the copyright? The artist who used the AI technology, the developer of the AI system, or no one at all?

The current law, section 9(3) of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, states:

“In the case of a...work which is computer-generated, the author shall be taken to be the person by whom the arrangements necessary for the creation of the work are undertaken.”

The problem with that, of course, is that it was written decades ago, before such technology as AI was even thought about. The challenge is when we address the nuances of today's AI systems, where creativity is often a joint effort of human input and machine output.

The outcome of the consultation is important, because it will shape the creative industries for years to come. As the UK is a global hub for technology and law, with institutions such as the Intellectual Property Office and a thriving creative economy, it can set the precedent for how AI and intellectual property can co-exist. I believe

that the first step must be legal clarity; we should revisit the 1988 Act specifically to address AI-generated works and conventions by creating a new category that pertains to AI-assisted intellectual property, with its own rules, including on ownership. We should also invest in education to empower creators and businesses to navigate the evolving intellectual property landscape. Finally, we need to balance innovation with fairness. As AI reshapes the landscape, we must ensure that the benefits of AI-driven innovation are shared in a way that is equitable and that does not place a monopoly of power in the hands of an elite few or restrict raw human integrity.

We should embrace this moment as an opportunity to redefine intellectual property for the age of AI and a future where technology and human enterprise work hand in hand to create a more resourceful and ambitious society. The time to start doing that is this day and in this debate.

3.4 pm

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) on securing this debate, particularly as it is his birthday. The debate comes at an important time for the country as we grapple with the ways in which we can continue to nurture our fantastically successful creative and cultural sector, and supercharge our economy with the opportunities that AI offers.

Across Devon, our creative industries contribute more than £250 million to the local economy every year, and support more than 11,000 jobs, with hubs in my city of Exeter, Plymouth, Totnes and our coastal towns, where there is a thriving festival scene. The sector is not only economically significant but deeply rooted in our communities. It is powered in our region by freelancers, microbusinesses and independent venues. It is also a driving force in regional regeneration and tourism.

Exeter is a shining example of what creative investment can achieve. As a UNESCO city of literature, it stands among a global network of places that recognise the power of human words to connect, include and inspire. Exeter's literary legacy stretches back over 1,000 years from the 10th century Exeter Book to the dynamic work of contemporary writers and festivals today. Our city holds institutions such as the Exeter Phoenix, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter library and the Quay Words writing hub. They are not just cultural assets, they are civic anchors promoting literacy, community engagement and creative opportunity for all.

We also have a thriving digital and gaming scene, a world-class climate science sector and a burgeoning life sciences economy. Creative tech includes an emerging immersive media, film and digital design sector across the city and the wider region. Although we have a creative economy that we want to grow, we also want to seize the opportunity of AI, which is able to change completely the way our economy works and will supercharge our science and creative tech sectors as well.

The Government are already creating space for those opportunities with the AI opportunities action plan. I have written to the Department in support of the Exeter science park's application to host a new AI growth zone. Building the UK's sovereign compute capacity to enable UK-based AI models and cloud computing across the country, including in Exeter, will

be vital to securing the investment, jobs and future tech creativity that will continue to shape our lives, and meet some of the great challenges of our times, including the very greatest—climate change.

That must be built fairly, however, and not at the expense of human creators. I am a member of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, and we recently held a joint session with our Culture, Media and Sport Committee colleagues to delve further into these issues. I support our joint submission to the Minister on that basis. I want to ensure that the Government are working hard to find a balance between protecting the rights and nurturing the growth of our cultural and creative sector, while also grasping the opportunities of UK-based AI development.

Will the Minister commit to working with stakeholders involved in the area, cultural and technological, to build a system—possibly a globally unique and groundbreaking system that will be embraced by others in the future—built on technological solutions, providing granular transparency, consent, fair remuneration, and respecting and building on our copyright laws while also enabling AI training models to be built and trained here?

3.8 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) for securing this important and timely debate, not only on his birthday but on that of one of our greatest creatives ever, William Shakespeare. I hope the hon. Member does not also succumb on his birthday like he did. *[Interruption.]* Did he not know that? Shakespeare was born and died on the same date.

My son, Isaac Slade, is studying musical theatre at university and wants to spend his life in the performing arts, a career he knows will be challenging. He and his peers expect long hours, low pay and the need to support themselves with hospitality and teaching work, all so that they can do what they love and entertain us all. The Government's current position on copyright and AI risks making those careers even more precarious.

Gerard, an actor from Upton in my constituency, wrote to me calling the position dangerous. Margaret, a designer, explained that she no longer shares her work online. She is afraid it will be copied without her consent, without protection and without pay. She said:

"If this is allowed to happen, we shall become a dying breed. If we don't get paid for our artwork, we will eventually go out of business."

Are the Government suggesting that performers and creatives should work for free? I recently held a roundtable in my constituency when a musician, Peter from Wimborne, shared something that shocked me. He told me that when I am out walking my dog, listening to my calming classical playlist, the chances are that some of that music has been interspersed with AI-generated music. I had no idea. I am sure most people would be deeply concerned to learn that they might unknowingly be enjoying work taken and replicated without the original artist's permission.

Today I met Equity, who explained the risks in very simple terms. Just as PRS ensures musicians are paid when their track is played on the radio, the same principle applies to the use of a voice or performance on screen. But without those solid copyright positions

[Vikki Slade]

remaining in place, AI will use that voice without their knowledge, consent, or payment from people around the world.

The Government argue that loosening copyright laws may encourage AI companies to set up here, but where is the evidence? Why would they move here where their costs are higher if they can access that content from around the world? If they do come here, why should they be able to get rich off the voice of an actor, the song of a musician or the design of an artist? The people who created the work deserve to keep what is theirs. That is why I urge the Government to scrap the opt-out clause and support new clauses 2 to 6 to the Data (Use and Access) Bill, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins), which will protect UK creatives by requiring transparency in using the data, enforcing compliance of copyright, giving power to the Information Commissioner and preventing data from being scraped. Our creative sector is the soul of our culture and the heart of our economy. We must protect it.

3.11 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) for securing this important debate.

The question about machine learning tools—AI—and their use in intellectual property is a key test of our time. What we decide to do now will have ramifications culturally, socially and economically long into the future. Large language models, a form of machine learning such as ChatGPT, have already used pirated and copyrighted material without the consent of the people who created it to train their models. It should be self-evident that that is a problem. It is a well-established right that people retain ownership of their work, with limited exceptions for education or critique. We have clear copyright laws. We have collective licensing schemes, yet those have been ridden over roughshod by machine learning developers.

I am not a luddite. I am very excited about the potential for machine learning to make our lives better, just as other technology has done before. The potential for large datasets to identify health concerns and make diagnostics more accurate—with a programme able to predict the folds of proteins, saving scientists time that they can spend on the next thorny issue—is exciting stuff. It is important to remember that technology is morally neutral. The technology itself is not good or bad. It is a tool—nothing more, nothing less—and we as humanity get to decide how we use that tool. To use that tool, we need to understand it, at least in terms of how we interact with it.

For example, we need to know that AI can lie. It will invent things. One of the best examples I have heard was when a large language model tool was asked by a huge “Doctor Who” fan to tell him about “Doctor Who” episodes and it simply made some up—perfectly plausible episodes that did not exist and have never existed. If anyone here is ever tempted to ask ChatGPT, be warned: it might not tell you the truth.

As well as understanding the potential and limitations of the technology itself, it is also important that we create frameworks that align with our values and do not roll over for mega-corporations that really do not care for our values. Meta, which owns Facebook, has argued that individual creative works have no value in themselves as they individually barely affect the performance of large language models. As a *Vanity Fair* article pointed out, it is a bit like an orchestra arguing that it should not pay an individual musician because the solo bassoon cannot play the whole piece by itself.

If large language model tech as a whole relies on creative works, and it does, then some form of respect for the rights of creatives must be found. We have existing copyright laws. We could simply enforce them and ensure that the tools are there to do so. I urge the Government to treat machine learning for what it is: a tool to be used well or used badly. Let us choose well.

3.14 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I am the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group and have worked with Equity through the Performance Alliance and the Musicians’ Union for the last 25 years. I just want to get on the record the union perspective. As other Members have said, often in these debates the workers have been portrayed as luddites. It is quite the reverse; it is the workers who are creating these mechanisms.

As hon. Members have said, all that the trade unionists are asking for is for their rights to be protected—protected through collective bargaining, which is the mechanism that we have used for over a century for negotiations between the trade unions and the trade associations. The request is straightforward: that copyright law should be respected. The hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), who secured the debate, eloquently and comprehensively set out that that law is actually not unclear or disputed—it exists. The simple rule is that if someone wants to use someone else’s material, they must secure a licence with the rights holder. As a result, through that collective bargaining mechanism, we can protect everybody in future.

Ms Billington: Copyright is often enforced by people who have licensing departments to enforce it, but smaller creatives, such as many in my constituency, find it extremely difficult to enforce copyright as it currently stands. That is one reason why we should use this opportunity to strengthen our copyright law to protect those low-paid workers.

John McDonnell: That is exactly right. One of the key issues raised by the hon. Member for Bury North is that lack of transparency, because people are not even aware that their stuff is being used until a later date, and then they are outraged. The role of Government is to ensure that they can enforce that the AI being developed is compliant with the regulations. In addition to that, as has been mentioned, the Information Commissioner has made very clear the role of GDPR and how it applies in such cases, and that the issue is about ensuring, from Government, that there is proper enforcement.

The simple message from this debate to the Minister is to just drop the Government’s proposed text and data exception. Several hon. Members have made it clear

that nobody has discovered an effective opt-out mechanism that is applicable at this time—maybe some time in the future, but certainly not in the immediate future.

The other issue is that the performers' rights framework needs to be updated now. That demand has come from virtually every trade union, and other bodies representing individual artists as well. That is the debate we should be having—about how we could update and improve that framework, and about enforcing existing GDPR.

One of the briefings that I saw said that this country is a gold mine of creativity and creative content. Well, at the moment, there is a gold rush on. It is a wild west out there, and the people benefiting are the big US tech companies. I do not want to push the analogy too far, but we need a sheriff. That is the role of Government; the Government should not be taking us backwards rather than moving us forwards.

I hope that the Minister leaves this debate with a full understanding of the tenor not just of what is needed, but of the cross-party strength of feeling. We need the Government to intervene positively to protect people's rights and to protect that gold mine of creativity in this country.

3.18 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) for securing this crucial debate—a great way to spend his birthday.

I want to draw attention to the fact that my partner works in publishing. My background is not in publishing or the creative industries, but in the data and tech industry, and I am excited by what it can help us to achieve. I rise to speak not only about artificial intelligence, but about the kind of country we want to be in the decades ahead. We are at a crossroads. The United Kingdom is positioning itself as a global leader in AI, and rightly so—AI has the potential to transform every sector of our economy, from healthcare to transport and from education to climate science—but, as we drive innovation forward, we must also ensure that our values are aligned.

If we want to be the best place in the world to start, scale and grow an AI company, we must also be the most trusted. Trust is not built through ambition alone; it is built through transparency, fairness, respect for the rule of law and the protection of intellectual property. At present, many of the most powerful AI models have been trained on vast quantities of copyrighted material—books, articles, art, music and software—and often without the consent, knowledge or compensation of the people who created it. That is not hypothetical; it is happening now. In the last week, we have seen some big names in tech say that they want IP law to be ripped up altogether. I wonder how they would feel if tech firms with deeper pockets and bigger legal teams than theirs decided to simply take what they have. Pulling up the ladder of IP law may no longer seem such an attractive prospect.

Let us be absolutely clear: copyright is not an inconvenience or a technicality. It is the legal and moral framework that ensures that creators are rewarded for their contributions. Some people will argue that requiring AI companies to comply with copyright law would hinder innovation, but the opposite is true: legal certainty

enables innovation. What stifles innovation is a regulatory vacuum where only the largest, best resourced firms can afford to operate in the grey areas of the law. We should not accept a model where creativity becomes collateral damage in the pursuit of speed or short-term profit for shareholders. Governments must prioritise the concerns of citizens.

Let us establish a clear, transparent and enforceable framework for the use of copyrighted content in AI training, and let us not waste any time or kick this can down the road by waiting for the results of the copyright and AI consultation. Let us act now. Let us amend the Data (Use and Access) Bill to ensure that companies providing generative AI services in the UK must comply with UK copyright law and be transparent about the data fuelling their models. After all, they should know what data they are utilising. It can be done; companies including Adobe, 273 Ventures and Flawless AI are doing it. Experts have made it clear that no opt-out models work. We have an opportunity to be world leaders—let us lead.

3.21 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) for securing this important debate. I should declare that my husband is a voiceover artist.

As with every technological leap forward, whether from theatre to cinema or television to streaming, protecting the rights and income of our creators does not create a barrier to innovation or growth. As we move into an AI-powered future, it is even more crucial to protect creators with transparency, consent and compensation for the content used to train AI models.

Our creative industries are a great British success story, worth more than £125 billion to the UK economy and supporting more than 2.4 million jobs. What underpins that success is the principle that those who create content are paid for it, and copyright protections have been the bedrock of that principle for decades. The case for updating UK copyright law for training AI is that the current framework is unclear, but there is no such ambiguity. If someone plays music in a club without a licence or sells counterfeit DVDs, they are breaking the law. If AI companies wish to train their models on copyrighted content, they have to get consent to do so.

AI companies may be harder to hold to account because their models are opaque, but that makes this a transparency and enforcement issue, not a legal one. Our content, our books, our journalism and our music are the oil needed to fuel generative AI systems. I do not think anyone would argue that oil should be mined and used for free by any other industry, so why should it be any different for the precious resource that is creative content? Creating generative AI systems with no accountability and no remuneration is not innovation; it is simply exploitation.

I welcome this Government's commitment to our creative industries and to finding a solution fit for the future, but the current proposal of an opt-out system is unworkable and unfair. The Government even acknowledge that the technology to implement an opt-out system does not exist. We must uphold the rights of our content

[Natasha Irons]

creators by upholding copyright protections and giving creators the transparency, consent and compensation they deserve.

3.23 pm

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) for securing this debate and wish him a happy birthday. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a member of the Musicians' Union. Long ago, I worked in the music industry, so I know musicians not as headlines or playlists, but as people. Most of all, I am a fan—a fan of what they make and of what their work means to our shared national life—but I am inundated with concerns from them. Their fears are immediate and tangible, because the truth is that the music industry has long enabled the legal and largely unchallenged exploitation of those who make music.

Streaming has gutted the income of songwriters and performers. More than half of professional musicians now earn less than £15,000 a year, which is much less than the minimum wage. Their songs are played more than ever, but they are not seeing the money; someone else is. If copyright law is not handled correctly, musicians will once again lose out—used, imitated, unpaid.

Any serious discussion about AI must include a clear demand for transparency from companies developing such tools. Creatives deserve to know when and how their work is being used. Without that, there can be no fairness. To me, it is very simple: no one should be allowed to use someone's work without permission or payment. That is called theft. Sidelining the creative sector that already exists comes with a bill, and right now, working artists are being asked to foot it. We in the Labour party believe in making work pay. That has to include the work of musicians.

Some of the proposals could favour faceless corporations that treat creativity as data and dress up appropriation as progress. Nothing is inevitable about that. We value culture, we value work and we must value those who create. I will end by repeating the plea of my friend from the other place, Lord Brennan of Canton:

"I want to make a plea for human intelligence and EI—emotional intelligence—over AI, artificial intelligence. AI is a great servant, including to the creative industries, but it would be a terrible master if we allowed it to become that."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 February 2025; Vol. 843, c. 848.]

3.26 pm

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) on securing such an important debate. To me, it is about culture, creativity and human talent, and about people reaching their full potential in life and making sure that that is not taken away from them by things that can happen. This morning, I hosted a drop-in with Equity, and I met the Association of Photographers. They are worried, and rightly so: 58% of Association of Photography members say that they have already lost work to AI. That is more than £14,000 on average already lost by each professional photographer.

That is not work going; that is work being taken by generative AI. More than 15 billion AI-generated images are out there now, trained by using people's intellectual property without permission, payment or those people even knowing. Photographers post their pictures on their websites, then AI companies send in web crawlers to scrape them—no consent, no warning. That is data theft, plain and simple. It breaks data protection laws, and we should call it out for what it is, because once scraped, they are gone—people cannot retrieve their property.

We would not allow that in any other sector—it is not right. We would not let someone steal our tools, so why would we let them steal our work, our face or our voice? That is robbery. Actors are finding their faces and voices turning up in ads and games that they never agreed to. AI watches people work and copies them. No one should lose their job and their creative talent to a machine that is trained on their own work—it is your face, it is your voice, it is your style, and it should be your choice. Consent must come first—no yes, no use.

Let us fix this. Let us give working people the rights they need in the AI age. We have copyright law for a reason, so let us update and strengthen it. Tech companies cannot just take—there must be rules and no opt-outs. There have to be protections and there has to be fair pay. Protect our artists, our voices and our jobs. This is not science fiction; it is happening right now, and we need to act now before irreparable damage is done.

3.28 pm

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) on securing this important debate and, in the words of my favourite artist, Stevie Wonder, "Happy birthday to ya".

In my constituency, I have a brilliant example of how technological advances can expand the performing arts in the best way, with the wonderful "ABBA Voyage" and its famous digital avatars, or ABBAatars, as we call them. I have, however, also been contacted by more than 200 constituents, because we have a thriving creative hub in east London. They have very real concerns about what the development of AI means for their careers—the careers that they have devoted their lives to.

Motion designers, photographers and illustrators have been in touch with me, as has "The voice of the Northern line". To give an example, a few people who work in illustration have written to me with their concerns, outlining that without suitable safeguards, their careers and businesses are being put at risk, not to mention their creative output, as we have already heard from hon. Members. The creative output of these illustrators is their craft and their life's work, which they have honed—in some cases, they have spent decades training—but it is all at risk of being cannibalised. There is a tension between big-scale changes from technology and AI, which can enrich our lives, and the impact that those changes can have on individual creators, who are the engine of the culture that we consume. That tension needs to be reconciled.

I am proud that Britain is leading the way in so many technological advances, but we absolutely have to get to the bottom of the concerns that my constituents and

others mentioned today have outlined. Could the Minister provide any assurances about how the Government are addressing those concerns and showing that they are listening to the voices of our constituents? Could he also outline how the Government will ensure that artists and creators retain control over their voice, style and licences?

Esther McVey (in the Chair): To fit in the last couple of speakers, we will go down to two minutes per speech, but I will get everybody in.

3.30 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Cadeirydd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), who spoke excellently, and there have been many excellent speeches today. I will speak briefly, but I want to raise some specific points. First, I thank Valerie Dunmore, who is the chair of the Society of Women Writers and Journalists, which was established in 1894. She came to see me specifically to raise these issues, and this gives us an idea of what is at stake.

Turning to the creative industries in Wales, we have heard how much the creative industries contribute in other areas, and in Wales itself, the figure was £1.5 billion. There are over 3,500 creative businesses in Wales; that number is increasing and the freelance workforce is growing. These industries all play an important part in preserving and spreading the Welsh language and culture. Film, drama, literature and music all sustain and produce a unique Welsh way of life, through the medium of both Welsh and English.

In February this year, newspapers and news organisations across Wales devoted their leading articles to this issue, warning that what is threatening their industry could have potentially catastrophic consequences for Welsh journalism. Creative groups in Wales, such as Teledwyr Annibynnol Cymru, say that they do not support an opt-out process. Instead, they suggest that any new regime should require creators to opt in, meaning that web crawlers cannot simply scrape content unless permitted to do so.

I wanted to bring the Wales-specific issues to the fore because the risk is that we always assume that the Welsh language works in the same context as that of the English language. It does not. We look at English creators as being vulnerable, but Welsh creators are even more so. I urge the Minister to respond by stating what impact assessment has been carried out in relation to the creative industries in Wales, and specifically the Welsh language, given its vulnerabilities.

3.32 pm

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) for securing this important debate. This is a subject of huge concern to anyone who works in the creative industries. I have been contacted by many people in my constituency who are concerned about how the future will impact them and their work. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for visual arts and artists, and we are looking at this issue closely to ensure that artists' copyright is fully protected.

AI can provide many opportunities across many industries. Indeed, we have already seen AI images grace the cover of magazines and AI artwork sold at auction. However, it also comes with challenges, such as how we can ensure sustainable growth while safeguarding the value of people's artistic work. Artists and creatives rightly have significant concerns about how AI could negatively impact their work, future opportunities and copyright. The breakneck speed at which AI is developing means that there is a widening skills gap, with people playing catch-up to ensure that their work remains relevant and current.

The role of Government in this emerging sector is crucial. Consent, control and remuneration for intellectual property must be at the heart of how the Government manage AI development. To prevent exploitation, we must ensure that the onus of protecting rights and intellectual property is not placed on rights holders. There are huge growth opportunities across the creative industries, worth billions to our economy. Our legal frameworks for AI and copyright must support artists and creatives to facilitate the protection of their intellectual property. Rights holders must be able to make nuanced decisions about the potential use of their work through standardised systems and be fairly compensated for that use. It is the role of Government to ensure that copyright is protective and enforced, so let us do that.

3.34 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) for securing this important debate.

A study by the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers found that people working in the music industry could lose up to a quarter of their income by 2028 as a result of generative AI. Those losses would happen on two fronts: unremunerated and unauthorised use of their work, and competition from AI-generated output. In opposition, the now Government proposed to grow the creative economy and create good jobs right across the country. That was rightly welcomed, but there is significant concern about the proposed opt-out approach to text and data mining. I add my voice to the concerns about the removal of Baroness Kidron's amendments from the Data (Use and Access) Bill. The Government previously said that the Bill was not the right vehicle for such action, so I would welcome some clarification: if not now, when?

The EU has had an opt-out system for text and data mining since 2019, but no effective rights reservation solutions have been developed in six years. That system was introduced before the widespread adoption of AI, and the EU is now trying to retrofit solutions.

The Government have outlined that AI companies and creative industries would need to collaborate to solve these problems, so I would appreciate some guidance from the Minister about the work that is happening in that space. I know that the Government are waiting for the results of their consultation, but many creators would appreciate clarity today about the work that is taking place. The UK's creators are asking not for special treatment but for fairness and for the unique value of their work to be recognised and protected in the digital age. Let us make sure that the law keeps pace not only with technology but with justice.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I thank Members for keeping so keenly to the time limit, which has allowed us to get everybody in.

3.36 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the birthday boy, the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), on securing this important debate.

In my constituency, we have thriving creative and tech industries off the back of GCHQ—Cheltenham has a lot of creative businesses. When I hosted my roundtable with the creatives, they told me that they are extremely worried about what they assume is being proposed in the Government's consultation. When I talk to tech start-ups, they say they are also concerned about that because they are worried that the things they are doing to innovate are being scraped. That is a concern from an economic growth perspective, in both directions, and the Government need to acknowledge that.

Intellectual property rights protect human ingenuity. They are the legal and moral foundations that allow creators to share in the value of what they create, but artificial intelligence is blurring the line between human and machine authorship, and is raising urgent and complex questions. Who owns an AI-generated piece of music trained on thousands of copyrighted songs? How do we enforce rights when the inputs and outputs are hidden behind proprietary algorithms? The answer must be that creators own the rights to their work, and those rights must be protected.

For centuries, creators have honed their craft through years of study, practice and transformation. That contributes to what we all enjoy about the creative industries, but AI now allows machines to ingest and remix millions of works in seconds, fundamentally altering the relationship between inspiration and creation. If we talk to tech companies about this, we find that they do not quite grasp the difference between their innovation and that of the human mind. That unprecedented scale and speed demands stronger, not weaker, protections. Our creative industries generate £126 billion annually and are central to our economy and cultural identity. As AI continues to reshape content production, the intellectual property rights of our writers, musicians and artists must be safeguarded, not weakened.

As we argued during the debates on the Data (Use and Access) Bill, when innovation outpaces regulation, we risk losing public trust and undermining the creative industries that employ 2.3 million people across the country. That is bad for our economy. Throughout the debates on data legislation, we have consistently argued that consent must not be an afterthought but should be the default. If a human being has created something, they have the right to know how it is being used and to be fairly recognised and remunerated for that use. That principle must carry through to how we approach AI and intellectual property.

The tech companies claim that an opt-in system would be too technically complex to implement. Well, they would, wouldn't they? But at its heart, this debate is not about technical feasibility. It is about being willing to respect creators' rights from the outset, preventing theft, as Members have said, and supporting our valued creative industries. We have also warned against innovation washing: the idea that technical progress should come

before ethical scrutiny. It is not anti-innovation to protect creators, but quite the opposite. A fair IP framework is what allows our creativity and innovation to thrive, and it is good for our economy, too.

So what must we do? First, we must ensure that web crawlers and AI models are bound by existing copyright law. That is why the Liberal Democrats have tabled amendments to the Data (Use and Access) Bill that would enforce existing copyright protections, rather than weakening them through a suggested opt-out system. Secondly, we need meaningful transparency. Our amendments would increase data and identity transparency for crawlers and models, ensuring that creators know how and where their work is being used to train AI systems. Thirdly, we need a clear path for consent and compensation. We have seen in the data Bill debates how opaque data-collection practices undermine public confidence. That lesson must apply here. Creators should have the right to opt in or opt out of their work being used in AI training, and there must be mechanisms for meaningful, proportionate compensation.

I also urge the Government to lead internationally on this issue. We have an opportunity to establish stronger protections that better serve our creative sector. The Independent Society of Musicians, the Authors Guild, the British Copyright Council and the Association of Illustrators—to name just a few of the many organisations representing hundreds of thousands of creators—all support that stance. The global nature of AI necessitates co-ordination through the World Intellectual Property Organisation and alignment with international partners, but British creators deserve robust protections that travel with their work across international borders.

This debate has repeatedly shown that, across party lines, we believe that creators must be protected—that is true of those who speak on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, the Government, the Conservatives and the nationalists, and those elsewhere, too. Creators must be at the centre. Data and innovation policy must work for people, not just for platforms, algorithms or corporations. Let us remember that behind every dataset are human stories: the novelist who spent years crafting her narrative; the musician who refined his composition through countless hours of practice; the visual artist whose unique perspective shapes our cultural landscape. Their rights are not obstacles to innovation, but its very foundation.

3.42 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and to respond on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition in this very well-attended, knowledgeable and thoughtful debate. Given that so many Members have taken part, I can only make some brief remarks.

I want to focus on principles, which came up quite a few times throughout this debate. In a complex area, it is principles that help us get through. It seems to be tradition in this debate to say happy birthday to the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith)—he will be clipping this so that it can go out on his social media. He spoke with knowledge and passion, and there is not much to disagree with in what he said. He also mentioned what I see as the core principles—transparency; the ability to enforce copyright; the ability to demonstrate

where data comes from, so that we can see who owns it and what the root trace is; and a technological solution linked to that, in terms of demonstrating data ownership.

I also mention my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), the Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, who reiterated this week, importantly, that all companies need property rights to be enforced, and that these two are not mutually exclusive. I thank her for her extensive work in this area to push forward this debate.

The previous Government were committed to the UK being at the cutting edge of tech and creative industries, and we remain committed to that in Opposition. We have heard the concerns of the creative industries loud and clear, but we do not believe that there is anything to be gained by treating the emergence of AI as some sort of zero-sum game, where one industry wins and another fails. It should not be an either/or. This needs to be mutually inclusive, not mutually exclusive, and we believe that it is possible to achieve that.

This is a challenging and complex area to get right. Solving this problem is not simple, particularly if we look at what is happening internationally and at extra-jurisdictional issues. Quite simply, other areas have not fixed this either. If there was a straightforward solution for this problem, it would be in process right now. It is important to recognise that from the outset, and to recognise the challenge facing the Minister in fixing the problem, but I have ambition for him. I believe that he can fix it, and I look forward to him doing so over the course of the next year. It is in this direction that we as Opposition want to take things forward.

We believe that getting this area of policy right will mean focusing on some key principles. Most importantly, there should be proportionate transparency in our AI industries about how they use creative content to train their models and generate content. That should be combined with recognition and enforceability of creative rights. The development of technology in the form of a readily accessible digital watermark will be instrumental in helping creatives protect their work online. Start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises in our growing AI industries need to be supported to develop their models in a way that respects the rights of creatives. In that regard, the AI opportunities action plan identified the need to unlock public and private datasets to enable innovation and attract international talent and capital.

We tabled a series of pragmatic amendments to the Data (Use and Access) Bill in Committee that would have committed the Secretary of State to putting in place a plan to achieve those important aims within a reasonable period after the conclusion of the Government's consultation on copyright and AI. We understand that the Government have received in excess of 11,500 consultation responses from stakeholders, which they are in the process of analysing. Given the concern that their original plans caused in our creative industries, we welcome the Minister's announcement, following the closure of the consultation, that the Government have taken a second look at their preferred approach to regulating the sector. In particular, we welcome the renewed emphasis on the need for increased transparency about how models are trained, so that creatives can enforce their rights. This is a key area that has come up throughout the debate, and we called on the Government to set out an informed plan in Committee on the data Bill.

We appreciate that the impact of AI on intellectual property requires proper and careful consideration. We will work constructively to support the creation of policy and plans in this fundamentally important area. If we get it right, there will be tremendous economic and societal benefits to growing our AI sector and supporting our creative sector to continue to thrive. It is time for the Government to be clear about their plans, in order to create certainty for the AI and creative industries about the way forward and help promote an environment of confidence, paving the way for investment and growth.

3.47 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Ms McVey, I am sure that if you were not in the Chair, you would be participating in this debate, because I know that you have an interest in this area not only as a Member of Parliament, but personally. I am not sure whether there is a recording of your performance in "The Vagina Monologues" years ago, but there are many other recordings of you around, and I am sure you would want to enforce your copyright in relation to them as well.

Today is not only the 48th birthday of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) and Shakespeare's 461st birthday, but Turner's 250th birthday. I suppose we could all join in singing "Happy Birthday" since, interestingly enough, it came out of copyright in 2015 because Warner Chappell lost a lawsuit over whether it maintained the copyright. The fact that people had to pay for it is one of the reasons that it rarely appeared in films and instead people ended up singing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow"—or "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow"—which always seemed rather odd.

I will not go through all the individual contributions to the debate, if that is all right with Members, because I want to deal directly with the specific issues as much as I can. My hon. Friend, whom I congratulate on securing the debate, talked about a landing point, and that is what I will try to talk about today.

There are some things that I think we all agree on. First, an honest day's pay for an honest day's work is a fundamental principle not just of the Labour party, but of the whole of British society in how we order ourselves. Another hon. Member said that creators deserve to be paid. I completely and utterly agree, and so do the Government. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) referred to the performers' rights framework. He is quite right: that does need some review, and we are looking at it. Interestingly enough, in one of the very early Westminster Hall debates I took part in, way back on 12 June 2002—the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), who is sitting across the Chamber today, led the debate that day—I said that we need to look at the performers' rights framework. I completely agree that creators need to be remunerated.

Secondly, it is patently wrong to use pirated material to train large language models. I have to be careful, because—I declare my own interest as an author and member of the Society of Authors—it has been noted in several newspapers that my own work was scraped in the use of the Library Genesis dataset by Meta Platforms Inc. Such use is patently wrong and I do not think anybody disagrees with that.

[Chris Bryant]

Thirdly, we should never characterise the creative industries as luddites. That is simply and patently untrue. I recently went to Ninja Theory, a video games company in Cambridge. It uses AI all day, every day, as an integral part of making sure that any game it presents is at the cutting edge of modern gaming. The same could be said of so many creative industries, not just about their use of AI but about their use of innovation. I want to knock this on the head: nobody in Government is saying that the creative industries are luddites. It is perfectly legitimate for people to have concerns about their future remunerative stream, and we acknowledge that.

It is not just video games; musicians and people in so many other parts of the creative industries use AI. Indeed, we should not forget that a large chunk of the creative industries is tech companies that are developing AI. As several hon. Members have noted, those companies have their own copyright concerns—otherwise, how will they make a living into the future?—but the irony of some complaining about others stealing their work is not lost on anybody.

Fourthly, the creative industries are already engaging with artificial intelligence. Many of them are engaged in licensing already, and have been from the very beginning. That is not just true for newspapers, many of which have had an easier time delivering that if they have been behind a paywall; a whole series of different licences have now been arranged. I went to the London book fair and spoke to several publishers, all of whom were interested in bringing forward licensing with AI companies and want to do so with all the AI platforms, for the simple reason that, as some of the academic publishers put it, they want AI to be the best version of AI that it can be. A fundamental principle of a pipe is that what comes out of it depends on what is put into it, and the quality of responses produced by AI will depend on the quality of information that has been put into it. Many of the UK's big academic publishers are trying to license and get remuneration for their work because they want to make sure that AI provides good, modern answers based on solid information.

Fifthly, transparency is vital but not simple, as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said. Several hon. Members referred to the European Union, which theoretically has transparency provisions in its legislation, but has yet to come up with a system that is both proportionate, and effective and usable. Frankly, there is no point in somebody dumping a list of millions or billions of URLs that have been scraped and looked at on some kind of website. Whether that was done on a monthly or weekly basis, it would hardly be usable, or a proper, effective means of transparency.

We need to get transparency, and the enforcement of transparency, right. That is why we have consulted on this area. There is a great deal more work that we need to do. I would like to do some of it with allies in other countries who are struggling with this too, but we need to do it with the creative industries and with tech. There must be somebody out there who could make a commercial living out of creating an app that could help us solve the transparency issue, but it is vital that we do so. We need to make sure that there is transparency, because otherwise how can anybody know whether their works have been scraped or not?

Pete Wishart: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I am very reluctant to give way, if only because I have quite a lot of things to get through. I am really sorry. We will have another debate on this issue very soon, I am sure.

Sixthly, several Members referred to people wanting a “legal peace of mind”. I am not reiterating the line about whether or not there is legal certainty; that is not the point I am making. Many individual creators have been in touch with me directly—I am sure that they have been in touch with other hon. Members—to say, “I don’t know where I stand now under the existing law. I understand how Getty Images can go to court and enforce their rights, sometimes on behalf of themselves but also on behalf of the people they represent, but how do I do that for myself when I’ve just posted some of my works online, because I’m advertising my works? I don’t want to disappear from the internet, so the robots.txt system doesn’t work.”

That is a really important area where we need to do work. We have a framework of civil enforcement of copyright in the UK. It is robust and it meets the Berne convention issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North referred to, but it is still easier for those who have lawyers and cash to use it. That is why we have collecting societies, which can be more effective in many areas, but the different segments of the creative industries that we are talking about have to be dealt with differently, because a musician, an artist, a photographer, somebody who writes or somebody whose words or voice are being used are all treated differently, or their rights are enforced differently at present, and we need to make sure that there is that legal peace of mind for all those people into the future.

My hon. Friend said that a technical solution for rights reservation does not yet exist and he is absolutely right. I think a couple of other Members made that point, and I know that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which is admirably chaired, has referred to some of these matters, including in a letter to Secretaries of State. But why do we not make it happen? I am determined to make it happen. Surely, it cannot be beyond the wit of the clever people who are developing all this technology to develop something. If we could get to a place where it was very easy for any individual, or everybody—

Dame Caroline Dinenage: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I only have 45 seconds left, so I am afraid that I cannot; I am sorry.

If we were able to deliver that over the next 12 to 18 months in the UK, then we genuinely would be leading the world and we would be answering the problems of transparency and provenance, and making sure that people were genuinely remunerated. That is one of the things I am determined to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who is no longer in his place, said that we must listen to the creative industries before any legislation is introduced. He is 100% correct. I absolutely commit that that is what we will do. Somebody else said that technology is not good or bad; I think they were almost quoting “Hamlet”. I will make the point that artificial intelligence

was made for humanity by humanity, not humanity made for artificial intelligence, and we need to make sure that we get the balance right.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North started the debate by saying—because he had to—that we have “considered” the impact of AI on intellectual property. We have not adequately considered it yet. We have to consider it more. We were not intending to legislate in the data Bill, and there is no clause in it, on opt-out. There is no such clause. There is no need to take it out, because it does not exist. I am determined to get us to a place where people are properly remunerated, where they are able to enforce their rights, and where AI can flourish in this country and be used by the creative industries and the creative industries are not left by the wayside. In short, to quote the Bible, we will not sell our birthright for a mess of pottage.

3.59 pm

Mr Frith: I thank everybody for their considered remarks. I have been so inspired by the turnout, not just of colleagues, but of industry representatives and other concerned stakeholders. It was remiss of me not to begin by referring to my wife, as is often the case: I failed to declare that she is a jobbing actor and a recording vocal artist. I apologise to her, and for my failure to follow protocol on such matters.

I will jump straight into the remarks by my hon. Friend the Minister. I cannot fault him for his engagement, but I will send him the questions that I posed to him, because I do not think that we got commitments to remove the opt-out clause or to a more clinical focus on the enforcement of copyright. If we addressed both of those issues, we would solve much of the problem that brought so many people to the Chamber today. I thank stakeholders for their engagement, and all those who wrote to me following my request for evidence.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

4 pm

Sitting suspended.

Hair and Beauty Sector: Government Policy

4.30 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of Government policy on the hair and beauty sectors.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. This debate is about giving a voice to the thousands of small business owners crushed by the weight of tax demands. They are frustrated and exhausted—penalised, it seems, for doing everything by the book. They are expected to keep taking personal risks, to employ others and to pour all they have into building businesses and serving customers, even as the rewards for doing so shrink year after year. Those assumptions have bred a troubling complacency in Whitehall that these businesses will always just be there to tap up, and the crisis now gripping the hair and beauty sector is a stark example of the consequences.

High street hairdressing and beauty salons offer jobs and training to thousands of young people. These businesses are disproportionately led or staffed by women, many of whom need flexible hours to balance their caring responsibilities. We all know these people, because we have been served by them—even counselled by them—sometimes over many years.

However, today salons are under threat. The combination of the pressures they face is turning into a crisis, and the result will not just be a loss of revenue to the Treasury.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Only a few weeks ago, I visited Sue Davis’s hair salon in Blaby in my constituency, and she introduced me to two of the young people my hon. Friend has in mind, Tegan and Poppy. Does she agree that the measures the Government have brought in not only damage the hair salon industry, but risk reducing the number of apprenticeships, making it possible that there will be no future Tegans and Poppys going into the hairdressing business in the first place?

Julia Lopez: That is precisely one of the issues I wish to highlight in today’s debate. This avenue of employment is being closed down for too many young people, because hiring apprentices has become far too expensive. I am sure other hon. Members are seeing apprentices being shed across their constituencies because the sheer cost of employing them makes it too difficult for salons to retain them. That is a terrible loss for those young people and for salons that need those skills and that skills pipeline.

As I was saying, the result of salons closing will not just be a loss of revenue to the Treasury: it will be young people without an apprenticeship; high streets where the empty units left behind are filled with front businesses—perhaps a dodgy nail bar, a vape shop or a barber that may not be playing by the rules; customers who lose a service that they loved and that gave them a sense of place; and entrepreneurs who wonder why on earth they bothered to do the right thing and who now question whether this country is the right place to put their energies.

[*Julia Lopez*]

I will set out the challenges facing these businesses, explain why we should all care and, finally, share with the Minister the asks from my local salons, so that we can keep these vital businesses alive, with the benefits that flow to us all. Let me start by setting out some of the pressures on high street salons.

Salons have weathered some extraordinarily difficult years with the pandemic. Take Wyndham Hair in Hornchurch, a business that has been operating since the late 1970s. Owners Johnpaul and Jane returned from covid burdened with debt due to the stop-start nature of operating restrictions. They restructured and streamlined, and are now debt-free and at their most efficient, but the business offers little more than a wage. Why? Well, VAT is a major factor.

Johnpaul and Jane chose to employ staff rather than rely on self-employed workers. That offers better security for their employees and quality control for them, but it comes with a financial penalty: as an employer, they pay VAT on services. Meanwhile, mobile or home-based businesses, or salons staffed entirely by self-employed workers, often avoid that. Those operating outside premises also duck regulatory costs such as those for trade waste, music licensing and more. That creates an unfair playing field. It is a bizarre situation, because we can effectively have two businesses, identical to all intents and purposes, operating under two different tax systems.

Hair and beauty is a labour-intensive sector, and around 60% of costs are wages. As I heard from Toby from the Salon Employers Association, salons trade in skill, not goods, and cannot reclaim VAT on their biggest cost, which is people. That pushes legitimate businesses to the brink and rewards those operating in the grey market. Self-employment is a legitimate business choice, but employment tribunal case law demonstrates that it is increasingly being used as a means of avoiding tax and employment laws. Without VAT reform, the British Hair Consortium forecasts that there will be a 93% drop in direct employment in the sector by 2030. That is not a typo; that is an emergency.

The long tail of covid and VAT were existing challenges. Rent and utilities increases also created pressure. Let us now add into that mix Labour's disastrous October Budget, starting with the withdrawal of business rates relief. During covid, Conservatives supported high street businesses with grants and rates relief but, as of April, those have gone. Coal House Cuts in Upminster now faces a rates bill of £2,000, up from zero. The Vanilla Room in Hornchurch saw its rates bill rise from £7,500 to more than £18,000. Those are not minor figures; they are bills that keep people up at night.

Let us add in the increase in employer national insurance contributions. There is something pernicious about what the Chancellor has done here. Because of the change to thresholds, the NICs hike is hitting the types of business that employ a large number of lower-paid or part-time workers. For the Utopia beauty salon in Hornchurch that means a rise in employer NICs from £750 to £1,000 a worker. Many of its workers are single mums providing for their families, and it has already had to let go one of its tight-knit team. Because Utopia's suppliers are facing exactly the same pressures, it is seeing cost increases of 5%, and energy and utility bills have trebled.

I am seeing an unmistakable theme in my constituency work: female business owners, with many female employees, are approaching me for the first time. I have been an MP for nearly eight years, and these are the types of people who never get in touch with their MP. To put some numbers on it, over 80% of the workforce in hair and beauty are women; 86% of businesses are female-owned; 40% of the workforce is part time, compared with 25% in the wider economy; almost one in three workers is under 30, so it is a young workforce; and 45% of the sector's jobs are in areas with the highest levels of unemployment.

I want to say something that does not come easily to me because I loathe identity politics: it is hard to ignore the impact, let alone the irony, of a Chancellor celebrating herself for being the first woman to hold that office, while simultaneously hammering sectors that employ, serve and are often led by women.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this incredibly important debate. Just up the road from her in Essex, in Basildon and Billericay, well-groomed men and women are facing the same issues. I thought this was a poignant moment to intervene, because it is precisely part-time workers, many of them women, who are affected, often in female-run businesses. Does my hon. Friend agree that the combination of all these things—the increase in national insurance, the issues around business rates relief on the high street—is really hitting? But there is also concern about some of the legislation coming forward in the so-called Employment Rights Bill, which local businesses tell me is an unemployment Bill and which, rather than protecting workers, is causing more problems, because businesses just do not want people on their payrolls.

Julia Lopez: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is about a series of things hitting these businesses. It is about new legislation, new taxes and the withdrawal of reliefs that had been supporting businesses. I am glad my right hon. Friend intervened, because I was in Hornchurch yesterday speaking to staff at Wyndham Hair. Johnpaul, who runs that business, is one of my right hon. Friend's constituents, and he told me how supportive my right hon. Friend has been of his local high street, so I appreciate the support he is giving me in the debate.

As my right hon. Friend said, this is about a whole range of people sectors. It is not just about salons being hit with these staggering tax bills; it is also about the early years sector. That sector supports many other businesses that require good workers. When I talk to nurseries in my constituency, some of the bills they talk about are just unbelievable. In fact, they are so unbelievable that when I tell people about them, they do not believe it—they think the nurseries must have got their sums wrong, but that is absolutely not true.

One after-school and holiday club provider has seen her annual NICs bill go from £10,851 to £26,040. That is a small business, and it is being absolutely hammered. One nursery provider told me that the combined impact of NICs and the minimum wage is adding £30,000 to her payroll costs every month. Those are unbelievable numbers, which risk driving many nurseries to closure. That will dismantle the support network that allows many other women to go into the workplace.

The minimum wage is right in principle, but when we force a small salon with razor-thin margins to meet that extra cost on top of everything else, it becomes untenable. When we add to that the looming Employment Rights Bill, many salons are telling staff to go self-employed just to survive. That is not giving people more protections but ripping up the ones they already have.

That brings me to apprentices. Salons are letting them go very fast. For decades, this industry has opened doors for young people to learn skills and earn a living, and that ladder is being kicked away. At Coal House Cuts, the owners once proudly trained apprentices; now they cannot afford to. Wyndham Hair used to employ four apprentices; now they have one. The Vanilla Room is getting daily calls from laid-off apprentices, but it too has had to cut learner hours. Its owner, Kerry, told me:

“For the first time in 30 years, we just can’t afford to run apprenticeships. Our costs are up £28,000 on apprenticeships a year. How much does the government think salons make?”

After I put in for this debate, more stories poured in from across the country. This crisis goes beyond hair and beauty, because I am hearing the same from construction firms—another traditional route for working-class youth. Two vital pathways into work for working-class girls and boys are collapsing. Is this the future that Labour promised—a generation of young people priced out of skilled trades because Westminster could not design a Budget with small businesses in mind? That is surely the very opposite of what this Government say they want, and it is utterly incompatible with their drive to get people off welfare. Because beauty salons are facing so many different costs, they are also cutting back on training, in a sector where customers demand that they are up on the latest technologies.

So what will happen? First, there will be job losses and price hikes. One of the challenges for many salons is that their customers face the same economic headwinds, so they are spending less and visiting less often. Then there is the ultimate risk of closures. Every time a salon closes, it leaves more than just an empty unit; it leaves a void in the community—a place of connection, conversation and confidence gone. Speaking to Wyndham Hair yesterday, I heard not only about the services it offers but the support it gave its long-standing clients through covid. Those are the kinds of businesses that these people run. Utopia has clients aged 10 to 97; the 97-year-old goes to the beauty salon because it is her place of sanctuary. When legitimate businesses vanish, they are replaced by shady operations that are often fronts for illegal or exploitative practices. The rest of the high street struggles, apprenticeship routes collapse and tax receipts fall—they will not rise.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know it is not the main thrust of my hon. Friend’s argument, but does she share my concern at the detailed exposés at the end of March in the *Evening Standard* and *The Sunday Times* about the huge proliferation of barber shops, which could not possibly all be conducting legitimate trade? For example, the *Evening Standard* talked about 17 barbers in and around a two-mile stretch of Streatham High Road, and about 25 on a similarly sized section of Kingsland Road between Stoke Newington and Haggerston. That is clearly criminal activity on a major scale.

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important intervention. As I was preparing for the debate, I read about some of the police operations in Manchester,

where they have been cracking down on this kind of activity. The frequency with which they found that these were fronts for illegal businesses—often with links to international crime gangs—is deeply worrying. That is one reason why I want to raise the profile of this issue. We cannot lose legitimate businesses from our high streets, because what fills the void is something that none of us wants in our communities.

What can be done? I know how this works: the Minister sits in the Department for Business and Trade, not His Majesty’s Treasury, so he cannot give any substantive answers on the fundamental mistakes being made on tax policy. However, like any Business Minister worth his salt, he will probably share my concerns and wonder how best to get the Treasury to change course. He might even find this debate quite helpful to his own lobbying, just as the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), and his officials did when I gave him evidence about the crisis now engulfing the early years.

Here are some practical asks that my salons would like the Minister to make of the Chancellor: VAT reform, with a reduced rate for labour-intensive services; the restoration of business rates relief and the overhaul of the outdated business rates system, particularly for high street premises; the revival of apprenticeship incentives; and revisiting the measures in the October Budget. Look, the Government should use global market turmoil as an excuse to mask Labour’s mistakes if that is what it takes, but let us get a U-turn on these economy-shrinking tax takes. They are not working. Confidence and employment are down. Growth projections have been halved. The tax take is going to shrink, and that will translate into a smaller pot for public services. Members do not need to take my word for it; the International Monetary Fund said so just yesterday, confirming its view that the UK’s growth prospects have been cut because of domestic factors.

To conclude, this debate must serve as a reminder that Government do not create growth—businesses and people do. Those businesses are now often paying increased rent, utility bills, professional fees, VAT and covid debt interest and, since April, giant hikes in business rates and the cost of employing people. It is just too much. People work to incentives, and right now the incentive to start a business such as a hair and beauty salon, grow it, take on staff with full employment rights and train apprentices is simply not there.

The Government say they care about growth, communities and employee rights, but their actions—I hope by accident rather than design—are crippling the very people who grow things, give heart to communities and employ people. I say to the Minister: use this debate and take these real stories, these stark warnings and the sector’s clear-eyed solutions straight to the Treasury—before it is too late.

Several hon. Members rose—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members to bob if they wish to speak in this debate; it seems that quite a few Members want to. We will come to the Front Benchers at 5.10 pm. Although I will not set a hard deadline, speeches should be about three minutes.

4.45 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing this important debate on a sector that, as she rightly says, is often overlooked but is a critical part of many of our communities, including mine in Ribble Valley in Lancashire.

As I am sure my colleagues will reference, the hair and beauty sector is a thriving economic powerhouse, contributing huge amounts to the UK economy while increasing visitors to high streets and promoting community wellbeing. Given its impact on not only the economy but our physical wellness, we must ensure that the whole sector is regulated effectively. I want to highlight my concerns and those of the Ribble Valley residents I have spoken to about the regulation of the beauty sector in particular.

It is deeply concerning that aesthetic medicine, a medical speciality recognised by the Royal Society of Medicine, is often considered just another part of the hair and beauty sector. If it were cardiology or dermatology, there would rightly be huge concern over non-medical professionals performing high-risk procedures. Aesthetic treatments are not cosmetic extras; they can be invasive medical procedures with serious risks, including blindness, tissue necrosis and death. I have recently read several tragic news stories of individuals—such as Alice Webb, a mother of five—who have died after undergoing non-surgical treatments, including the increasingly popular Brazilian butt lift, known as the BBL procedure. No charges have been brought because it is still not illegal.

However, it was promising to hear that last December, Save Face, a Government-approved register of trusted practitioners, met with the Government to share Alice's story and discuss potential solutions to stop untrained individuals from performing such procedures. One of my constituents, Dr Natalie Haworth, has said that as a medical professional with her own aesthetic clinic, The Doctor & Company, she has to routinely manage complications previously caused by poorly trained practitioners. Legitimate, medically-trained professionals such as Dr Natalie undergo training built on years of foundational medical education, ethical standards and regulatory oversight. A three to seven-day course cannot replicate that. The increase in un reputable training providers across social media is increasingly worrying. We must look into training standards to rectify the situation.

Across the UK, invasive procedures such as fillers, liposuction and facelifts are being performed in unregulated salons. These are overwhelmingly carried out on women, reflecting a systemic failure to take the risks seriously—often dismissed as a women's issue or vanity. In a society where our beauty standards are shaped by social media and celebrity culture, there is no doubt that aesthetics treatments will continue to grow. In 2024 alone, the UK aesthetics industry grew by a considerable 8.4%.

Unregulated actors in this space lower the reputation of the whole industry, which in turn impacts the success of safe and legitimate services like those provided by my constituent, Natalie. We must therefore work to tackle the rise of unregulated cosmetic procedures. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government plan to follow up on the previous Government's consultation on non-surgical cosmetic procedures? The Government must

listen to women's stories and work to act and legislate on aesthetic medicine to ensure that people's safety is secured.

Meanwhile, the NHS shoulders the burden. A&E departments are seeing increasing complications from fillers, botox and laser treatments that should have been managed in a clinical setting. The industry must not be overlooked. We need to support trained practitioners and advocate for women seeking treatments by prioritising the raising of standards across this dynamic sector.

4.49 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing this important debate, about which I have had much communication from constituents, particularly those who operate their own health and beauty businesses in my constituency. Those businesses, of which we are all aware, are a cornerstone of our high street and community. They provide valuable employment; I was particularly struck by my hon. Friend's comments about the volume of employment that they provide, particularly to female members of society. But the crisis that we face is urgent, the stakes are high and the voices of salon owners, staff and apprentices must be heard.

I would like to highlight an example from my constituency. A constituent who operates a salon in Bromsgrove got in touch. After 33 years of contributing to the local economy, creating jobs and nurturing talent, they face the heart-wrenching possibility of having to close their doors within the next 12 to 18 months. Severe financial pressures, exacerbated by Government policies, have pushed them to the brink, and without support, staff—including a promising new apprentice—may lose their livelihoods. One of the major challenges is the disparity caused by disguised employment practices. VAT-registered salons, such as theirs, are struggling to compete with establishments exploiting loopholes through which workers are falsely registering as self-employed to dodge VAT. That creates an unfair playing field, forcing ethical businesses to consider unsustainable practices simply to stay afloat.

However, the consequences of inaction extend far beyond individual salons. Industry forecasts paint a bleak picture: a 93% drop in employment by 2030, no new apprentices by 2027 and the loss of generations of talent. Rising costs—including, in this case, a wage bill of £52,000 before factoring in rent, national insurance and pensions—make it impossible for compliant salons to thrive under the current VAT threshold of £90,000. That is why support from the Government is not optional; it is essential. This salon owner, alongside many others, has taken proactive steps to bring attention to this crisis. They are a member of the British Hair Consortium and they have contributed to comprehensive dialogue with Government urging action—action that cannot wait.

I am also struck by the comment made by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis) about non-surgical aesthetic treatment; I have raised that before in the House of Commons myself. My constituent, Nicky Robinson, is quite happy to go on the public record as someone who often performs corrective action for surgery that has gone wrong. That is another dimension to an

industry that presents an emerging healthcare crisis that I, too, urge the Government to address. I would also like the Minister to confirm when the Government will introduce a mandatory licensing regime that will protect not just consumers but those practising in this industry.

The beauty sector is not merely about aesthetics: it is about empowering individuals, building confidence and fostering community connections that we all know exist across our constituencies. It is time for the Government to recognise the importance of the industry and take the necessary steps to ensure its survival.

4.52 am

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): It is an honour to again serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing this important debate.

I was recently contacted by the owner of a local, international-award-winning hair salon in my constituency. Tim Scott-Wright runs a salon in the village of Wollaston and prides himself on training the next generation of hair stylists. Sadly, Tim does not think that he will be able to take on any apprentices this year due to the increased NICs and the increase to the national minimum wage.

It is important to say that Tim and others are more than happy to contribute a bit more to get Britain's economy growing. However, he did not realise that it would impact his business so drastically. Tim told me about salons forced into the self-employed model to reduce costs, which can have the unintended impact of forcing workers into accidental tax avoidance. It also reduces training opportunities for the next generation. Salons are already operating on slim profit margins, and the current VAT rate places an unsustainable burden on these labour-intensive businesses. Unlike other sectors that benefit from lower VAT rates or exemptions, hair salons must pass those costs on to customers, making services less affordable and reducing demand.

A proposed reduction in VAT to 10% would provide immediate relief, allowing businesses to plan for the future and keep contributing towards our economy. I have already written to the Treasury and the Department for Business and Trade to urge the Government to consider a targeted reduction in VAT for hair salons, bringing it down from 20% to 10%. Many salons are facing severe financial difficulties due to a combination of rising operational costs, reduced consumer spending and the long-term impacts of the covid-19 pandemic. The hair and beauty industry is a vital contributor to the UK economy, supporting over 250,000 jobs and generating billions in annual revenue. Let us back our hair and beauty industry, make sure revenue is not lost in self-employed models and keep the sector thriving.

4.54 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) on securing this debate and articulating so comprehensively the issues that the hair and beauty sector face. I share her concern and frustrations, and those of the sector.

The hair and beauty industry contributes £5.8 billion to the UK economy. It is not just about how people look; it is important for our high streets, for individuals

and for communities, yet the Government seem to insist on seeing the sector driven into the ground. Since the Chancellor's spring statement, I have received messages almost daily from businesses across my constituency that are seriously concerned about their future. This is existential.

Just this week, a small salon owner who has been in business for over 27 years got in touch with me and said that this is the most challenging period that she has ever experienced. The Government's changes to employer national insurance contributions and the national minimum wage will see labour costs for an average small salon in my Gosport constituency rise by over £25,000. That is completely unsustainable; as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster said, it forces people into the black economy or out of business altogether.

Only recently, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions set out her Government's welfare reforms, arguing that they are aimed at incentivising people currently in receipt of benefits back into work and secure employment. But I would love to hear from the Minister how he thinks that tallies with the closure of small businesses in our communities, and the redundancies that will result. On top of that, the Government's actions are set to make 1,000 apprenticeships across the country unaffordable, closing the door to young talent and diminishing training and employment opportunities. I heard from one local barber who has trained apprentices for years; he has now said that the Government's changes mean he will not be able to afford to train another apprentice.

Businesses will suffer. Female-led businesses in particular will suffer, as well as female work opportunities. Communities will suffer, and in the end the Government will see declining tax receipts. Will the Minister admit that his party made a mistake, and set out how he will communicate with the Treasury to attempt a U-turn? I do not think that anyone on the Opposition Benches would blame him if his party took that sensible step. On Monday I will be hosting a roundtable for all the hair and beauty salons across my constituency, and I would love to know what the Minister's message is to them.

4.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I commend the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing this debate. If you looked at me, Ms McVey, you would say that a beauty person could be working all day on that guy without making much difference. There is nothing on the top of my head, so when it comes to going to the barber's it does not take me too long. I say that in jest: I am speaking in this debate on behalf of the constituents who have contacted me.

As the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster and others mentioned, we are inundated by messages from local businesses and the consumers that they provide services to. According to the National Hair and Beauty Federation, there were more than 61,000 hair and beauty businesses operating in the United Kingdom in 2023. The hair and beauty industry is largely represented by small businesses. Those small businesses have mostly female owners, operators and workers, but not all. Three quarters of businesses employ fewer than five people, while 95% employ fewer than 10. Of people

[Jim Shannon]

working in the beauty and hairdressing industry, 60.5% are self-employed—it is a specific group of people. There is also a downward trend: the industry has declined by 7%. Apprentices have also declined, as the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster referred to, and some businesses are not taking apprentices on. Those are the issues.

The personal care and beauty industry as a whole grew its contribution to the UK economy by 11% in 2023, so there has been an upward trend in the businesses and what they do. Beauty and hairdressing is worth £5.8 billion, and it makes up a considerable chunk of the sector's overall contribution to the economy. People tell me that it should be noticed that, for the large majority of hair and beauty businesses, turnover is less than £100,000. In its September 2024 industry survey, the NHBf found that 46% of salons and barbers surveyed made a profit, 41% made none—they broke even—and the rest just weren't doing.

Those are not healthy statistics. The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster was absolutely spot on when she outlined that business owners are facing a perfect storm of rising costs, including the withdrawal of business rates relief, the increase to employer national insurance contributions and higher minimum wages. Although people are happy to spend their hard-earned money on self-care, the industry struggles with profitability and needs more support. I look forward to what the Minister will say, because it is important we get this right.

The rise in the national minimum wage, the rise in national insurance contributions and increases in the goods supply price are leaving the industry with profit margins of a mere 2% to 3%. That is unsustainable. We need to correct it and offer support to small businesses and microbusinesses. I look to the Minister to see how we can help keep our beauty and hair businesses thriving, keep people in employment and keep people feeling good about themselves. That can be done only with greater support than is available right now. My wife says that when she goes to the hairdressers, she comes out and feels like a million dollars. I would say that she always looks like a million dollars, but that is just me.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): You sweet-talking devil.

5.1 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing this most important debate. When thinking about the debate, I looked up some quotes on hair. My favourite was, "Invest in your hair: it is the crown you never take off." That is a very true sentiment, although I apologise to the men among us who are perhaps lacking in the hirsute department. Naming no names—they are kings in their own right.

Hair is such an integral part of our being and our confidence, and we can appreciate how traumatic it is when people lose their hair while undergoing cancer treatment or suffering from alopecia. We often expect to walk on to our high streets and find a hair and beauty salon that can help to tame our locks or restore our nails, but we cannot take the sector for granted.

According to the British Beauty Council and Oxford Economics, the sector contributed £8.541 billion to the UK economy in 2023, supporting the direct employment of more than 224,000 people.

I have many excellent hair and beauty salons in South Northamptonshire, but it really pained me when Defern Beauty in Brackley and The Beauty Works in Towcester met me and explained how desperate the position is for the industry. It was heartbreaking to see them explain how their life-long work is being eroded by this Chancellor. After NICs increases and business rate relief changes, they desperately need help.

One of their asks is for a review of the VAT position, which would help not only to save businesses and raise revenues for the Exchequer, but also to save apprenticeships. The British Hair Consortium's February 2025 report explains that as VAT is applied evenly across goods and services, it has a disproportionate burden on labour-intensive industries such as hairdressing and beauty, where 60% of the costs are wages. When they are unable to reclaim the VAT on their primary cost, which is people, there is a distorted market with competition between VAT-registered and non-registered businesses, which incentivises VAT avoidance tactics such as bunching, disaggregation and disguised employment. We should not be surprised by the rise in cash-only salons, and should think carefully about what that means in practice. The consortium is also calling for a mandatory register of all hairdressing professionals. Without a register, VAT avoidance and disguised employment will continue unchecked, costing the Treasury billions while putting responsible businesses at a disadvantage.

My businesses pride themselves on taking apprentices and bringing the next generation along, but my fear is that, as the British Hair Consortium believes, apprenticeship starts are set to reach zero by 2027, which contravenes the Government's objective of reducing inactivity among 18 to 21-year-olds. These businesses simply cannot afford to take on the next generation, which will stifle the industry in the long term. I implore the Government to engage with the industry and take immediate action. Hair is a beautiful form of self-expression. Where will we be left without it?

5.4 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) not just for securing the debate, but for making eloquent arguments about the hair and beauty industry and the broader impact of the Chancellor's damaging Budget last year, such as the impact on nurseries and its knock-on effects. Almost a quarter of a million people are employed in the industry, and it is a disproportionate employer of women and young people. In the short time I have in which to speak, I will limit my comments, because a lot has already been said by my hon. Friend and other hon. Members.

I had the pleasure of visiting the award-winning Aesthetics Hair and Sarah Bowron in Solihull and she eloquently put a lot of the arguments to me. This industry—these businesses—might have never contacted their MP before, because they have never felt the need to do so. Like many small businesses, they just get on

with the job in front of them. I am sure that the Minister recognises this, but I am not sure that his colleagues in the Treasury do, so the very first message I would share with him is that small businesses are not there to be squeezed till the pips squeak. There is real concern that the rise in NICs, the reduction in the tax threshold, the impact on part-time workers, the reduction in rates relief and the impending Employment Rights Bill, as well as, of course, the highly competitive market in which the industry operates, will have huge impacts. We have already heard about the impact on the hiring of apprentices.

When there are disincentives on business, such as higher taxation, a much more competitive business environment or higher regulation, it is inevitable that businesses will have to look at where they can cut costs. Young people who come into apprentice positions, who have less training and are yet to learn the skills of the trade, so to speak, are the easiest ones to cut, because the businesses have to be able to continue to operate. I make no comments about his hairstyle or anything like that, but I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that they are skilled people who do skilled work, and an apprentice cannot just be trained overnight. It takes time to do so.

Hearing from my constituent was certainly eye-opening and helped me to understand the impacts on their businesses. The fundamental point is that businesses in that competitive environment are being forced into a situation where hairdressers go for self-employment status, which means that they are below the VAT threshold, with less return for the Exchequer. That cannot be what the Chancellor of the Exchequer intended when she made her statement.

I have some thoughts about what the Chancellor was trying to do—basically, taxing everyone to appease some of the trade unions—but we will not get into all that right now. The reality, however, is that small businesses are the ones suffering. The impact has been huge. I also share the concern about the impact on high streets and the extended impact on tax avoidance and tax evasion, which of course we are very worried about.

5.7 pm

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

I thank the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing the debate. She made an important point about the fact that small businesses in the hair sector have endured a perfect storm: the pandemic, soaring energy bills, red tape and unfair tax bills. Everyone present today has called for the Government to recognise this industry's importance to our economy, our high streets and the communities that we represent. With that in mind, I will pick up on three points made by my colleagues today about employer national insurance contributions, forced self-employment and apprenticeships.

The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) pointed out that the hike in NICs has meant that many small businesses in the industry are just breaking even, never mind making a profit. That is why the Liberal Democrats oppose the Government's increase to national insurance. We believe it to be an unfair tax on jobs. The Government will reiterate that the employment allowance helped the

smallest businesses, but the British Hair Consortium estimates that the changes could add more than £40,000 to the payroll costs of a typical business of this type.

This week, a salon in Royal Wootton Bassett in my constituency told me of a trend across the sector of encouragement to become self-employed, as has been mentioned by many colleagues today—"rent a chair", my constituent called it. That did not come as any surprise to me, nor will it to other Members. The increasing costs associated with employing staff, coupled with the complex and fairly impenetrable Employment Rights Bill coming down the line, mean that many small businesses such as salons are struggling to plan ahead. These are small businesses whose owners run them in the evenings, not during the day, when they are trying to run the salon. They need clarity from the Government about that Bill and what it will mean for them, and they need support to retain some of their staff. If they do not get that support the industry will see a huge increase in the number of people becoming "chair renters". I hope that the Minister will address some of the issues of clarity in that Bill.

In addition to the challenge of retaining staff, small businesses find it almost impossible to afford to host apprentices in the current climate—that point was raised by the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster. Hair salons and the beauty sector have long provided a route into meaningful careers for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, but the current apprenticeship levy is not working for them. The Liberal Democrats would like a more flexible skills and training levy that helps businesses invest in their teams.

On Friday I will support a careers fair in Wiltshire that will connect students with lots of small local businesses. I hope that the Minister's response will enable me to reassure those budding apprentices about their futures. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster for securing this important debate.

5.11 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing this important debate, and for clearly setting out the issues with Government policy for the hair and beauty sector.

It is truly SOS time—save our salons. In the debate, we have heard from across the country—from Ribble Valley, Bromsgrove, Stourbridge, Gosport, Strangford, South Northamptonshire, Solihull and Chippenham—about how important these businesses are to our constituents. They make not only a huge economic contribution but an enormous contribution to our personal wellbeing, to fostering community spirit and to tackling loneliness. We have heard about the economic contribution of over £8 billion, but the impact of salons in giving people an opportunity for a moment of peace in a frantic life should not be underestimated.

It is regretful that the Government's recent decisions have put such uncertainty into the sector. We all acknowledge that the sector has had a long-standing issue that VAT cannot be reclaimed on its biggest expense: labour. We have also heard that, given about 60% of the sector's costs are wages, the Government's decisions in

[Dame Harriett Baldwin]

the Halloween Budget, particularly the change in the national insurance threshold, have made things considerably worse for businesses in the sector. Many of the businesses are small or medium-sized, and they add so much to our high streets. They are being gravely affected by the Budget.

The British Beauty Council states that the assumption that these businesses

“can simply absorb the costs is hugely misguided. Instead, it will most likely prevent wage increases and deter people from hiring more staff therefore stifling growth”,

which is the very growth that the Government wish to see. Additional pressure has come from the rise in the national minimum wage, and another impact of the Halloween Budget was that, as we have heard, the Chancellor reduced retail, hospitality and leisure relief from a 75% discount to a 40% discount. That has been another major hammer blow to the sector’s financial wellbeing.

We know that the Budget has had a big impact on the hair and beauty sector because the National Hair & Beauty Federation has just published a report examining it. It says that businesses in the sector are expected to incur an additional £139 million in costs, and that is before making any operational adjustments. Labour expenses alone will rise by £100 million. The report revealed that, as a result, 72% of businesses anticipate having to raise prices; no wonder the IMF is calling out the inflationary impact of this Budget. Furthermore, 45% of the businesses intend to cut their staff hours and another 45% plan to reduce their workforce. On average, each business expects to lay off 2.7 full-time equivalent employees and an apprentice. Overall, the sector’s profits are expected to decrease by 15%, with turnover down by £20 million and corporation tax therefore decreasing from £240 million to £200 million. Indeed, the sector’s total tax contribution is anticipated to fall by £44 million, which is a great example of the Laffer curve in reverse.

Following the Budget, the Hair and Barber Council polled hair professionals across the country. Of the 2,000 respondents, 42% are now considering closing their businesses in the next 12 months, 80% said they are now being forced to consider moving to self-employment, 94% said they are either extremely concerned for the future, or believe that a generation of apprenticeships will be lost, and 98% do not believe that the sector is valued by this Government.

Can the Minister confirm whether the Government commissioned any kind of impact assessment of the potential impact of the changes to national insurance in the Halloween Budget on the number of apprenticeships offered by high street businesses? We already know that the Employment Rights Bill will add a further £5 billion of costs across the whole of UK businesses, so what assessment has he made of the potential impact of the 2024 Halloween Budget on the level of employment of women in the hairdressing and beauty industries?

Another long-standing concern that we heard raised in the debate was about tax avoidance and criminal activity, particularly by illegal barber shops linked to money laundering. I tabled a written question to the Home Office on this subject and received the following response:

“According to a report by the Local Data Company and Green Street, the average number of barber shops per 10,000 people has more than doubled in the last 10 years, from 1.4 per 10,000 people in 2013 to 3.1 per 10,000 in 2023.”

What assessment has the Minister made of criminal activity among barber shops and what steps are the Government taking to tackle it?

We have heard today how important the hair and beauty sector is to our high streets and to everyone in our constituencies who uses it. The Government’s Halloween Budget has delivered a devastating blow to the sector and put its future in jeopardy. Will the Minister commit to reversing these damaging tax increases?

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): In the usual way, let me begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) on securing this debate. Let me say at the outset that, as in all the debates that I am privileged to participate in, here and in the main Chamber, there are points in this debate for many other Government Departments as well as my own to consider. I am happy to make sure that those Departments have heard the different insights—let me put it in those diplomatic terms—offered by Members in this debate.

As well as hearing from the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster, we heard from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), my hon. Friends the Members for Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis) and for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles), the hon. Members for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas), for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinéage), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) and for Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), and the hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson)—the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats—and the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin).

Let me begin by responding to a couple of the points that came out in the speech by the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster. I also take this opportunity to commend her and other hon. Members for the support they have shown for hair and beauty businesses across the UK, including in their constituencies.

While I was researching in preparation for this debate, I noticed that the hon. Lady ran a campaign to highlight the very best salons in her area so that they could be nominated for the British Hairdressing Awards. I do not know whether Wyndham Hair was one of those that she nominated, but I certainly wish it well in the coming months.

It is very important that we continue to champion this sector as individual constituency MPs, because of the significance that hair and beauty businesses have to our economy, our high streets and all our daily lives. Many Members have asked about the extent to which the Government engage with the hair and beauty sector, and I can confirm that I regularly meet the sector to understand its views and concerns. The very first business that I visited on my appointment was the excellent Pall Mall Barbers, founded by the remarkable Richard Marshall; he could not read or write when he started in the industry, and he now runs some eight stores in central London and New York.

As well as visits, those conversations with the sector include holding roundtables with key representatives of the industry, the next of which is due next month. I think those are important because the hair and beauty sector is one of the industries that I would gently suggest has been neglected for too long over the last decade. Economically, the industry contributes some £25 billion to the UK economy and employs over 550,000 people. Hair and beauty businesses, as Members have rightly set out, are found on every high street and in every town and village in the UK. They are essential for pulling people to the high street and help to generate the footfall that keeps other local businesses there.

However, it is true that the contribution of the industry is far more than an economic one, and the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster also rightly drew that out in her contribution. It is an industry that should be championed for its female entrepreneurship, for the opportunity it brings to people from all backgrounds, and for its role, on occasion, in combating mental health challenges. For example, over 80% of hair and beauty workers are women, and almost of 90% of businesses in the sector are owned by women. Almost half of all jobs in the sector are in areas with traditionally high levels of unemployment, which I think underlines the contribution that the sector makes in getting people into work and into an exciting and creative career path.

Whether it is getting a fresh haircut, a massage or even just chatting to their beauty therapist, many people relish the conversations that their local salons offer. I am not sure there is much that a beauty therapist in Harrow West could do for me, but I certainly value the conversations and skill of the barbers at Paul's in north Harrow in my constituency.

In short, hair and beauty businesses are a vital pillar of our high streets and communities. I recognise that it has been an exceptionally challenging decade for high street businesses, and that includes the hair and beauty sector. The pandemic, followed by the cost of living crisis and rising interest rates, forced many hair and beauty businesses into high levels of debt, depleted cash reserves and reduced profit margins.

Opposition Members may not like to hear this, but the Government inherited a very challenging fiscal position, so we had to make some very difficult decisions on tax, spending and welfare at the autumn Budget. Some of the measures in the Budget have concerned the industry, but I believe that those decisions are important for delivering long-term stability and, in time, and even more significantly, economic growth. Many hair and beauty businesses will benefit from some of the other measures that the Chancellor announced.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: It is entirely predictable that the Minister is trying to push the blame on to the previous Government for some of his Government's decisions. Does he not agree that actually this is such a retrograde step? As a number of Members have tried to explain, what he is seeing from these small businesses is a decrease in the tax take and a decrease in employment opportunities. At a time when his Government have bet the house on growth, all he is seeing is a decline in growth. Surely that is a decision, not a position that he has been forced into, and it is a retrograde step.

Gareth Thomas: I would have thought that the hon. Lady would welcome the measures we took in the Budget to protect the smallest businesses. We increased

the employment allowance so that almost 1 million employers pay no national insurance contributions at all. More than half of employers will see no change or gain from that package, and that includes many hair and beauty businesses, as the vast majority of them are micro-sized.

Sarah Gibson: Does the Minister not agree that, at the same time, he reduced the threshold at which that measure steps in, such that any allowances mean that it is counterproductive to most small businesses? There is an increase in NICs once they pay it, and the fact that they pay it on a £5,000 rather than £10,000 employment means that lots of part-time workers are suddenly liable for employment contributions when they were not before.

Gareth Thomas: I will go back to the point I made earlier. We inherited a very difficult fiscal position, which, to be fair to them, the Liberal Democrats do accept. Unfortunately, the Liberal Democrats never like taking difficult decisions in my experience, although they are happy to support the benefits of those difficult decisions.

We sought to protect small businesses as much as we could in the Budget, in order to repair the finances of the country going forward. We are also creating a fairer business rates system that protects the high street, supports investment and is fit for the 21st century. We have committed to reforming business rates from 2026-27 with a permanently lower multiplier for retail, leisure and hospitality businesses, which will include hair and beauty salons.

I also understand that the sector is competing against unfair and illegitimate businesses, as many hon. Members drew attention to. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs recognises that tax can be very complex, and we are working with the sector to help businesses to remain within the rules. However, there are those who are engaged in criminal activity, and we take that very seriously. As has been well chronicled across various media outlets, the National Crime Agency has been co-ordinating Operation Machinize, during which 265 premises were visited and officers secured freezing orders over bank accounts totalling more than £1 million. Other work in that space is ongoing. We will continue to support law enforcement partners to tackle high street crime more generally. Improved funding to help those partners go after gangs was also announced in the Budget.

Later this year, we will be publishing our small business strategy, which will set out the Government's vision for small businesses. It will focus on boosting a range of support to businesses to create thriving high streets, make it easier to access finance, open up overseas and domestic markets, build business capabilities, and provide a strong business environment. All those are vital to the growth and resilience of the hair and beauty industry, and I will certainly continue to work with the sector as the strategy develops.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley specifically asked me about the consultation run by the previous Government, and whether the Government are going to respond to it. We are due to respond as soon as possible. The Department of Health is leading on that issue, so I hope she will continue to watch this area and campaign on it going forward.

[Gareth Thomas]

In conclusion, I know that the hair and beauty industry is incredibly important to every high street and every community in the UK, and I will continue to champion it in the House and across Government.

5.28 pm

Julia Lopez: I thank every colleague who has spoken so passionately on behalf of their local businesses and the local people who run them. I hope I have done justice to the local business in my patch for the challenges it is facing. I appreciate all those who supported me in preparing for this debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles). She was courageous in admitting that national insurance has become a problem for some of her local businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) raised the importance of hair to the sense of self. I neglected to mention a very important business in my Hornchurch constituency: Bear with the Hair, which helps women who are going through hair loss in relation to cancer treatment. These are the kinds of businesses that are being affected by these challenges.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) and the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis) raised the important issue of rogue operators. My real fear is that if we drive some of the legitimate operators out of business in the salons that are regulated, we will simply see more of this kind of activity proliferate. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) is always a strong voice on small businesses, and I appreciated his support today.

I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) luck with her hair and beauty roundtable. She made the point very well that these taxes are fundamentally counterproductive. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) is always very sound on security and economic issues. He raised the important issue of some businesses being fronts for international crime gangs, a concern that I share deeply. Finally, I would like to say that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is beautiful inside and out—and I finish by saying that this measure is against Labour's fundamental aims.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 23 April 2025

TREASURY

Ukraine: Extraordinary Revenue Acceleration Second Tranche Disbursal

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones):

On 1 March 2025, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and her Ukrainian counterpart, Minister Marchenko, signed a £2.26 billion (\$3 billion) loan agreement under the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loans for Ukraine scheme. The Government are disbursing their contribution to this scheme in three equal tranches over three fiscal years. The first tranche of £752 million was paid to Ukraine on 6 March 2025, with the second tranche paid on 14 April 2025.

The G7 ERA initiative is set to collectively provide approximately \$50 billion in loans to Ukraine. This crucial funding will be repaid using future flows of extraordinary profits generated from immobilised Russian sovereign assets, which are primarily held within the EU.

Given the urgent needs of Ukraine and the significant public interest in Ukraine's defence of its territory, as well as the broader security of Europe and the UK, there is insufficient time to wait for the usual parliamentary process to conclude to allow for the second tranche of UK support under this scheme to be distributed to Ukraine. The final tranche, payable in the next financial year, will be funded in the usual way through the estimates process.

Parliamentary approval for additional capital of £752,667,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a main estimate for His Majesty's Treasury. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £752,667,000 has been met by repayable cash advances from the contingencies fund.

[HCWS595]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

2023 Agenda for Change Deal: Non-pay Workstreams

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Today I am updating the House on work under way to improve the working lives of NHS staff.

The 2023 Agenda for Change (AfC) pay deal, agreed between the previous Government and the NHS Staff Council, included 10 commitments to look at issues that impact NHS staff. Some of these commitments have already been fulfilled; however, five of the commitments involved representatives from the Department, the NHS Staff Council, NHS Employers and NHS England working collaboratively to produce recommendations for Government to consider.

These five commitments included: identifying ways to support the fair and consistent application of the NHS job evaluation scheme (JES), ways to improve nurse career progression, options to tackle violence and aggression against NHS staff, ways to reduce agency spend through the NHS terms and conditions, and options to improve support for newly qualified healthcare registrants.

I have now carefully considered each of the 37 recommendations that have been made, in the context of the extremely challenging fiscal situation and other departmental priorities.

I am delighted to inform Members that I will be taking forward 36 out of the 37 recommendations at this time, which will have a considerable and positive impact on the NHS workforce. The full list of recommendations has been published at <https://www.nhsemployers.org/articles/nhs-staff-council-joint-statement-2023-non-pay-commitments>. I will continue to update my colleagues as we work in partnership with NHS Employers to improve the working lives of colleagues across the NHS.

The NHS should always be a great place to work, regardless of job role or location. Staff should be free from fear of violence, aggression or discrimination and I know that the Minister for Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), looks forward to working closely with colleagues in the Social Partnership Forum to implement all the recommendations to better protect staff from the risk of violent behaviour. This includes encouraging a reporting culture where all incidents of violence and aggression are reported, the consistent collection of data, and developing a standard approach to post-incident support for all staff that are impacted.

Supporting career progression for our nurses is another important aspect of this work. As a result of these recommendations, our ethnic minority and internationally educated nurses should receive better and more consistent support for their career progression through six-monthly career reviews and more consistent recognition of their overseas experience. In combination, all the recommendations will have a positive impact on the experience of our highly valued nursing staff.

I wanted to take this opportunity to particularly highlight the importance of accurate and consistent application of the NHS job evaluation scheme (JES). Staff should expect to be paid correctly for the work that they are asked to deliver by their employer, as is their contractual right. That is why I am particularly pleased to be accepting the package of recommendations relating to improving local job evaluation practice.

The NHS JES underpins the AfC contract as the mechanism for determining the pay bands for all posts under the NHS terms and conditions (Agenda for Change). It is the responsibility of each NHS employer to comply with the Equality Act 2010 which mandates equal pay for work of equal value.

All NHS organisations should have the necessary resources and skills in place to be confident that they are correctly and robustly applying the NHS JES; however, we know this is not the case. While I know there are some areas where this is working well, this is not consistent across all organisations. I want to be clear that my expectation is that the NHS JES is applied correctly and robustly throughout the whole of the NHS, underpinned

by partnership working between employers and trade unions at a local level, to ensure that all staff are paid correctly for the work they are asked to deliver.

Further information and guidance will be developed with the NHS Staff Council to support local partnerships to apply the NHS JES correctly.

These recommendations will restore confidence in the NHS JES and build essential capacity to enable proper application of the scheme. With the roll-out of a new national job evaluation software solution, we are seeking to monitor banding outcomes and improve efficiency by making the current administrative functions easier and more consistent, which will in turn reduce administrative costs locally.

Next steps

I have now instructed officials to work with NHS England, the NHS Staff Council, the Social Partnership Forum and NHS Employers to agree an implementation plan to phase the delivery of the non-pay measures over the next two years. This will minimise the potential impact on resource across the system.

This Government have ambitious plans for the NHS, and we are getting the health service back on its feet through our plan for change, delivering over 2 million extra appointments and cutting hospital waiting lists. A vital part of these plans is to improve the working lives of our NHS staff, and that is why we are announcing this support package to tackle violence and improve career progression opportunities for staff. We recognise that NHS productivity can be impacted by poor workplace experience for staff, which we are addressing through these measures. We are in the process of developing a 10-year health plan and a refreshed long-term workforce plan to set this out comprehensively. This work will ensure that we not only have the right people in the right places to deliver the care patients need, but also that the NHS is a great place to work for our staff.

I am incredibly grateful to all those involved who worked so hard to produce these recommendations.

I will continue to keep Parliament updated on the progress of this work.

[HCWS597]

HOME DEPARTMENT

VE Day 80th Anniversary: Licensing Hours Extension

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Government will move forward with the proposal to issue a licensing hours order under section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003, following growing and overwhelming support from the public to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. To confirm, this order will extend licensing hours in England and Wales for the 80th anniversary of VE Day.

The order will apply to premises already licensed for the sale of alcohol and late-night refreshments for consumption on the premises until 11 pm. The order will extend the licensing hours for these premises from 11 pm on 8 May to 1 am on 9 May. The territorial extent of the order will be England and Wales.

The Government view VE Day as an event of exceptional national significance, and an extension to licensing hours will enable communities to come together at their local licensed premises to celebrate 80 years of peace since the end of world war two, which millions paid the ultimate sacrifice to achieve. This will also provide support to the hospitality sector by enabling businesses to extend their trading hours should they wish to do so.

The order will be laid in Parliament in due course and an economic note will be published alongside it on legislation.gov.uk.

[HCWS593]

Police Accountability and Vetting

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): In my statement to the House on 23 October 2024, I announced a number of reforms in relation to police accountability and misconduct, and set out the further work that the Government would be undertaking to restore the confidence of both the police and the public in the current system for holding officers to account.

Since October, the Home Office has worked in partnership with the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Metropolitan Police Service, the College of Policing, the Independent Office for Police Conduct and the Crown Prosecution Service to implement the practical steps I announced last autumn, and develop the further changes that would be required, and I am grateful for their support.

Today, as one of the measures arising from that work, I am laying new regulations requiring all serving police officers to hold appropriate vetting status. Where they do not, it will be grounds for dismissal, thereby ending the unacceptable situation where many officers who are clearly unfit to serve cannot currently be removed.

This action is long overdue. Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Sir Mark Rowley rightly expressed his frustration in February at the lack of progress made on this issue over many decades, and called for new regulations to be put in place

“so that we can deal expeditiously and properly with people who aren't fit to wear a uniform.”

One of his predecessors, Sir Ian Blair, recently wrote of his experiences in the 2000s seeking to root out corruption from the Metropolitan Police Service. He said:

“We needed the ability to remove officers who had failed vetting and subsequent appeal procedures. That nothing has changed 25 years later is bewildering. Ministers should do what their predecessors failed to do and make clear that vetting failure is a sackable offence.”

That is the action we are taking today.

I intend to lay additional regulations next month to increase the robustness of the police conduct and performance regimes and further strengthen the ability of forces to remove individuals who do not meet the high standards required of police officers. These will ensure that conviction of certain criminal offences will automatically result in a finding of gross misconduct, and that dismissal is the default for any officer found guilty of gross misconduct. Extra measures on mandatory vetting standards and suspension of officers under investigation for allegations of violence against women

and girls will be introduced later this year. I will also shortly announce the chair and terms of reference for a review of systemic barriers to timeliness in the misconduct system, including learning lessons.

In addition, we are continuing to make rapid progress on a number of the other reforms set out in my statement in October. As I set out then, the British policing model relies on mutual bonds of trust between the public and the police. For our policing model to work, it is essential that the police have the confidence of the communities they serve, and also that officers have the confidence that they need to do their vital and often extremely difficult job of keeping us all safe. As well as the new action set out above to rebuild public confidence in policing by ensuring the highest standards are upheld and maintained, we have also progressed work to boost the confidence of police officers in the systems holding them to account by tackling unacceptable delays and confusion in the process, protecting officers' identities during court proceedings following the discharge of a firearm, and ensuring that the complexity of specialist operations is considered at an early stage.

At the end of 2024, the Director of Public Prosecutions completed his review of CPS guidance and processes in relation to charging police officers for offences committed in the course of their duties. The review considered three pieces of guidance: deaths in custody, fatal road traffic offences and allegations against the police. Working with the police and stakeholders, it sought to provide greater clarity when explaining the approach to decision-making and to set out all relevant considerations which are to be addressed when deciding to charge. This includes taking account of the dynamic and fast-moving circumstances that police officers face, particularly firearms officers. Revised guidance was published on 31 January.

Sir Adrian Fulford and Tim Godwin will shortly be completing their rapid review examining the legal test for use of force in police misconduct cases and the threshold for determining short-form conclusions of unlawful killing in inquests. Once received, the Lord Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), and I will consider their recommendations before announcing the Government's response.

Later this week, we will table an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill to provide for a presumption of anonymity for firearms officers who are subject to a criminal trial following a shooting. This is intended to address specific concerns raised during the accountability review about the risks firearms officers face from criminals seeking revenge and will protect them, and their families, against any such threat.

In February, three other measures were set out in the Crime and Policing Bill arising from the accountability review: (i) to align the threshold for police and Independent Office for Police Conduct referrals of officers to the Crown Prosecution Service to that used by the police when referring cases involving members of the public; (ii) to allow the IOPC to send cases to the CPS where there is sufficient evidence prior to their final investigation report; and (iii) to put the IOPC's victims' right to review policy on a statutory footing. Those measures are due for debate during Committee next month.

In addition, the IOPC and National Police Chiefs' Council have developed a new protocol regarding the investigation of deaths or serious injuries on the roads involving police officers. Where the input of a subject matter expert is required, that input will be requested at the earliest opportunity to expedite investigations. Further work relating to use of force investigations will begin in due course and I will provide further updates to the House once that work concludes.

Finally, the College of Policing is taking forward the plans I announced in October to establish a national database of the lessons learned when deaths or serious injury happen after police contact or pursuits, so that when these tragic incidents occur, the lessons are incorporated into the development of police training and guidance to help prevent their repetition. Further details will be set out in due course.

In these and other areas, the Government remain determined to take the necessary action to strengthen public confidence in the police, and to strengthen the confidence of the police when they are out on the street doing the difficult job of keeping us safe. Those are the twin goals that we will continue to work towards, building on the strong progress we have already made since my statement in October.

[HCWS596]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects Regime: Further Reforms

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Sustained economic growth is the only route to delivering the improved prosperity our country needs and the higher living standards working people deserve. That is why it is this Government's No. 1 mission and why our plan for change committed us to fast-tracking 150 planning decisions on major infrastructure projects by the end of this Parliament.

While nationally significant infrastructure projects applications are already being processed on average 50 days quicker than in the last Parliament, achieving that milestone is going to require the planning regime for NSIP to be firing on all cylinders. Yet we know that the current system is too slow and that its performance has deteriorated sharply in recent years. Inefficiencies in the system are delaying the delivery of much-needed infrastructure and driving up costs for industry, billpayers and taxpayers.

The Government are determined to improve the system and to that end the Planning and Infrastructure Bill includes a range of measures—from mandatory and faster updates to national policy statements to reducing the scope for meritless judicial reviews—designed to deliver a faster and more certain consenting process for critical infrastructure.

As the Deputy Prime Minister and I made clear on Second Reading, the measures included at introduction are not the limit of our ambitions when it comes to streamlining the NSIP regime. In responding to the debate, I committed to giving further consideration to addressing the significant elongation of pre-application periods resulting from the way in which statutory procedures are now being applied and made clear that the Government would not hesitate to act boldly if there is a compelling case for reform in this area. Having considered the matter further as promised, we have decided to act.

A key objective of any planning consent regime must be to encourage the submission of high-quality applications that deliver benefits at both the national and local level. High-quality applications should be underpinned by early, meaningful and constructive engagement with those affected—including with local authorities, statutory

consultees, landowners, and local communities. When such engagement does take place, the benefits are felt in terms of better schemes, greater local benefits and improved mitigation.

However, the successful functioning of any planning consent regime also requires that it ensure proportionate and timely processes for decision making. This is particularly important for the NSIP regime, which is the primary route for consenting critical infrastructure projects in the national interest. Yet the evidence clearly indicates that the system's performance has deteriorated sharply in recent years.

In 2021, it took on average 4.2 years for a project to secure development consent, compared with 2.6 years in 2012. The National Infrastructure Commission has highlighted that uncertainty around the time and volume of consultation required resulted in the doubling of the preapplication period for Hinkley Point C to Sizewell C from three to seven years. An Anglian Water application for a new Fens reservoir—to supply 250,000 homes with water—has spent over 1,000 days in pre-application stage. It is essential that we take all necessary steps to drive timescales of this kind back down.

Unique to planning consent regimes, the NSIP system established by the Planning Act 2008 includes statutory requirements for applicants to undertake consultation before submitting an application. These statutory pre-application procedures were created for a regime that originally saw decisions taken by commissioners rather than Ministers. Subsequent to that democratic deficit being addressed through the Localism Act 2011, they were retained on the basis that they helped improve applications prior to submission.

However, there is considerable evidence to attest to the fact that these statutory requirements are driving perverse outcomes. Rather than providing a means by which engagement drives better outcomes, statutory pre-application procedures have become a tick-box exercise that encourages risk aversion and gold-plating. The result is consultation fatigue and confusion for communities, longer, more technical and less accessible documentation, and an arrangement that actively disincentivises improvements to applications—even if these are in a local communities' interest—because applicants worry this will require a further repeat consultation.

The Government have concluded that these statutory requirements, absent from other planning regimes, including those used to determine applications for new housing, now serve to slow down projects and deter improvements to them—wholly contrary to their nominal purpose of producing better outcomes.

I am, therefore, today announcing that the Government will amend the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to remove the statutory requirement to consult as part of the pre-application stage for NSIP applications, bringing requirements in line with all other planning regimes. This will include removing the requirement for developers to prepare and consult on preliminary environmental information, which currently often leads to applicants duplicating content already required through existing environmental regulation.

This change could reduce the typical time spent in pre-application by up to 12 months, speeding up the delivery of major economic infrastructure—including our electricity

networks and clean energy sources, roads, public transport links and water supplies—that is essential to delivering basic services, growing the economy, supporting the UK's mission to achieve clean power by 2030, and enabling 1.5 million safe and decent homes to be built over this Parliament. Over this Parliament, the change could result in a cost saving of over £1 billion across the pipeline of projects. By speeding up delivery, increasing capacity and reducing constraint costs, it will also contribute to lower household bills.

Following these changes, affected local communities and local authorities will, of course, still be able to object to applications, provide evidence of adverse impacts, and have their say as part of the post-submission NSIP process. The Government are clear that removing these statutory requirements does not signify that pre-submission consultation and high-quality engagement is no longer important—such engagement and consultation will remain vital to delivering successful major infrastructure projects. However, the current system is not working for communities or developers.

We still want the NSIP regime to function on the basis of a front-loaded approach in which development proposals are thoroughly scoped and refined prior to being submitted to the Planning Inspectorate. And we still expect high-quality early, meaningful and constructive engagement and consultation to take place with those affected as part of that process, thereby enabling positive changes to be made to proposals without causing undue delays. Given that such engagement and consultation routinely takes place and leads to improved proposals in other planning regimes without such statutory requirements, and because the development consent order examination procedure rewards high-quality applications, we are confident that developers will continue to be incentivised to undertake it.

To support this change, the Government intend to publish statutory guidance setting out strong expectations that developers undertake consultation and engagement prior to submitting an application. We will work with stakeholders to design this guidance, launching a public consultation in the summer, so that it encourages best practice without recreating the flaws of the current system.

Principles that we intend to reflect in this guidance will include the benefits of consultation to developing high-quality schemes and the importance of developers taking a proportionate approach to avoid repeated consultations. As the NSIP process will continue to be one built on the principle of front-loading engagement, pre-application services provided by the Planning Inspectorate, statutory consultees and local authorities will continue and be encouraged by guidance, but these services will be reshaped to reflect a renewed focus on the quality of applications and their readiness for examination rather than meeting a statutory test.

Alongside these changes, we will retain the invitation to local authorities to submit a local impact report to the Planning Inspectorate in advance of an examination. We will also retain the requirement for applicants to notify the Planning Inspectorate when they intend to submit an application and extend this requirement to include host local authorities. Publicity requirements, essential to support good quality engagement, will remain in place.

The Planning Inspectorate, on behalf of the Secretary of State, will continue to assess whether applications are suitable to proceed to examination. We expect guidance to emphasise that without adequate engagement and

consultation, applications are unlikely to be able to proceed to examination. Both guidance and advice from the Planning Inspectorate will be aimed at helping applications demonstrate that they are of a satisfactory standard.

[HCWS594]

Petition

Wednesday 23 April 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Protection of the ceremonial county of Rutland

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Government proposals for Local Government Re-Organisation and Devolution risk the status of Rutland as a ceremonial county; and further declares that the earliest record of a Lord Lieutenant in Rutland is 1559 and that, regardless of the outcome of Local Government Re-Organisation, the petitioners urge the Government to ensure the protection of Rutland's Ceremonial County status, with the continuation of Lord Lieutenants and High Sheriffs to serve as the Monarch's representative in Rutland exclusively, thereby protecting the identity and pride of our communities in our home.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and protect Rutland's status as a ceremonial county regardless of the outcome of Local Government Re-Organisation and Devolution.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Alicia Kearns, *Official Report*, 2 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 389.]

[P003055]

Observations from the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):

The English devolution White Paper published on 16 December set out how the Government plan to deliver on our manifesto pledge to fix the foundations of local government. This Government have been clear on our vision for simpler, more sustainable, local government structures, alongside a transfer of power out of Westminster through devolution.

There is no intention that the priorities set out in the English devolution White Paper will impact on the ceremonial counties or the important roles the high sheriffs and lord lieutenants play as the monarch's representatives in those counties, and ceremonial counties will be retained. The Government recognise and value the work they do in relation to civic, business, social and community life in the ceremonial counties, and will ensure that the ceremonial rights and privileges of an area will be maintained after any reorganisation of local government.

Where local government re-organisation might affect ceremonial privileges, we will work with local leaders to ensure that areas retain their ceremonial rights and privileges.

Written Corrections

Wednesday 23 April 2025

Ministerial Corrections

EDUCATION

School-based Nursery Capital Grants

The following are extracts from the statement on School-based Nursery Capital Grants on 2 April 2025.

Munira Wilson: ... While I welcome today's announcement, will the Secretary of State commit to an urgent review of the rates paid for free entitlements to ensure that they cover delivery costs? Will she finally take this opportunity to recognise the deep damage that the national insurance hike is doing and ensure that early years providers are exempted? Finally, will she look again at the damaging guidance issued by her Department on charging and funding agreements?

Bridget Phillipson: ... We also know that school-based providers have a greater share of the market in more deprived areas, and 34% of those announced today will serve disadvantaged communities.

[*Official Report*, 2 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 337.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson):

Bridget Phillipson: ... We also know that school-based providers have a greater share of the market in more deprived areas, and 32% of those announced today will serve disadvantaged communities.

Ian Lavery: I am delighted that the fantastic Ringway primary school in Stakeford, in my constituency, will be among the first in the country to host a school-based nursery. That, combined with the much-needed—and long in the planning—rebuilding of the school facilities will have an immeasurable impact on the life chances of young people in my area. Does my right hon. Friend agree that investments of this nature, mainly in socially deprived areas, will be of huge importance, and will she commit herself to rolling out further such schemes on my patch as soon as possible?

Bridget Phillipson: ... I, too, am delighted that Ringway is part of the first phase of our school-based nurseries programme, and we are determined to ensure that there is more provision throughout the country. Of those that I have announced today, 34% will serve communities that experience disadvantage. It is important for us to ensure that all families can take up childcare and early years provision, and it is critical that we deliver those places.

[*Official Report*, 2 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 344.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Education:

Bridget Phillipson: ... I, too, am delighted that Ringway is part of the first phase of our school-based nurseries programme, and we are determined to ensure that there is more provision throughout the country. Of those that I have announced today, 32% will serve communities that experience disadvantage. It is important for us to ensure that all families can take up childcare and early years provision, and it is critical that we deliver those places.

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