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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 28 April 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 766

FIFTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 28 April 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

SEND Provision

1. **Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help support SEND children not in full-time education. [903806]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): We are committed to reforming the special educational needs and disabilities system. We are also acting now through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, children not in school registers and a duty on local authorities to provide advice to eligible families. We will help local authorities identify and support these children to achieve and thrive.

Mark Swards: I recently met a constituent at my surgery whose son has missed out on more than 800 hours of education. That is despite her attempts to find special educational provision for her son in 14 different schools across our region. She is now very concerned, because the council has said that he is at risk of criminal exploitation and cannot be left alone. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this case and also provide reassurance that this Government will ensure that vulnerable SEND students get the educational provision they deserve?

Stephen Morgan: One of the ministerial team will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the important issues that he raises. All children are legally entitled to a full-time education, which is important for their educational progress, their wellbeing and their wider development. It is the local authority's responsibility to arrange suitable education when it is not already in place, and I encourage my hon. Friend to contact his local authority to discuss this matter further.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I have met children who have experienced significant trauma, who are not in full-time education and who are supported through the adoption and special guardianship support fund. On 1 April, the Government announced that that funding would continue, which was welcome. However, on 14 April, it was announced that funding would be reduced by 40%, capping the support at £3,000 per child for the academic year. That reduction will be devastating for families and therapy providers. Does the Minister agree that without proper funding enabling specialist support, we risk placement breakdowns and increased pressure on already stretched mental health services?

Stephen Morgan: This Government are committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity so that every child can succeed and thrive. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) who is responsible for this area, has committed in the House to £50 million of funding for this programme. She will have heard the question and will respond in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Having told this House in answer to an urgent question from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) that the adoption and special guardianship support fund would continue, Ministers somehow did not manage to mention that the funding per child would be cut by 40%. They then slipped that out during recess. Meanwhile, Ministers will spend £90 million on advertising. Can they at least agree to publish the impact assessment on cutting what is available from this fund?

Stephen Morgan: As I said, this Government are committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity. We will take no lectures from the Conservatives. They have absolutely no plan for education, other than to reintroduce private school VAT reductions. *[Interruption.]* What?

Neil O'Brien: When will the Government publish the impact assessment?

Stephen Morgan: We will respond in due course to those issues.

SEND Funding

2. **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): What recent assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of local authority funding for SEND. [903807]

9. **Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure sustainable funding for SEND provision in schools. [903815]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): This Labour Government inherited a lose, lose, lose SEND system, in the words of the Tories' last Education Secretary, but we have invested an additional £1 billion in high needs budgets and £740 million to pave the way for pupils with SEND to achieve and thrive in mainstream schools. Just last week in Derbyshire, I met families with experience of the SEND system who had been badly failed by the Tory county council. This Labour Government know that the SEND system needs far-reaching reform to deliver better life chances for all our children.

Charlie Dewhirst: The Secretary of State is well aware that the East Riding of Yorkshire receives the lowest level of funding for children with SEND, and I hope that the current review gives the Government an opportunity to rectify that. On a wider point, parents like me often look ahead to the school holidays with a sense of dread, because the provision for out-of-school activities for children with SEND is so limited and what is available is often expensive. As part of this review, will she look at what more can be done by local authorities to provide opportunities for young people with SEND outside term time?

Bridget Phillipson: I know that the hon. Gentleman cares deeply about this issue, and brings real passion and determination to trying to ensure that all children, including those with SEND, are given the support that they require. For the purpose of wider reform, I will look carefully at the funding issues that he has identified and also at the issue of broader support. Parents have the right to request wraparound holiday childcare places, and we updated the relevant guidance this year. We want to ensure that all children receive the support that they need, and that applies to childcare for SEND children aged up to 18.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: The last Government left SEND education throughout the country in crisis. The National Audit Office found that there was no consistent improvement in outcomes from 2019 onwards. I saw that

at first hand when I met Calder Valley parents of SEND children at Highbury School in Rastrick, where I saw committed parents and teachers struggling with a failed system. What will my right hon. Friend do to fix the mess that the last Government made of the system?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his passion and interest in this subject. Let me also congratulate him on his efforts in yesterday's London marathon: he is not only a brilliant advocate for children, but a fantastic runner. He is right to say that this Labour Government have inherited a terrible mess when it comes to support with children with SEND. We want all children to have the support that they need in order to achieve and thrive, and as part of the wholesale reform that we will deliver, we will listen to parents, children, stakeholders and schools to ensure that we get the system right for children and deliver better outcomes, and that issues such as those identified by my hon. Friend are a thing of the past.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst), but each child with special educational needs in the East Riding receives £968, whereas in Camden the figure is £3,564. I am sure she agrees that a child in Camden does not have four times the need of a child in the East Riding. Will she undertake to ensure, as part of the review, that in principle we will have fairer funding for children throughout the country with educational needs related to, for instance, dyslexia or autism at the end of that process, as opposed to where we sit now?

Bridget Phillipson: The right hon. Gentleman brings real expertise to this issue, and I know that he also cares deeply about ensuring that we get the system right for children with SEND. Our allocations were made on the basis of the funding formulas that were already in place. We intend to look carefully at all these matters as part of our wider reform of the SEND system, but, as the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate, they are complex, and it is important for any change to be made in a way that is responsible and focused on better outcomes for children.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The crisis in the SEND system is a source of distress for parents and children who have to fight far too hard for support, and for professionals working in local authorities and schools who face an extremely challenging funding situation. Does the Secretary of State agree that in this context blaming parents and GPs for the increase in the number of SEND diagnoses, as some Reform party politicians have done in recent days, is both inaccurate and insulting, and that solving the SEND crisis requires listening to parents and professionals rather than denigrating them?

Bridget Phillipson: I could not agree more, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and the other members of her Committee for the important work that they are doing through their inquiry on this matter. We look forward to hearing more from them in due course.

My hon. Friend is entirely right: just days before the local elections, the comments of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) will have sent shivers down the spines of so many parents throughout the country. His comments were completely irresponsible and totally wrong. This Government are focusing on better outcomes for all children, including those with SEND.

Apprenticeship Funding

3. **Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): What steps she is taking to ensure that non-levy paying employers receive apprenticeship funding. [903808]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): Labour is transforming the Tories' failed apprenticeship levy into a growth and skills levy. The Government offer a range of support to non-levy-paying employers, including assistance with training costs and payments to take on younger apprentices. New foundation apprenticeships in construction will unlock opportunities for up to 10,000 young people. Apprenticeships, participation, achievement and starts have already increased under Labour, and we are going further and faster for growth.

Robin Swann: As the Minister will know, employers in Northern Ireland pay substantially into the apprenticeship levy but have no direct access to it. What steps is the Minister taking to enable them to receive direct benefits through the levy, so that we too can enjoy the benefits of which she spoke in her answer when she was having a dig at the Conservative party?

Janet Daby: As I am sure the hon. Member knows, skills are a devolved matter, and funding in the devolved Administrations remains the responsibility of those Governments. However, we will continue to engage with them as we deliver the levy-funded growth and skills offer for England.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): My constituency of Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley, in the Black Country, is a proud manufacturing area and the birthplace of the industrial revolution. Will the Minister please tell me what she is doing to increase the uptake of manufacturing and engineering apprenticeships across the country and in the west midlands?

Janet Daby: Too many young people have been locked out of accessing apprenticeship opportunities, and apprenticeship starts by young people under 25 fell by almost 40% between 2015-16 and 2023-24 under the previous Government. We are developing new foundation apprenticeships to give more young people a foot in the door at the start of their working lives.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The British Chambers of Commerce has said that the lack of clarity around the future of the apprenticeship levy is creating uncertainty among businesses, and is "worrying and destabilising". Employers in universities are worried about plans to cut higher apprenticeships, and the Institute of Chartered Accountants has said that plans to axe level 7 apprenticeships will lead to work leaving the UK altogether. Will Ministers agree to the proposal from the Campaign for Learning for a

skills immigration worker test to be carried out before any cuts are made to level 7 apprenticeships, so that we do not go from simply investing in British workers to just importing workers from other countries?

Janet Daby: We are very excited about what this Government are achieving for young people in our apprenticeship schemes. There are, of course, tough choices to take on how funding should be prioritised to generate opportunities for young people so that they can make a good start in fulfilling careers going forward. The Department has received a wide range of representations regarding level 7 apprenticeships, and we will communicate our decision going forward. We are absolutely committed to making sure that people are on the right apprenticeship courses and that we have a wide range of apprenticeships available.

School Students: Mental Health and Wellbeing

4. **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support the mental health and wellbeing of school students. [903809]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): This Government are committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity and helping pupils to achieve and thrive in education. We are providing access to specialist mental health professionals in every school so that every child and young person has access to early support, to address problems before they escalate.

Mr Forster: In my constituency I am in touch with a family of a child who has complex needs and severe mental health issues, who has not been able to go to school for a whole year. The child's deteriorating mental health needs are not being met, because they have not been given a school that fits their child and adolescent mental health services assessment. Has the Minister made an assessment of how the Department might best avoid situations such as that, which leave children without the services they need?

Stephen Morgan: We will deliver on our commitment on mental health to make sure that it reaches every child. I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the specific case that he raises.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Admissions to acute medical wards for children and young people with mental health concerns increased by 65% between 2012 and 2022. Given that gaining parity of esteem between mental health and physical health is so important, will the Minister update us on the talks with the NHS about ensuring that there is mental health provision and support in every school?

Stephen Morgan: I know my hon. Friend is a real champion of these issues. We will recruit an additional 8,500 new mental health staff to treat children and adults, as well as open new Young Futures hubs, which will provide support for children and young people across the country. The Department also provides a range of guidance and resources on promoting and supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing, and I thank him for his question.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Addictive algorithms that serve up harmful content are fuelling the children's mental health crisis, as well as worrying behaviour both inside and outside the classroom. With almost two thirds of children having a social media account by the end of year 7, will Ministers commit to working with their counterparts in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to support the Liberal Democrats' amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which would stop tech companies trading on our children's attention by raising the digital age of data consent from 13 to 16, so that they cannot process children's data to feed toxic algorithms without parental consent?

Stephen Morgan: Protecting children from online harm is a cross-Government priority, and Ofcom's draft code of practice for child safety sets out why it is so important that we continue with our efforts to protect children. From July, the child online safety regime will be fully in force, and Ofcom will be able to take robust enforcement action against those failing to comply with the child safety duties. I know the DSIT Secretary of State will want to look very closely at any future further proposals.

School Costs and Employer's National Insurance Contributions

5. **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of increased school costs on the adequacy of school funding for 2025-26. [903810]

8. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What estimate she has made of the potential impact of increases in employer's national insurance contributions on the number of teachers employed in schools. [903814]

10. **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): What estimate she has made of the potential impact of increases in employer's national insurance contributions on the number of teachers employed in schools. [903817]

14. **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What estimate she has made of the potential impact of increases in employer's national insurance contributions on the number of teachers employed in schools. [903821]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): The Tories left a trail of devastation across our schools, with buildings crumbling and teachers leaving in their droves. Through taking tough decisions at the Budget to fix the foundations, Labour has been able to increase school funding by over £3.2 billion. As a result, there is a forecast of £400 million of headroom in schools' budgets nationally. The Tories' only plan is to cut school budgets to restore private schools' tax breaks. We are getting on with the job of delivering for children.

Mr Holden: Many heads, teachers and support staff who are worried about school budgets have been in touch with me. I recently had a letter, which was sent to the Secretary of State, from a therapist in a school, saying:

"I have recently been informed that I am being made redundant. Most of the schools in the trust are making cuts in order to stay afloat. Staff that are being cut or having hours reduced are teaching assistants, social, emotional and mental health staff and other support staff."

How would the Minister answer the question posed by my constituent who is being made redundant, who asks:

"Why have Labour voted for unfunded pay rises and National Insurance Tax increases if they cannot support schools with the cost?"

of these proposals?

Catherine McKinnell: The Government are committed to supporting teachers to stay in the profession and to thrive, which is why we accepted the schoolteachers pay review body 2024-25 recommendation in full, implementing a 5.5% pay award. That means that teachers and school leaders have had a combined increase of 17% over the last three years. We really need some humility from Conservative Members about where these problems stem from.

James Wild: Headteachers are warning that the gap in funding to cover the Chancellor's jobs tax is equivalent to losing more existing teachers than the Government are planning to recruit. I have heard that message loud and clear from headteachers on my recent school visits, and unfunded pay awards will just make this worse. Why is the Education Secretary not standing up for our schools?

Catherine McKinnell: This Labour Government have made some tough decisions to fix the foundations of our economy and our public services. We make no apologies for doing what the last Government failed to do while in office. The extra money from national insurance contributions means we can protect key educational priorities. The Conservatives should be honest: what would they cut to pay for our schools?

Dr Shastri-Hurst: Can the Minister solve this equation? VAT is pushing more students into the state sector and increases in national insurance are squeezing staff budgets, yet the Government say their ambition is to improve school standards and staff retention. How does that add up?

Catherine McKinnell: This is just scaremongering from the Conservative party, because the Tories have no plan for the future of our education system. They have no plan to deliver high and rising standards. Their only education priority is to hand tax breaks back to private schools, which means cutting free breakfast clubs, cutting school-based nurseries and cutting school building.

Mr French: I have been contacted by schools in my Old Bexley and Sidcup constituency that are outraged that Labour's tax rises are forcing them to cut resources and staff while the Government demand that teachers do more. One teacher told me that, as a proud trade unionist, she had always voted Labour, but feels completely betrayed. She says:

"Labour have made the situation in schools 10x worse letting students and teachers down".

She is right, is she not? Labour has betrayed teachers, students and schools.

Catherine McKinnell: Schools funding is increasing by over £3.2 billion compared with 2024-25, meaning that core school budgets will total over £64.8 billion this year. The last Government sat on the pay review

recommendations, leaving it for this Government to clean up. The Conservative party's record on education was dismal; school buildings were crumbling and teachers were leaving the profession. This Government are focused on returning education to the centre of public life.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I recently met student councillors Aadam, Olivia, Adam and Remy at Fixby junior and infant school. They gave me a guided tour of the school and highlighted how the playground was long overdue for an upgrade, but the school is facing increasing costs to resurface it. On behalf of the student council, can I ask the Minister what additional funding and support is available so that pupils can access high-quality play areas?

Catherine McKinnell: We absolutely support children to have the ability to play, and that is really important in school as well. We understand that some schools require additional support. We are working closely with the sector to ensure the best outcomes for all children, not just some children, as the previous Government focused on.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Local Conservative council candidates in Mansfield say on the doorstep that they want better funding for our schools. However, in the pursuit of restoring private schools' tax breaks, which of these measures does the Minister think the Tories would cut first: new teachers, speech and language support, mental health counsellors, careers advice or work experience?

Catherine McKinnell *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I can save the Minister. That question is about Opposition policy, which is not her responsibility.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am deeply concerned about the funding of Howden-le-Wear primary school in my constituency. After years of real-terms cuts, it is now making four teaching assistants redundant. I will write to the Minister on that to seek her support, but the elephant in the room is that the pay of the chief executive of the multi-academy trust of which it is a member has increased £30,000 over the last two years, taking it to £275,000. That is the equivalent of 12 teaching assistants. Which does she think would be better: one CEO or 12 teaching assistants?

Catherine McKinnell: Executive pay must be justifiable and must reflect the responsibility an individual takes on, alongside local retention and recruitment needs. We engage with trusts on levels of executive pay, and I would be more than happy to discuss the matter further with my hon. Friend.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I am deeply concerned about Prudhoe community high school in my constituency, which was opened eight and a half years ago after being built under a Conservative Secretary of State and Conservative Education Department. Unfortunately, in February this year, cracks were discovered in the structure and the students are being taught in Washington, which is quite a significant journey. Can I ask the Minister to not only back the students and staff at Prudhoe community high school, but have an urgent investigation into how

the school got into this state? Does she agree that, after 100 years in charge, the legacy of the Tories in west Northumberland is crumbling?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely recognise the challenges Prudhoe community high school is facing, in particular those due to sit their GCSE and A-level exams. I wish good luck to them and to all young people who over the Easter holidays have been working very hard towards their exams. Officials have been working closely with the school to ensure they are accommodated in the right way, but my hon. Friend raises a really important point about how a school built eight years ago is crumbling, and indeed all the schools across the country that are crumbling, after 14 years of a Tory Government that did not prioritise education.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): Not only has the Education Secretary introduced a Bill to this place that will destroy standards in English schools, but now she has broken her promises on national insurance contributions compensation and is leaving schools in an impossible funding situation. Every MP has heard from headteachers who are stressed beyond belief at how to manage their funding. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that worried headteachers up and down the country will not have to make teachers redundant because of her broken promises: yes or no?

Catherine McKinnell: The right hon. Lady has a firmer grip on anonymous briefings in the papers than on the details of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. She is more focused on petty political games in Westminster than on improving the lives of children and families up and down the country. The Bill will get qualified teachers in front of classrooms. It will teach a cutting-edge curriculum. It will drive down the costs of sending children to school. It will provide breakfast clubs for children who need them. It will stop vulnerable children falling through the cracks. It is a single most important piece of child protection legislation in a generation. The Conservatives voted against it. They can snipe from the sidelines; we will get on with delivering change.

Mr Speaker: Let us have another marathon runner to ask the next question.

SEND Teachers

6. **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): What steps she is taking to help increase the number of teachers trained in the provision of SEND education.

[903811]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): Improving the quality of teaching is the best way to drive up standards in schools, which is why the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will get expert teachers in front of the classroom, driving high and rising standards. We are improving teacher training so that teachers are equipped to properly support pupils with SEND to achieve and thrive, but we know there is more to do. We are paving the way for far-reaching reforms through our plan for change.

Tim Farron: I thank the Minister for her reply. Two excellent teachers in my constituency—both experts in special educational needs provision—set up an organisation called the Mighty Oak Initiative, whose work is focused on helping young people with special educational needs who are not attending school at the moment, either not fully or at all. Its work is exemplary. Would the Minister meet Mighty Oak and myself to look at how we can support the organisation, learn from what it does and apply it elsewhere so that young people with special educational needs can get the best out of their educational experience, rather than being left on the sidelines?

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and congratulate him on being on his feet after running the London marathon. We are absolutely committed to improving attendance rates of all children, but particularly those with SEND, and to addressing challenges in the school setting to ensure that children have the support to achieve and thrive. I would be happy to engage with him on any good practice in this area that can support us in our endeavours.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): In Derby, like in so many communities across the country, we face a lack of available SEND school placements with appropriately trained teachers. In '23-24 alone, Derby city council spent £18 million on placements outside the city. It is wrong that pupils and their families are not getting the support that they need in their communities. Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to increase the availability of SEND school places in Derby, in the east midlands and across the UK?

Catherine McKinnell: The Secretary of State had a useful and interesting visit to a school in Derbyshire to see for herself where progress is being made—or, unfortunately, where not enough is being made—to support children with SEND. We know that high-quality teacher training, particularly in SEND, is vital to ensure that every teacher is a teacher of special educational needs and disabilities. We will continue to work to ensure that local authorities deliver on their obligations to all the children in their local area, but particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): There are significant gaps in the understanding of autism profiles from teachers and school support staff. The evidence shows that there will be massive benefits in school attendance and educational performance if that understanding can increase. I urge the Secretary of State and the team to ask the specialist neurodiversity group that they have set up to look specifically at initial teacher training to see whether more autism-focused elements can be added.

Catherine McKinnell: This work is already ongoing. I recognise what the right hon. Gentleman is saying—we want to ensure that every teacher gets that high-quality training from their initial teacher training to their first years in a school to ensure that they are confident and able to teach children of a whole range of abilities. We are determined to have the right number of teachers with those skilled professional qualifications so that they are able to thrive in the profession, and, indeed, to support children to thrive, too.

Construction Skills Training

7. **Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number of construction skills training opportunities. [903812]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Construction skills are essential to rebuild Britain as part of our plan for change and to deliver 1.5 million homes. This Labour Government are cutting red tape and reforming English and maths requirements to deliver 10,000 more apprenticeships a year and prioritising investment, with £625 million in additional spending to boost construction skills and train 60,000 additional skilled construction workers this Parliament—that is more foundation apprenticeships, more industry placements and support for further education, as well as 10 new technical excellence colleges specialising in construction skills across England.

Mark Ferguson: Our plans for the renewal of central Gateshead are by far the most exciting investment opportunity in north-east England, with £1.2 billion of inward investment, thousands of new homes and public transport infrastructure, meaning 15,000 construction jobs over the next few decades. Gateshead college, right at the heart of the development zone, is rapidly increasing places on its superb construction course, but much more is needed. Will the Secretary of State meet me and Gateshead college to discuss super-charging construction skills to deliver our plan for growth?

Bridget Phillipson: I have visited Gateshead college to see the fantastic work it does on digital skills, but I know that it has also developed innovative, flexible apprenticeships for careers in building design and construction, which I hope can be replicated elsewhere. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and perhaps to visit Gateshead college to learn more about what it is doing on construction.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Further education colleges such as Chichester college in my constituency are vital to the delivery of construction apprenticeships and skills training. Many colleges, however, have raised a concern with me that a loophole in the last Government's Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, which brought colleges back into the public sector, means that they cannot go out and get public investment into their colleges. What is the Minister doing to address their concerns and ensure that FE colleges can invest in the facilities and courses needed to train our future construction workforce?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady raises an important point about that reclassification. Through the construction announcement we made ahead of the spring statement, we created a capital pot for employer-led and match-funded projects to ensure that we are really working to deliver some of the programmes that are needed. We are also investing more in further education—again through boosting teaching in this area—and making sure that young people have access to industry placements, which we know are crucial in making sure that they succeed, especially in areas like construction.

SEND Support

11. **Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve support for children with SEND. [903818]

17. **Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that SEND children are being adequately assessed. [903825]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): Colleagues across the House will know about the “lose, lose, lose” system—to use the Tories’ own words—that we inherited. We are investing an extra £1 billion into high-needs budgets, £740 million into creating new places, and have restructured the Department to put SEND at its heart. The system needs far-reaching reform. We are engaging with parents and we have brought experts on board to assist us in this important work.

Mr Kohler: Merton council, in which most of my Wimbledon constituency is situated, tells me that there is a national shortage of SEND specialists—therapists and educational psychologists in particular—which is negatively impacting its and other local authorities’ ability to produce education, health and care plans in a timely fashion. This seems to be a particular problem across London, where in more than a decade there has been almost no growth in the number of local authority-employed educational psychologists, despite a large increase in demand. Will the Minister update the House on plans to address this issue and meet me to discuss the particular challenges in London?

Catherine McKinnell: We know that local authorities have been impacted by the increasing demand for education, health and care plans and workforce capacity issues, so much more efficient and effective service delivery and communication with schools and families will be central to making those improvements. We are working with local authorities and across the Department to ensure that there is as much effective early identification as possible. I am more than happy to continue engagement with the hon. Gentleman on these important issues.

Helen Maguire: I often hear accounts of constituents waiting over two years for education, health and care plan assessments from Surrey county council. When those assessments finally come, they are frequently carried out remotely, with assessors never actually meeting the child. Headteachers report that these delayed and inaccurate assessments result in inadequate funding, leaving schools under-resourced and simply unable to meet the children’s needs. Families in Surrey deserve assessments that are timely, thorough and centred around the child. What reassurances can the Minister offer families in Surrey that the broken system will be fixed, and when?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady sets out what is unfortunately a common picture for far too many children and families. We know that the system needs reform, and we are working at pace to deliver on that. We are working with experts and engaging with families and local authorities. We are determined to deliver a better outcome for children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families, and we will continue to update on progress as we make it.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): School support staff, teaching assistants and learning support assistants—the unsung heroes of our schools—often provide that crucial day-to-day support for children with SEND. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that we upskill our school support workforce so that they are best placed to support those children?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to recognise the role of school support staff in supporting schools in general, and particularly children within the school system with special educational needs and disabilities. We want to encourage more inclusive mainstream schools, and we need a really strong and qualified workforce to deliver on that. I recently visited a school that had a fantastic group of teaching assistants who are undertaking the apprenticeship and specialising in issues such as special educational needs, to make sure that they can continue to develop their skills in the workforce. That is a really positive story, and one that I hope many schools can take up.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My constituent, Martyn Hodgson, has two adopted children. Both have suffered extensive trauma in their short lives, and the oldest son was diagnosed with autism and learning disabilities. They rely on the adoption and special guardianship support fund. He says:

“This support means so much to families of looked-after and adopted children. As a children’s social worker and adoptive parent, I have seen at first hand the impact this funding can have on their lives.”

For Martyn and so many others like him in Hartlepool and beyond, please will the Minister urgently reconsider the cuts to this fund?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely take on board the issues that my hon. Friend raises. Where people take on the responsibility of adoption, that is to be applauded and supported as far as possible. The Government are obviously considering all the financial matters in a very difficult context and making some difficult decisions, but we will continue to bear in mind the issues that he raises. We want to maximise the number of children who can access the fund and get the vital support that is needed.

Freedom of Speech: Universities

12. **Chris Ward** (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): What steps she is taking to protect freedom of speech at universities. [903819]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): It was Labour that enshrined freedom of expression into law. That is why in January I announced plans to fix the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, making it robust and workable. Today I signed the commencement regulations to impose stronger free speech duties on higher education providers and the Office for Students from 1 August. We are taking common-sense decisions to fix the foundations of higher education and to deliver change for students.

Chris Ward: The Minister will know that the University of Sussex, one of my local universities, has recently been fined over £500,000—a record amount—following

a three-and-half-year investigation by the Office for Students into freedom of speech. I know that the OfS is independent, but does the Minister share my concern that it reached this conclusion without ever speaking to the university or its current staff and students? Does she recognise the very wide implications of this ruling, and will she meet me and the University to discuss this?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend will understand the limitations on what I can say in answer to his question because this was a decision by the Office for Students, which carries out independent regulatory functions. I would be happy to arrange for him to meet the relevant Minister, but only once legal matters have concluded.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the new freedom of speech provisions will ensure that, if any member of a university's staff gives the same definition of a woman as the Prime Minister did in his most recent iteration of it, they will not be no-platformed or driven out of their job?

Bridget Phillipson: In setting out the Government's position in the statement on Tuesday I was very clear that we accepted the Supreme Court judgment, and that is the right basis on which things ought to be taken forward. Through the commencement regulations, we have given tougher powers to the regulator. We have also reformed the regulator since July, with a much sharper focus on financial sustainability—something that I know is important to Members across the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Neil O'Brien.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): At the start of January, the Secretary of State said that she needed more time to consider the overseas funding transparency measures in our freedom of speech legislation. It is now nearly May. In the meantime, there have been several concerning the reports in the press about UK universities working with Chinese institutions that are designated as high risk and have ties to their defence and security apparatus. This legislation was passed in 2023. When will the Secretary of State reach a decision?

Bridget Phillipson: This is an important area, and this Government will always make sure that issues of national security come first. Measures are already in place to address foreign interference in the higher education sector, from vetting international students in sensitive areas of research to specific requirements around freedom of speech and expression. We continue to keep all these matters under review, and when we are in a position to do so I will of course update the House.

Pupil Referral Units

13. **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of levels of funding for pupil referral units. [903820]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): My hon. Friend is a champion for young people with SEND and their families in his constituency. The Government have invested an extra £1 billion into high

needs budgets to help local authorities to maintain their pupil referral units. Of course, the system we inherited from the Conservatives is broken, but we are paving the way for far-reaching reform to restore parents' confidence and to support every child to achieve and thrive.

Josh Newbury: I recently visited Chaselea alternative provision academy in Cannock and met headteacher Mr Archer, who told me that it receives £8,300 less per pupil than the average for PRUs due to the unfair funding formula. With year after year of real-terms funding cuts under the previous Government, Chaselea had to stop all off-site education and halt new admissions, which means longer stays for students. Will the Minister confirm that this Government will ensure that PRUs have the resources and support they need to do the vital work of helping young people return to mainstream education?

Catherine McKinnell: I agree that it is important that funding is available to support young people back into mainstream education. Staffordshire county council is being allocated, through the high needs funding block, over £143 million of its 2025-26 dedicated schools grant, and will need to consider how best to deploy that funding to achieve this aim. I know that my hon. Friend's constituents will be best served by a Labour council delivering on this issue and will want to think about that ahead of this Thursday.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): My constituent—a child who attends alternative provision—was physically restrained by his passenger assistant on school transport, which caused significant distress to him and his family. The Department for Education has published guidance on the use of reasonable force in schools in England, but it appears that there is a gap when it comes to the use of reasonable force on school transport. Will the Minister meet my constituent and me to discuss this case with a view to closing this loophole with the funding that it requires?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and it is one that we are looking at as a Department. Obviously, home-to-school transport is an important aspect of accessing education, but it needs to be safe for all children. I would be more than happy to discuss the issue further with him.

Higher Education Funding

15. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of higher education funding. [903822]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): The Tories were more interested in picking ideological fights than ensuring that universities were financially sustainable. They left students and taxpayers to bear the brunt. Labour has taken tough decisions to shore up higher education as we pave the way for reform. We will fix the foundations of higher education to deliver change for students.

Rachael Maskell: Over half of UK universities, including the University of York, are again consulting on academic and staff redundancies. In line with the University and

College Union's "Stop the Cuts" week of action, does the Minister agree that we need an urgent review into higher education funding and visa arrangements for international students and their dependants, and that we need to protect students from poverty, to safeguard our world-class universities and, ultimately, drive research, innovation and their economic output?

Janet Daby: We are committed to securing the future of our higher education sector and we absolutely recognise its excellent economic value, which is crucial to our future economic growth. We welcome international students, who enrich our campuses, forge networks with domestic students and become global ambassadors. We will set out our plan for reform in the summer.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Over the past few months, Bournemouth University has had to take steps to suspend 15 of its courses due to financial pressures and rising operational costs. Most were arts and humanities courses, including English, photography, sociology and politics. What options exist for universities to access other sources of funding, and what assessment is being done to protect arts and humanities courses across our higher education sector?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for her level of concern. Higher education providers are autonomous and responsible for managing their own budgets. If they were at any risk, we would work with the Office for Students to ensure that students were protected. The Government reserve the right to intervene to protect the interests of students. The strategic priorities grant is also available to support teachers and students in higher education in more expensive subjects.

Topical Questions

T1. [903830] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Today in places such as Leicester, Birmingham, County Durham, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Northumberland, some of the last of our 750 early-adopter schools will launch their free breakfast clubs. We are now providing 180,000 pupils with the best start to their school day, boosting parents' work choices and children's life chances. Evidence shows why that matters so much: when schools introduce breakfast clubs, behaviour improves, attendance increases and attainment grows. It also gives parents 30 minutes of free childcare every day to juggle work and family life. That is why we will cement those freedoms and that opportunity through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, delivering on our plan for change.

Imran Hussain: To follow on from the two previous questions, 5,000 university jobs have been cut nationally, and the University and College Union projects that 10,000 more will be cut by the end of the year. In Bradford, up to 300 further jobs are at risk. Bradford University's nursery service faces the chop, and some courses are long gone in a bid to meet funding shortfalls. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to protect staff and students in places like Bradford, given the growing crisis in higher education?

Bridget Phillipson: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. We are focused on putting universities on a firm footing. As the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), said, we will set out further reforms in the summer so that higher education delivers for students and the taxpayer. We had to make tough decisions to increase tuition fee limits in line with inflation for the next academic year, but I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) recognises, as I do, the enormous economic value of universities in towns and cities right across our country. That is why we have reformed the regulator: to put universities on a much firmer footing for the future.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): Despite the Education Secretary's best attempts to rewrite history, we Conservatives did not need a court to tell us that biological sex was real. She has on her desk the draft guidance for schools on gender questioning, and the final Cass report was published a year ago. If she is serious about protecting women and girls, why has she not published the guidance?

Bridget Phillipson: I am serious about protecting the rights of women and girls. That is why I ran a women's refuge for children and women fleeing domestic abuse, fleeing male violence, fleeing some of the most unimaginable abuse that anyone could ever see. I need no lessons on the importance of such provision.

The shadow Secretary of State asks a specific question, which I will answer. This is a sensitive area. We are talking about children's wellbeing—often very vulnerable children who are experiencing stress. Although I recognise the importance of providing clarity and guidance for school leaders, we have to get it right. The Conservatives published draft guidance for consultation only a matter of months before the general election. It is right that we take stock following the full and final review from Dr Cass, which we accept should be the basis for how we take things forward.

Laura Trott: That draft guidance was produced a year and a half ago. The Education Secretary wants to talk about her record. Well, let me remind her that one of her first acts on coming into post was to pause implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which would have protected gender-critical voices. She is more concerned about listening to student union activists than to women. Will she apologise to the gender-critical women who were forced to spend eye-watering sums on legal fees to fight for their rights because of her actions?

Bridget Phillipson: From that question, I do not think you would know who had been in government for the past 14 years, Mr Speaker. The Conservatives had ample opportunity to clarify the position. The ruling of the Supreme Court was that Labour's Equality Act 2010 was the basis for its judgment confirming that biological sex should be the basis for provision of single-sex services. Alongside that, the Court was also clear that everyone in our country deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, and that trans people continue to receive protection in law. The Conservatives published guidance, in draft form, a matter of months of before

the general election. It is right that we take this issue seriously and get it right. We do not need this shameless opportunism; this is about children's wellbeing.

T2. [903832] Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): The exam season is well under way in Scotland, and I think the whole House will join me in wishing pupils in Livingston and across Scotland luck over the coming weeks, and in thanking teachers for preparing during the academic year. Closing the attainment gap between the richest and poorest pupils in Scotland was the SNP Government's "defining mission", but the latest statistics show that it is increasing year on year, and 1,351 pupils are leaving Scottish schools without any qualifications at all—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have other Members to get in as well. I call the Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend in sending my best wishes to children in Scotland and across the UK as their exams get under way and thanking the brilliant staff working hard to support them. He is of course right about the many failures under the hopeless SNP Administration. Scotland deserves a new direction and a better education system and that will only come with Labour.

Mr Speaker: I call Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Last year the Secretary of State said:

"There can be no goal more important and more urgent than extending opportunities to our most vulnerable children".—[*Official Report*, 24 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 700.]

Actions speak louder than words, so will she commit to reversing her 40% cut to the grants available through the adoption and special guardianship support fund so that vulnerable children are not made to pay the price for the Conservatives' financial mess?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady will know that we have confirmed £50 million for '25-26. Further considerations will be for the spending review. We have made changes in order to maximise the number of children who can access the fund. In addition to the funding that is provided there, we are also trialling kinship allowances, investing more in foster care and investing another £0.5 billion in providing local authorities with the support they need to provide preventive services. I agree that it is important that vulnerable children who have been through the adoption system and beyond get the support that they need to thrive.

T6. [903838] Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): We know that young people are at the sharp end of the mental health crisis, so can the Minister update the House on the progress his Department is making on our manifesto commitment to put specialist mental health support into our schools, and tell us how gaps in support for neurodivergent pupils—as highlighted in the trailblazer programme—will be addressed?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): This Government will provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school so that every young person has access to early support,

including those who are neurodivergent. NHS-funded mental health support teams will continue to roll out across schools and are expected to cover at least 50% of pupils this year.

T4. [903835] Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): The Secretary of State may be aware of the tragic death of Genevieve Meehan, who died in a nursery in Cheadle. She was just nine months old. Despite claims that the nursery was safe, Gigi's death was entirely preventable. Gigi's parents, John and Katie, are now campaigning for changes in the law around nursery safety. Will the Secretary of State meet me, Gigi's parents and the Lullaby Trust to talk through this campaign and commit to helping to ensure that this tragic story is never repeated?

Stephen Morgan: Every incident of harm of a child, including this tragic case, is incredibly distressing. I am committed to doing everything possible to reduce levels of harm as part of our mission to give every child the best start in life. I would of course welcome a meeting with the hon. Member and Gigi's parents.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): A number of families have contacted me to share their concerns about the impact of the delays to the adoption and special guardianship support fund and the cuts to the service, describing the very real and distressing strain on them. What consideration has the Department given to addressing their challenges, and what steps are being taken to ensure that adoptive families receive the timely support they so desperately need?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): As my hon. Friend will be aware, we are providing £50 million through the adoption and special guardianship support fund. We are also funding Adoption England with £8.8 million to improve adoption services. This includes new support for the first 12 to 18 months after placement and better support for families in crisis. Adoptive families may also access mainstream family health services, and we are doubling the investment in these services to over £500 million.

T5. [903836] Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The pay review bodies have recommended a 4% pay rise for school staff. Will the Department for Education pay 4%, and will that really be expected to come from existing school budgets?

Bridget Phillipson: We will set out our approach to the recommendations in the usual way, but I say to the hon. Gentleman that one of the very first acts of this incoming Labour Government was to accept the previous recommendation to fund the 5.5% pay award for teachers that had been sat on the desk of the Conservative Government.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Sadly, after years of Tory Government, fewer younger people in Southampton Itchen are successfully engaged in employment, education or apprenticeships compared with the national average. What specific steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that apprenticeship and university routes are equally valued and equally accessible to the young people in my constituency?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. Our youth guarantee will provide tailored support to young people, helping them to access high-quality education, training and employment. We want young people to be earning and learning, and we are wasting no time about that. Youth foundation apprenticeships provide more opportunities for young people, and we want to ensure that we expand access to university for disadvantaged students and that all learning is on an equal footing.

T7. [903839] **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): National per pupil funding criteria are a blunt instrument for fairly funding schools in rural areas like mine on the Isle of Wight, which is also separated from the UK mainland by sea. Will the Minister meet me and representatives from the Isle of Wight council to discuss how fairer funding for Isle of Wight primary schools can be provided so that no more of them close unnecessarily?

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): I appreciate the concerns that the hon. Gentleman raises. I know that the Isle of Wight local authority is working to address the issue of surplus primary places in the best way. I recognise the challenge around funding. It will take some time to look at that, but the system is designed not to give every school the same amount of money but to address some of the needs that he outlines. I am more than happy to continue this discussion, as I appreciate the issue is very important in his constituency.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Has the Department made an estimate of how many children with SEND are at risk of losing therapeutic support as a result of the recent changes to the adoption and special guardianship support fund?

Janet Daby: I hear the concerns around the adoption and special guardianship support fund. We have had to make some really difficult decisions, but we have chosen the fairest approach to manage tight resources in the face of increasing demand for support. We will continue to review the situation.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I recently had the opportunity to visit Echelford primary school in my constituency, where I saw an extraordinarily different approach to oracy from those I have seen in other schools. Will the schools Minister visit to see that for herself?

Catherine McKinnell: We are always looking for good approaches to raising standards, whether in phonics, maths or oracy, and to giving children the confidence that will set them up for life. I would be keen to hear more details about the programme that the hon. Gentleman describes.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I have recently been informed that teaching assistants employed through agencies in Blackpool are being paid under the national living wage and sent into schools with positive Disclosure and Barring Service checks, and that the profit margins of those agencies are as high as 35% to 40%, with agencies

making £100 a day on candidates. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss those issues that are facing Blackpool?

Catherine McKinnell: Support staff, temporary staff and agency staff can provide important support to schools where it is needed, but that must be done in a fair way that helps to manage school budgets and provide the outcomes for children that we know a stable teaching force can bring. I would be more than happy to discuss the particular issues that my hon. Friend raises with him.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): Bromley council has the second highest rate of education, health and care plans in London, and is in desperate need of extra special school provision. The council is looking to bring forward a 200-space special school but has met with a lack of innovation at the Education and Skills Funding Agency. Will the Minister meet me and local officials to discuss how we can break those bureaucratic blockers and deliver this provision?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes, I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Last month, I held a public meeting in my constituency with over 100 parents, carers and pupils to discuss our concerns about the quality of secondary education in my constituency. It is an absolute scandal that over 60% of young people leave school without a pass—level 4 or higher—in maths and English GCSE, a trend that has got worse under the Conservative party. Will the Minister commit to driving up standards in my local schools as a priority for this Labour Government?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for better outcomes for the young people in her constituency, and I commend her approach for engaging so widely with parents, who I know share her concerns. I am more than happy to give her that commitment. Everything we do in the Department is about driving opportunity, and that means driving up standards in every school, in every part of the country.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): This week, on a visit to a school in my constituency, I was told about a boy with SEND who has been temporarily excluded five times. He is extremely dysregulated and vulnerable and has been waiting for two years for specialist provision. The school has tried to get him to the top of the mental health list but has been told that it cannot. What should I say to his headteacher, who is at the end of her tether?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady and I have discussed some of the challenges in her local area in relation to delivering better outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and she is right to raise this issue of ensuring that the health workforce can back up the change needed in education settings. We are working closely with colleagues across Government to ensure that we take a joined-up approach to improving outcomes.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Welsh universities, including Bangor University, face very real challenges as a direct result of policies introduced by the last UK Government. Will the Minister update us on conversations that her Department is having with the Welsh Government around higher education in Wales?

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend is aware that education is devolved and that the Welsh Government are responsible for education policies in Wales, including those covering universities, but I assure her that the Department for Education engages with the devolved Government at ministerial and official levels on a range of areas covering education and students.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): What assurances can the Minister provide to concerned adoptive parents in my constituency who benefited from the match funding element of the adoption and special guardianship support fund, and whose funding could be cut from £10,000 to £3,000? Will she consider reintroducing this vital element of the ASGSF?

Janet Daby: The adoption and special guardianship support fund still enables those who are eligible to access a significant package of therapeutic support to meet individual needs. The fund is important, which is why we have continued to fund it, but it is not the only source of adoption and kinship support, responsibility for which lies with local authorities and regional adoption agencies. Our £8.8 million of funding to support Adoption England can assist that.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): This morning, I had the pleasure of visiting Milwards primary school, which is one of the many brilliant primary schools in my constituency. One of the main issues raised by primary schools is school readiness, which was hugely impacted by the closure of Sure Start. What are this Government doing to ensure that young people are ready for school and ready to learn?

Stephen Morgan: I know that my hon. Friend is a huge champion for children in his constituency. This child-centred Government want to break down the barriers to opportunity and ensure that every child gets the best start in life. That is why we are introducing a number of initiatives through our plan for change, including good-quality early education, increasing school-based nurseries and investing in other initiatives that support a child's development.

Mr Speaker: Final question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What steps will be taken to ensure that there are therapeutic and counselling opportunities in all primary schools across the United Kingdom to ensure the earliest of interventions for pupils who could struggle in their education?

Stephen Morgan: Education is a devolved matter, but I know that the hon. Gentleman is a champion on these issues, and I am very happy to meet with him. We are committed to rolling out mental health support teams to every school in England.

Business without Debate

Ordered,

That Charlie Maynard and Joy Morrissey be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Paul Holmes and Tom Morrison be added.—(*Chris Elmore.*)

Headingley Incident

Mr Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) to ask his urgent question, I must advise the House that although the matter is not yet sub judice, for the purpose of the rules of this House relating to these matters, Members should exercise care in what they say about a live criminal investigation. I urge Members to avoid speculating about the guilt or innocence of any person. On the identity of the person who has been arrested and the motive for the attacks, Members should take care not to say anything in this House that might prejudice a criminal trial. Members may ask about the emergency services, the response to the attacks, the support for victims' families and other connected matters, but I urge the utmost caution in avoiding any remarks that might be prejudicial.

3.38 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the incident that occurred in Headingley on 26 April.

The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): First, I thank my hon. Friend for securing this urgent question. I begin by saying that my thoughts and prayers are with the victims of this horrific violent incident in Headingley, Leeds, on Saturday. I understand the shock that this incident has caused among the local community in Headingley, and I understand that my hon. Friend will want to get rapid answers for the constituents he represents. At the same time—as you have pointed out, Mr Speaker—this is a live police investigation, and we all have a responsibility not to say anything that would interfere with that investigation or any legal proceedings that may follow from it.

For the benefit of the House, though, I will recap what the police have themselves said about the incident and the ongoing investigation. On the afternoon of Saturday 26 April, West Yorkshire police were called to reports of a male on Otley Road, Headingley, Leeds, in possession of a crossbow and a firearm. Armed police arrived at the scene at 1453 hours, where the suspect was found with a self-inflicted injury. He was taken to hospital and remains in a life-threatening condition. On arrival, officers also found two members of the public who were injured and were admitted to hospital. One victim has now been discharged from hospital; the other has undergone surgery after suffering life-threatening injuries. Our thoughts remain with the victims and their families. Counter Terrorism Policing North East has taken the lead for the investigation into this attack, and is now working with West Yorkshire police.

As I have said, this is an ongoing investigation and I cannot comment on details of the case, other than to note that we must allow the police time and space to conduct their investigation. Having said that, we are very aware of concerns about the use of crossbows in violent attacks. We share that concern, and last week, the Government tabled amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill to strengthen age verification controls on both the online sale and delivery of crossbows. Last year, the previous Government held a call for evidence on licensing systems that could apply to crossbows, to which they did not respond. As part of our wider work

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

to get dangerous and lethal weapons off Britain's streets, we will shortly publish our response to that consultation, setting out how we plan to go further to limit the availability and accessibility of crossbows in this country.

Alex Sobel: Mr Speaker, I am very grateful to you for granting this urgent question after the harrowing attack in Headingley on Saturday. My community is still reeling in shock and disbelief at the horrific act of violence that occurred in our midst on Saturday afternoon.

I begin by expressing my concern and sending my best wishes for the recovery of the two women who were harmed in the egregious attack this weekend. I also express my gratitude for the heroic efforts of the members of the public and of our local community who intervened. The details of how they helped are still emerging, but I already know that without them, we may have had a far worse tragedy. I also thank all the emergency services and Leeds city council for their swift response, and for ensuring that the situation was brought under control and isolated. The fact that this most heinous crime was committed against two women is not lost on anyone, and I thank West Yorkshire police for committing to increase its presence in the area and working to ensure the safety of women and girls. The response to this horrific attack is a testament to the Headingley community, Leeds, and the people of West Yorkshire. Our community is strong and we will show that we remain united. We will not allow this to divide us.

The key suspect was carrying a range of lethal weapons when the attack was carried out, and the two victims were both shot by crossbows, a weapon that has been used in murders before. I know that the Home Office issued a call for evidence on strengthening controls on crossbows on public safety grounds, which ran from 14 February to 9 April last year. Will the Minister now publish a response on providing further controls on the use, ownership and supply of crossbows after Saturday's horrifying attack? We need to see action taken on those lethal weapons.

Police inquiries are ongoing, but we know that this is a critical incident and that the lead force is Counter Terrorism Policing. The fact that an individual was able to plan and carry out such a vile, hideous attack on two women requires us to ask questions about how our intelligence gathering operated prior to the attack. Can the Minister reassure me, my community and the House that there will be a thorough investigation into what intelligence gathering had been undertaken on the suspect, and whether lessons can be learned for the safety and security of the public?

I pay tribute once more to the local community in the area that I am proud to call home, and thank them for their bravery and kindness, as I do to our excellent emergency services in West Yorkshire.

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. He is absolutely right to pay tribute to the community, the members of the public who came forward when the attack was happening and the emergency services, who, as ever, run towards danger when many others run in the opposite direction. It is absolutely right that we pay tribute in the way that he has done. I hope that my response to his urgent question offered

him some reassurance about the Government's approach towards crossbows and what more we want to do. As I said, we will shortly publish our response to the consultation that took place last year. The investigation is under way; I know that it will be thorough and comprehensive, and that all the issues he raised will be looked at.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Everybody will have found the reports about this incident, which was of great severity, deeply concerning. I would like to express my deepest sympathies to those who were injured during this horrendous attack. Our thoughts are with them at this time. I also thank the public, the police and the emergency services more broadly for their response to the incident.

There are two aspects that I would like to touch on with the Minister. West Yorkshire police has said that counter-terrorism police are involved in responding to the incident. We have heard from the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation about the importance of not allowing an information vacuum to form. Will the Minister ensure that there is as much transparency as possible in the release of information about this case?

Secondly, I am aware that in the aftermath of the incident, although the police are not seeking anyone else in connection with it, there will be an increased police presence across Headingley and the broader city of Leeds in the coming days and weeks. Given that this horrific attack was on two young women, I would be grateful if the Minister could outline whether there have been any discussions about what that presence will entail and what measures are being taken, in particular to ensure that young women and girls feel safe in Leeds following this incident.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for his comments; he is absolutely right to praise the public of Headingley and the emergency services. The policing presence in Headingley and across Leeds is an operational matter for the chief constable, and I know that he will be mindful of the needs of the community in making clear what police presence is needed.

I am mindful of the issue around transparency and the flow of information, but again, this is a live police investigation. The police make decisions about what information is disclosed at the appropriate time. As I have said—and as you have set out to the House, Mr Speaker—it is important that there is not speculation at this stage, and that we allow the police to do their job and to investigate, look at the evidence and take the appropriate action as and when.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) in expressing my deepest sympathies to the families of the victims of this horrendous crime. West Yorkshire police is investigating two recent murders in my constituency of Shipley. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that West Yorkshire police has the necessary resources to investigate not only this most recent incident in Headingley, but serious crime taking place in the area more broadly?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. Let me reassure her that all police forces have additional resources in this new financial year—up to £19.6 billion is going into policing. We know that there are challenges in policing, but I have every confidence that West Yorkshire police has the resources it needs. West Yorkshire has a very effective mayor and deputy mayor, who leads on policing, and they make the case for their police force very well indeed.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): No one should have to live in fear of such horrific violence. The appalling events in Headingley on Saturday have left a community shocked and two women with really serious injuries. My thoughts and those of all the Liberal Democrats are, of course, with the victims, their families and all those affected by a crime of such awful brutality. This is yet another devastating example of the violence faced by women and girls across the country, which we must all work to end. It is also yet another example of a violent attack in which a crossbow has been used—one of too many in recent years. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), among others, has urged the Government to review and strengthen crossbow regulations. I note the Government's amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill, including new clause 70, and the Minister's response to the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel). Can the Minister confirm when the Government's formal response to the call for evidence will be published?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful for the comments from the hon. Member who leads on this subject for the Liberal Democrats. We all are committed to ensuring that violence against women and girls is halved over the next decade. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is sitting with me, is leading on that. It is an important strand of the safer streets mission.

I am pleased to hear of the support from the Liberal Democrats for our ongoing work on crossbows, particularly through the Crime and Policing Bill. We will bring forward details of the Government's approach, and the response to the consultation, very shortly. I have taken a particular interest in this issue, and I have met families who have been affected by violent crossbow attacks. I recently met Laura Sugden up in Driffield, who lost her partner, Shane Gilmer. Just this morning, I met Joan Whelan, whose partner, Dave Peck, was killed in 2022 by someone using a crossbow. I am aware of the need for action on this issue.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I wish the victims of the Headingley attack a full recovery. My thoughts are with their friends and family and the community. Just this morning, I welcomed Joan Whelan to Westminster to meet the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire—I thank the Minister for her time, and her sage advice and counsel—following the tragic loss of Joan's beloved partner, Dave Peck. Dave was fatally struck by bolts fired from a crossbow into an open busy pub in Westcliff in my constituency of Southend East and Rochford in 2022. Dave was affectionately known as West Ham Dave, and was a larger-than-life

character. Dave and Joan together had 22 grandchildren, who no longer have their grandad in their life. The crossbow was purchased by a resident with paranoid schizophrenia who had a history of mental health struggles. It was purchased freely, unchecked and unlicensed, on the internet. Does the Minister agree that more needs to be done to stop crossbows falling into the wrong hands? Will she join me in thanking Joan for her bravery in sharing her story?

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing Joan to see me today. She is an incredibly brave and impressive person, and we heard directly from her what the loss of Dave meant to her, her family and her 22 grandchildren. In the few words that my hon. Friend used, he made the case effectively for further changes to the law around crossbows.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The Minister mentioned her meeting with Laura Sugden, and I pay tribute to Laura for her campaigning on the issue. It is more than seven years since Anthony Lawrence brutally murdered Laura's partner Shane Gilmer. Laura was attacked with a crossbow, and was pregnant at the time. I know that a response to the consultation is coming, but can the Minister give us more detail about the timetable for that response? What next steps will we likely see?

Dame Diana Johnson: I also pay tribute to Laura, an incredibly brave woman who faced a horrific attack when her neighbour got into the house through the roof space and attacked her and her partner. In answer to the hon. Gentleman, I cannot give a specific date. I used to really dislike it when I was sitting on the Opposition Benches and a Government Minister would say "shortly" or "imminently", but I can guarantee that I am doing my best to ensure that we respond to the consultation from last year as soon as possible.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I express my sympathies and those of the people of Central Ayrshire to the victims of this horrific attack, and those affected by it. I note the presence of the Mayor of West Yorkshire in the Gallery. Does the Minister support the excellent work that the mayor is leading to keep women and girls safe in West Yorkshire? Will the Minister commit to working with mayors, and police and crime commissioners, across the country to tackle the rise of misogyny?

Dame Diana Johnson: I do not want to get into trouble with you, Mr Speaker, but I am very conscious of the excellent work done by the Mayor of West Yorkshire and her deputy, Alison Lowe, on violence against women and girls, and of their real commitment to making policies that will have a dramatic effect on the women and girls of West Yorkshire.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Unhinged individuals are roaming the streets of our towns and cities with crossbows, knives, saws and other dangerous weapons, and no tinkering around with legislation or licensing will stop this madness. Is it not about time we had mandatory jail sentences for people who carry such weapons?

Dame Diana Johnson: We are working as quickly as possible to understand and identify the nature and scale of the growing cohort of predominantly young men

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

and boys who are fixated with violence. We want to ensure that we have a proper approach and multi-agency interventions to manage the risk that they pose. The Prime Minister has already said that if the law needs to change in recognition of this new and dangerous threat, we will change it, quickly.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming forward to respond to the urgent question. Let me put on record my deepest sympathies for the victims of this terrible incident and their families. Members on both sides of the House have talked about the victims of crossbow attacks, and I find the whole issue very shocking, especially as someone who regularly visits Westcliff-on-Sea. Is there any more that we can do as a Government to support victims of these terrible attacks and their families?

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend has raised the important issue of how victims of such attacks are supported. As I said, this morning I talked to Joan about the support that she received after the horrific attack on Dave Peck, and I have heard about the support and help that Laura Sugden has received since she was attacked with a crossbow; but I am well aware that there is more to do, and I will talk to my counterpart in the Ministry of Justice about that.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister share my surprise at just how easy it is to get hold of one of these weapons? A few clicks will buy someone a Guillotine X+ compound crossbow for £324.91 plus £6.99 for delivery, or a Jaguar Deluxe for £129.95, with free delivery. These things are as deadly as shotguns, yet we do not license them as such. Will the Minister, in the plans that she has heralded, consider seriously going down the same route as other European countries and ensuring that these deadly weapons are properly controlled?

Dame Diana Johnson: In just a few sentences, the right hon. Gentleman has made a compelling case for why change is needed in this regard. I cannot go any further today, but I hear what he says, and I share his concern about the fact that people can go online and, with a few clicks, buy one of these items.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): A number of people have mentioned to me that they have been to university in Leeds, or have kids who live in "Below Clarey" in Harrogate and go to university in Leeds. There is quite a high-density student population in the area. What conversations have the Government had with local authorities and other partners to ensure that university students and parents feel supported and reassured? May I also echo the sentiments of Members on both sides of the House who have thanked the emergency services?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point about reassurance for the public, so that they can feel confident about going out in local

communities. I know that West Yorkshire police is ensuring that through the extra police presence, and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) will be working with community groups and the university. Also, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Minister for Security were properly briefed about the incident over the weekend. There is engagement across the board, and all the key stakeholders are part of those conversations.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I join all the other Members in wishing the victims of this horrific crime a speedy recovery. I note that Counter Terrorism Policing has been involved in intelligence-gathering, and that there is concern about online incitement to violence. Will the Minister join me in condemning the recent statement by the so-called Irish rap band Kneecap, who are reported to have told their audience that they should kill their local MP, and that the only good Tory is a dead Tory?

Dame Diana Johnson: Yes, of course I would condemn any such comments. Clearly, I cannot comment on anything that was posted online in relation to the case we are talking about today, but the hon. Gentleman will know that we work in partnership with technology companies to ensure that they understand their responsibility to tackle illegal content on their platforms, and we have been clear that they need to act quickly to identify and remove such content from their platforms once it has been posted. More generally, the Online Safety Act 2023 places duties on platforms to swiftly identify and remove illegal content, which we expect them to abide by. Furthermore, these platforms have a moral responsibility to keep their users and the general public safe, and we expect them to take all reasonable steps to do so.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very important that this matter is raised, but I am not sure that it fits in here. It might have been better if the hon. Gentleman had raised the issue in the House by making a point of order at the end.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. Our thoughts are with the victims and, indeed, with the police officers and the emergency services workers, who responded in such a positive way. Like others, I believe that such incidents highlight the fact that police officers, and particularly police community support officers, need to be on the ground so that they can deal with the use of crossbows, put in place measures to ensure public safety, and send the message that the police are close by. That needs to be the case not just in Headingley, but across all of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes the case for what this Government are doing on neighbourhood policing. We are putting 13,000 police officers and PCSOs back into local areas and communities to provide not only a police presence, but public reassurance, which is so important to the people we all represent.

Child Rape Gangs

4.1 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the child rape gangs scandal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): The shadow Home Secretary was away when I updated the House on the Government's response to the independent national inquiry into child sexual abuse, and on the action that we are taking to investigate and tackle child grooming gangs across the country. As I have said many times, people up and down this country are understandably horrified by the appalling crimes committed by despicable grooming gangs. Children were subjected to the most unthinkable sexual violence. Frontline services, local authorities and elected politicians turned away or even blamed the children, rather than their rapists. I know this because I speak to victims week in, week out, and I have done so for decades.

This Government are determined to get to the truth of both historical and current grooming gangs, to ensure that perpetrators are punished and to deliver justice and accountability for victims and survivors. That is why we are pressing ahead with the key recommendations of the independent inquiry, including the mandatory duty to report. Baroness Casey, who conducted a no-holds-barred review into grooming gangs' offending in Rotherham, is currently overseeing a national audit of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse. The audit will identify what further work is needed. It is looking at the scale, nature and profile of group-based abuse, including the characteristics of offenders. It will conclude in the coming weeks, and I have already committed to publishing the findings.

The Home Secretary and I have always been clear that the first priority in tackling this heinous offending is getting perpetrators behind bars, and getting justice for the victims and survivors. That is why all police forces in England and Wales have been asked to review historical grooming gangs investigations that were closed with no further action, and to pursue new lines of inquiry and reopen investigations where appropriate.

We are also going further than ever before to support local areas to hold independent local inquiries, which can drive action and accountability at a local level. That is what inquiries in Telford, Manchester and Rotherham have delivered effectively, and that is the approach we would like to see rolled out elsewhere. In January, we said that we would support five local inquiries. We are moving ahead with that commitment, and we have confirmed that funding will be made available to Oldham council as part of this work. We are currently working with a range of experts to develop a best practice local inquiries framework, so that local areas that conduct inquiries do so in a way that actually delivers justice, accountability and truth, commanding the support of victims and survivors.

Our focus is on delivering meaningful, tangible change for victims and survivors. That means delivering on the key recommendations of Professor Jay's national inquiry, getting perpetrators behind bars and, most importantly of all, protecting children today.

Chris Philp: The whole nation is shocked by the rape gangs scandal. Thousands of young teenage girls were systematically raped over years by men of predominantly Pakistani heritage—girls such as Jane, who was repeatedly gang raped at the age of just 12. The police found her being abused by an illegal immigrant, but instead of arresting the illegal immigrant, they arrested her. That is sick. The last Government took action by setting up the wider Jay inquiry and the grooming gangs taskforce, but the truth is that that is not enough.

There is now clear evidence that those in authority covered up these rapes because the perpetrators were mainly of Pakistani heritage. Last week, I met retired Detective Chief Inspector John Piekos. In Bradford, he witnessed the abuse of a young girl in a car, but he was then instructed by a chief superintendent to drop the matter in order to avoid antagonising Bradford's Muslim community. Covering up the rape of young girls for that reason is one of the most immoral things I have ever heard, yet not a single person—not one—has ever been held to account for these cover-ups.

That is why we need a national statutory public inquiry that can compel the production of evidence. Even last year, authorities in Manchester were still covering up, leading the chairs of the local Manchester inquiry to resign. Five local inquiries, which cannot compel the production of evidence, just will not do. Fifty towns were affected, not five. Bradford, where some of the worst abuse occurred, is refusing to co-operate with any inquiry at all. There has never been an inquiry in Bradford, because the council is refusing to participate.

The Home Secretary promised on 16 January that Baroness Casey would complete a rapid audit within three months. Three months have now passed and we have heard nothing whatsoever. The Government said there would be five local inquiries, but we know nothing about four of them. The man charged with setting them up, Tom Crowther, told the Home Affairs Committee on 1 April that he had been sidelined by the Minister over there, and "did not know" what was going on.

Finally, I recently met Marlon West, whose daughter was trafficked, abused and raped by mainly Asian men, including in Bradford. He said that this Government should be ashamed of themselves, and they should hold a national inquiry. Jane, who was trafficked and gang raped at 12, also wants a statutory national inquiry. Labour Mayor Andy Burnham, Harriet Harman and the Labour MP for Rotherham—the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion)—all agree. So will the Minister do what they, and Marlon and Jane, are all begging for, and hold a national inquiry so that those who covered up this scandal are at last held to account?

Jess Phillips: I thank the shadow Home Secretary. I do not need to read out the things found in other local inquiries to know, because I speak to the victims. I spoke to some of the victims of grooming gangs this morning, and I will speak to some more tomorrow. I have spoken to them from Oxford, from Birmingham, from Rochdale, from Rotherham and from Oldham. I know exactly the issue of the cover-up, as does everybody already, because of the many local inquiries that have told us this happened and the national inquiry that has told us there were cover-ups.

What we must focus on is making sure, as happened in Telford, that there is a local process of accountability that actually changes things on the ground, and that is

[*Jess Phillips*]

what I will do. I have been trying to change things on the ground all my life, since the very first time I met a girl who had been ignored. I will continue to do that, and do what is right for the victims.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): I genuinely welcome the renewed focus on this issue in this Parliament. In the Home Affairs Committee we have heard evidence from Professor Jay about her report, which made a number of recommendations in November 2022. She then set out her efforts in trying to get the previous Conservative Government to act on any of those recommendations for a period of over 90 weeks. She spoke about begging two Home Secretaries to take action. She spoke about talking to a chief of staff to one of the former Tory Prime Ministers, who ignored her. Does the Minister agree with me that rather than words now, action is far more important?

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree that action is what is needed, which is exactly why the Home Secretary has written to all police forces in England and Wales seeking to ensure that more arrests are made in these cases. The grooming gangs taskforce has in the past nine months made 597 arrests, surpassing the entire previous year, because we are so heavily focused on ensuring that these people end up behind bars. I think Professor Jay was ignored by the previous Government, and had we had mandatory reporting 10 years ago, when the current Home Secretary asked for it, perhaps more people would have been held accountable.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): No child should ever endure sexual exploitation or abuse. Such horrific and unacceptable crimes must have no place in our society. Victims and survivors of these crimes must be at the centre of our thoughts whenever we discuss these matters. We owe it to them not just to offer words of support, but to deliver justice and bring offenders to account. That also means taking firm preventive action to protect future generations from such harm. The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, led by Professor Alexis Jay, published its recommendations in 2022. Will the Minister please set out a clear timetable for the full implementation of the Jay inquiry's recommendations? Does the Minister agree that a duty of candour, via a Hillsborough law, would bring transparency and accountability to any future inquiry? Will the Government commit to a timetable for delivering that?

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Lady, and I agree with her that inquiries are only worth anything if we crack on. That is why, when I came to this House before the recess, I said it would go alongside the publishing of an action plan on the recommendations of the Jay report and Jay's work into grooming gangs. That has all been published as part of a Government plan, but it is only the beginning. Actually, this is going to take years and years. On the duty of candour, it seems appalling that we have to ask people to tell the truth, yet here we are. Of course, that is what we must be striving for, as the hon. Lady says, on behalf of the victims and survivors.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): As we have heard, when Alexis Jay came to the Home Affairs Committee, she told how she had pushed and pushed for the implementation of her long and wide-ranging report, but heard nothing back from the previous Government. I welcome today's urgent question, because this issue requires an urgency that we did not see from the previous Government. As someone who has worked on protecting the victims of child trafficking I know we need local responses, but there is an element for national co-ordination. Before recess, the Minister announced the creation of the child protection authority. Can she tell us more about the remit and the role that organisation will have in ensuring that, nationwide, we clamp down on this horrific crime?

Jess Phillips: Yes. As was outlined in Professor Alexis Jay's report, the need for an overreaching authority to ensure accountability across the child protection system was made very clear. As we roll out the new authority, we are consulting many experts on what exactly it needs to look like and ensuring that we get the very best possible. I am sick of hearing lessons learned in a serious case review about a child rape, a child rape gang or a child death. There needs to be genuine accountability and things need to change.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I agree with the Minister that policy must be victim-centred and that we must put victims at the heart of everything we do. Could she provide more information on when we will know about the remaining four locations? What will she do to ensure that the councils that are reluctant to be part of this work are compelled to do so?

Jess Phillips: We have committed to five, but I expect to go further.

Chris Philp: When?

Jess Phillips: I will answer the question of when. The framework for what local authorities will be tasked with will be released later in May, as will Baroness Casey's review, which I have committed to publishing. All those things will be dependent on each other. I cannot stand here and say exactly what that will look like, because I do not know what Baroness Casey will say about any particular area and what I might need to focus on. I will go on the basis of facts—something that does not happen very often in this debate, I have to say. I will follow the facts; wherever they tell me that there are victims who need help, that is where I will go.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): Before being elected to this place, I worked for a national social work organisation, and I know my hon. Friend the Minister similarly worked with victims of crime before entering this place. It is so important that we keep those victims at the forefront of our considerations. In the light of that, how does the Minister envisage the child protection authority working, and how will victims of crime be supported by it?

Jess Phillips: As my hon. Friend points out, I have spoken to and worked with victims of crime for many years. What they want, fundamentally, is for the things that happened to them not to happen to children today. That is the change they wish to see more than anything—more than they want any sort of justice. Ensuring that the new authority does that, and that it is not just words on paper, will therefore be absolutely vital and will deliver that fundamental victims' need. When we consult experts on the child protection authority, we will ensure that organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which has panels of specialist victims groups to assist its work, will be part of that.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): In February, a brave group of victims and a leading child abuse lawyer wrote to the Home Secretary warning her that the rape gangs scandal across the Bradford district is likely to be one of the most significant of its kind in the UK, and that leaders in Bradford are deliberately seeking to avoid the commissioning of an in-depth inquiry for fear of unearthing a significant problem. The letter, which still sits with the Home Secretary, outlines the dreadful deadlock that we are in across the Bradford district, where there is overwhelming victim-led support for a full inquiry, but a council unwilling to commission one. Does the Minister believe that victims and families across Keighley and the wider Bradford district deserve a full rape gangs inquiry, and if not, why not? If she believes they do deserve an inquiry, what powers will she use to overrule Bradford council if it continues to ignore victims' wishes?

Jess Phillips: Once again, I praise the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue over a number of years; others have come to it more recently. We have a meeting in our diary, so I will make him an offer: I would very much like to meet the victims he is talking about. I will gladly sit down with them. I want the hon. Gentleman to know that he has my guarantee that, if in the work Baroness Casey is doing around problem profiling and police forces across the country local authorities are found to have problems, I will pursue them.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): On Friday, in Rochdale, I met Jayne Ward and her colleagues from St Mary's sexual assault referral centre in Manchester, which is staffed by former police officers, nurses and social workers who are all committed to helping victims and survivors particularly in areas such as Rochdale which have suffered from grooming gang abuse. They told me that their priorities are cutting the courts backlog which means that cases are having to wait until March 2027 to go to trial, longer-term funding commitments to help groups such as theirs, and a wider recognition that most sexual abuse and child rape is perpetrated not by strangers, but by family and friends. Does the Minister agree that those should be our priorities, too?

Jess Phillips: I agree with every one of the asks of that sexual assault referral centre. I am working closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), to try to do all those things. Unfortunately, we cannot mend a very broken system overnight. It is very important for me to say, though, that the cases of grooming gangs

that I have come across are horrible—some of the worst I have ever seen—yet sometimes we forget how harrowing it is for children who have been raped by their fathers, their stepfathers or people in children's institutions. There is no hierarchy; they all deserve our love, care and dedication to taking action for them.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Thousands of young, white, British working-class girls have been raped, tortured and abused by Pakistani grooming gangs, yet the Minister refuses to support a full national public inquiry. What I want to know is: is she part of the cover-up?

Hon. Members: Shame!

Jess Phillips: That does not deserve a response—and I actually quite like the hon. Gentleman. I have spent my entire career helping—[*Interruption.*] I wonder how many victims of grooming gangs he has sat and held hands with in court, and for how many he has gone round to their house in the morning to get them out of bed to get them into a courtroom. There is no way that I would be part of any cover-up. I will do everything I can, under a Home Secretary who will do everything she can, to ensure that those who are responsible are held accountable.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank the three incredible, formidable women on the Front Bench—the Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones)—who have not just learned that this is an issue but have been working and campaigning on it for their entire lives and come to this place to create change. Since 2022, there has been an 88% increase in online grooming, and 81% of those groomed are young women and girls. Does the Minister think that the social media companies are doing enough? Does she think that the police understand the nature of online grooming enough to be able to protect young people from it?

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We often talk about historic cover-ups and failings, but we must also keep our eye on exactly where grooming is going on now and will take place in the future. She points out, completely rightly, that there is an ongoing grooming issue. Through the taskforce and work with various security departments, I have seen great examples of quite how focused police enforcement is on that. Do I think that social media companies could be doing more? The answer will always be yes.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Minister said in her opening answer that she is determined to get to the truth. She also listed people who could be caught up in cover-ups such as politicians, police and councillors. There are five potential inquiries and up to 50 child grooming gangs; how will it work if those councils do not have funding? More importantly, what if the councils do not want to take part? She said that she will do everything she possibly can. She could change the law—with backing from the Opposition—so that people are compelled to give evidence in such cases. Will she consider doing that?

Jess Phillips: As I said, I will consider the situation as it unfolds. What I would say is with the amount of money that the Government are allocating for local inquiries—[*Interruption.*] From a sedentary position, the shadow Home Secretary said, “It’s not enough,” but it is millions more than the zero that the previous Government allocated. When Oldham and Telford wrote to the previous Government to ask for help, answer came there none. I will follow the leads that are left for me.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Group-based sexual abuse is among the most heinous of crimes, and our priority must always be to listen to victims and survivors. I recently attended an event organised by West Yorkshire’s Mayor Tracy Brabin and the deputy Mayor and police and crime commissioner, Alison Lowe, where I had the opportunity to meet victims and survivors, as well as fantastic organisations such as Rape Crisis Bradford. I commend the Under-Secretary for her brave and tireless work to get justice for victims and survivors and to challenge those who have failed them, and for her commitment to implement the Jay inquiry in full. Can she assure me and my constituents that, as well as taking action to bring perpetrators to justice, she will support work to prevent such heinous crimes from happening again in the future?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely, and I say with the voice of the victims I have worked with over the years and have spoken to even today that the fundamental that they want is that children who come forward today—to their teacher, their social worker or whoever it is—do not suffer as they did. Keeping our eye on making sure that people are held accountable for the past will deliver justice only if we also look at the now.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The Minister has outlined money for local inquiries. Is she able to comment on what resources will be made available for people who might come forward as a result of those local inquiries? Obviously, there is a backlog in provision of mental health support, talking therapies and all sorts of resources that people who have been through these horrific experiences may require, which are often provided by local authorities, health bodies and charities whose funding is under pressure. Will she elaborate on that and how she will make sure that victims are at its heart?

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree. I remember working in a Rape Crisis centre when the Jimmy Savile scandal was revealed and it was like being hit by a tsunami—the phone lines lit up. As I said before Easter in response to the Jay inquiry, making sure that we have robust mental health support for children who are victims is really important. I also announced that the Home Office would double the amount of money it provides for adult historic rape victims, in recognition that we may bring more people forward and therefore need to improve access to support.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesend) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for all her work and commitment over many, many years. Will she confirm that the Government are committed to building trust with victims and survivors of child exploitation and abuse? My heart goes out to

them. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government’s focus on tackling violence against women and girls will turn the tide and shed a light, as sunlight is the best disinfectant?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. There are systemic problems with how women and girls are treated, and sometimes cover-ups are ignored. I am afraid to say that there is still a cultural sense of women feeling that they will not be believed if they come forward. We have to look fundamentally at all the systems across Government, which is what I and my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who is leading on the violence against women and girls strategy, will do.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The Government are blocking a national inquiry into the rape gangs and say instead that we should have five local inquiries, but we know there have been 50 places where these things have happened. In some of those places, such as Bradford, the council is blocking a local inquiry. We also know that local authorities often do not have the powers they need to requisition evidence and summon witnesses. Indeed, this whole story began when representatives of Oldham council wrote to the Minister after the election asking for the national powers that the council needed. Why did the Minister refuse to meet them?

Jess Phillips: I appreciate that that is where the whole story began for the hon. Gentleman, but it is not where the whole story began. Oldham council had written, I believe, twice before to the previous Government—

Neil O’Brien: No, it had not.

Jess Phillips: It had written to the previous Government, as had Telford. So, for me, this story started many years—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. To say it is simply untrue is to suggest something about the Minister. We have to get this right—

Neil O’Brien: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is not correct that Oldham council had written to the last Government. An individual councillor had, but Oldham council had not. That is the whole point.

Mr Speaker: I am sure if there has been a mistake, the Minister will correct that.

Jess Phillips: I will check the record and make sure, but what I am absolutely certain of is the number of times that Telford council wrote and asked. I am aware that Rotherham, Rochdale, Telford, Oxford, or any of the places that have had an inquiry, were never given a single bean by the previous Government to do that work, and yet here we are and we will do it.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): Communities across Heywood and Middleton North, however resilient, still bear the scars of these appalling and cowardly acts. I am grateful to the Minister for her continued engagement and resolve in addressing the cruel legacy of those crimes. What steps are being

taken by her Department to learn from the healthcare practitioners, support workers and others who were active at the time of these crimes and initial inquiries to ensure that they can provide their insights and expertise to inform the commendable present-day efforts to secure justice for the women and girls?

Jess Phillips: I commend my hon. Friend's work, and I know she is coming to see me with some of those healthcare workers. Sara Rowbotham—a woman I know well who works in sexual health services—was one of the whistleblowers in the Rochdale case. We absolutely need to ensure that, as we make progress, we listen to anybody who interacts with children and that people have space to come forward and speak up. The mandatory duty to report will go some way, but changing the culture to ensure that people are listened to and heard—in the health setting they know that better than in most—is definitely something that we will learn.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): Despite multiple promises of inquiries from political parties across this House, it seems the only operational investigation will be the rape gang inquiry that I have privately launched. It has garnered cross-party support, and I implore MPs from any political persuasion to align with our cause. Will the Minister commit today to engaging in a co-operative manner with the investigation and make herself available to answer questions from our expert panel?

Jess Phillips: I delight in the hon. Gentleman's interest, and what I would say to every single Member of this House is that I will work with absolutely anybody to make this better. I am more than happy to meet him and talk about any level of co-operation, because if people are genuinely here to try to stop the grooming gangs in this country, I am genuinely here to help.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I welcome that the Minister has kindly confirmed today that the Casey review will be published in May. Given that it will explain the next stages of the process, and while she obviously cannot preface the review, could she elaborate on whether she expects the review to include a framework for conducting the local inquiries?

Jess Phillips: I absolutely do not expect it to do that. Baroness Casey is seeking to do an audit of the problem profiles around the country, looking at exactly where the data does or does not exist and where there are failings. It was intended to be a rapid audit. The framework for good local inquiries is being worked on by a series of experts, including Tom Crowther and Alexis Jay. Details of the fund that local authorities can apply to will also be published by the end of May.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I am sure the Minister shares my concern that, to date, no one has been convicted of covering up these horrendous crimes, including sexual abuse and gang rape. What is the plan to ensure that people are held to account, because it is quite clear, as the Minister said in her earlier remarks, that the cover-ups perpetuated the crimes, not just historically but potentially continuing to this very day?

Jess Phillips: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. I wish to see people who covered this up held accountable within the law and the frameworks that exist. If people have concerns about things and would like to bring specific cases to me, the police have the power to investigate those things. Had mandatory reporting laws existed sooner, we might have been in a better situation, but I completely agree that it is appalling that no one has been held to account.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her continued hard work on this issue. I welcome the commitment to introduce mandatory reporting for suspected sexual abuse, which was recommended 11 years ago by the current Prime Minister when he was the outgoing Director of Public Prosecutions, and accepted by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. However, we had to go through four more Tory Prime Ministers and seven more Tory Home Secretaries before this Labour Government could implement it. I assure my hon. Friend that she has my full support on this matter, and I urge her to continue her good work.

Jess Phillips: Thank you.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Child sexual exploitation is a vile and despicable crime that cuts across all sections of our society. It is perpetrated by individuals with blackened souls who come from all races, creeds, religions and backgrounds. All law-abiding citizens want justice for the victims of those horrific acts. Does the Minister agree that our focus must be on supporting the victims of exploitation and stopping the perpetrators, but that that must be done in such a way that does not fan the flames of hate towards innocent groups of people who, like all law-abiding citizens, condemn such acts?

Jess Phillips: Of course I agree. I want the perpetrators to be held accountable. What I can say without any doubt is that, as local inquiries have told us, people have covered things up, whether asked to or not, for seemingly multicultural reasons. That cannot stand. That said, we will always follow the facts to ensure that we completely and utterly deal with it.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Home Secretary's commissioning of Baroness Casey to conduct the national audit. Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), can the Minister confirm whether the growing prevalence of online group-based sexual exploitation of children will form part of the report, and will she provide an update on the Home Office response to that growing crime?

Jess Phillips: Group-based grooming, which includes some terrible examples of British children being groomed from abroad and vice versa, is something that we are acutely aware of. Whether it forms part of what Baroness Casey finds, I will leave to her to say. I will say, however, that it absolutely forms part of the strategy of work that the Government have laid out for preventing child sexual abuse.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I am concerned that some of the people involved in local authority inquiries could be the very same individuals who have covered up these heinous crimes for years.

[Charlie Dewhurst]

Why is the Minister so unwilling to seek justice for the victims of these child rape gangs through a national statutory inquiry?

Jess Phillips: I want to be clear that local inquiries must be independent. The chair of Telford inquiry was independent, and Professor Alexis Jay chaired the Rotherham inquiry. They are independent inquiries and they are not run by local authorities.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Last week I caught up with SafeStep, a remarkable charity in my constituency that supports victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse. We discussed the many ways in which trauma remains with victims and survivors, and how important accountability is for them as they rebuild their lives. My constituents who have suffered this appalling abuse need closure and change. I pay tribute to the Minister for her vital and persistent work to that end, including the establishment of the five local inquiries. Will she give further examples of what areas such as mine can do to ensure that the vile perpetrators are brought to justice?

Jess Phillips: The grooming gangs taskforce will work with local police force areas. The whole point is that it works operationally with local police forces to ensure best practice. That has led to 1,100 more arrests for group-based child sexual abuse since the taskforce was set up. There is a huge amount of resource in that centre. I encourage local areas and local police forces always to be working with the taskforce.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Surely there is something fundamentally flawed with the process of local inquiries if the option of holding the inquiry rests with the defaulting authority. Is there not equally something out of kilter with the Government's approach to public inquiries when at this moment they are about to spend up to tens of millions of pounds on a public inquiry to meet the political demands of the Finucane family while denying a national inquiry to this national scandal of child rape gangs?

Jess Phillips: I will not answer the second point, which I think strays slightly from this urgent question, but what I will say is that I wonder if the hon. and learned Gentleman has read the 200-page document of the national inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse that already exists and has statutory powers. If he or anyone in the House has not read it, I encourage them to do that.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her responses. As has often been said in this Chamber, child sexual abuse happens across all sectors of society, to girls and to boys, and there is no hierarchy of victims. As the Minister has already said, every single one of those young people comes into contact on a daily basis with professionals who have the power to change their lives for the better. What work is being done in advance of the mandatory reporting to work with the professional bodies who register those professionals to ensure that this can happen?

Jess Phillips: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning boys and giving me the opportunity to say the following. I made a promise to one of the Oldham victims when I met her that I would always say that grooming gangs could happen to boys and girls, because it was her son who had lost his life, so I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to do that. There will be a delay in the preparation and rolling out of mandatory reporting exactly because we must make sure the guidance and the regulation that sits behind it and the training that will have to be put in place are right. We need that not so much for social workers and others who already have that sort of training, but there will also be sports coaches and volunteers, because huge numbers of institutions work with children, and getting this right is more important than rushing ahead with it.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): My constituents are horrified by the Government's failure to order a national inquiry into the child rape gang scandal. Does the Minister share the concerns raised by Sir Trevor Phillips that the decisions made by the Government appear to be obviously political and designed to avoid offending Muslim voters of Pakistani origin?

Jess Phillips: I do not agree with that. Politically, the easiest thing for me to have done in this situation would have been to capitulate, but I do not think it is the right thing to do. I genuinely believe that from my years of work and speaking to the victims and working in Telford with those victims about what changed afterwards. I would not do it—I would not stand here if I did not believe it. And as for the idea that I am trying to protect something of myself, this process has, I have to say, not been protecting of me and, frankly, that is an absolutely disgraceful thing to say.

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): This is clearly a deeply distressing topic that affects the whole House, and I fully accept that the Minister is affected as much as anyone. That being said, it is not clear to me why we would not do absolutely everything within our power to get to the bottom of this, and that includes a full national inquiry with all the powers that come with it. Will the Minister please explain to me why we will not have that inquiry, and why she sees having one as capitulating?

Jess Phillips: What we have proposed is better because it is about acting now in areas where it is needed. We have already had a national inquiry, which took seven years and wrote a 200-page dossier on group-based sexual abuse—[*Interruption.*] There was a 200-page dossier specifically on that, and it took two years just to do that, and it made really good recommendations. I genuinely believe that the best thing for me to do is crack on with them.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Minister provide assurances from the Dispatch Box as to how the Government will compel councils—like Bradford, which has refused to participate in this inquiry or in a local inquiry—to take part? It may seem self-evident, but councils that are liable for child protection and that are found at fault are probably not going to want to participate in a local inquiry. That is why we are asking for a national inquiry. Will the Minister please set out what

the Government are going to do to compel those councils to give evidence so that justice can be served for the victims?

Jess Phillips: I will wait for the review being undertaken by Baroness Casey and look at what it tells me, and then I will act on that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her honest answers. She has spoken a number of times on this issue, and I thank her for her care and consideration of the matter. She will know that I always try to be respectful but my question is one that has to be asked. It remains clear that there is a public perception that the Government are drawing a line under actions that simply do not deserve to be forgotten. In order to learn the lessons of these dreadful actions, we need a full and open investigation. The Government must pacify the general public. We have an obligation to society, and even more so to the vulnerable. Will the Minister confirm the investigation that the public and Members of this House believe the scale of these issues warrants?

Jess Phillips: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's desire to always be respectful. I shall pay it back in kind and say that there is absolutely no way that the Government wish for the past to be forgotten or for a line to be drawn. That is absolutely the opposite of what I want. I want every single perpetrator rounded up and locked up; I want every single victim to feel supported; and I want everybody who covered these actions up to be held accountable for that—*[Interruption.]* I can hear chuntering from the shadow Home Secretary, who does not always show respect. There is this idea that people are held accountable by public inquiries, but that is not the case; nobody has gone to prison following the Hillsborough inquiry. Has anyone gone to prison as a result of the infected blood inquiry? No. Hon. Members should be careful about what they are promising can be achieved.

Points of Order

4.47 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order, about which I have given Mr Speaker prior notice.

All of us in this House know that Mr Speaker has a deep personal commitment to the safety of Members of Parliament and their families. In that context, a video has emerged this weekend of a concert held in London some months ago, at which an Irish republican band, called Kneecap, told a cheering audience that,

"The only good Tory is a dead Tory".

The band then implored the audience to,

"Kill your local MP".

I am not a lawyer, but to my mind that is incitement to murder. Quite rightly, counter-terrorism police are now investigating. This is beyond despicable and the issue affects all parties. I say that as I look across the Chamber at the plaque for our fallen comrade, Sir David Amess, and at the one behind me for our fallen comrade, Jo Cox. They both died serving their constituents.

Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I ask Mr Speaker three things? First, will the Home Secretary come to this House by no later than tomorrow and make a full statement on what the Government understand has happened here and exactly what they intend to do about it to protect all those in public life, not just MPs and their families? Secondly, will the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who I see is in her place—I did notify her of my point of order—give a public explanation, ideally via a statement, of how it came to pass that this band were given some £14,000 of British taxpayers' money in a grant?

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): That was your Government!

Mr Francois: We do not normally heckle points of order, but, if the right hon. Lady is going to do that, I will say that our party's leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), refused the grant. The band appealed, and this Government did not oppose the appeal. Those are the facts. Will the right hon. Lady please explain to us exactly how that happened and how we can get the money back? I did not want to make this issue partisan, but she interrupted me.

Thirdly, I understand that Kneecap are still booked to appear at Glastonbury, which, under the circumstances, would be unconscionable. As Mr Speaker is chairing a Speaker's Conference on MPs' safety, can we implore him through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to write to the organisers of Glastonbury festival and say that this House does not think it is appropriate that Kneecap should be allowed to appear, at least until the investigation is completed? I ask this on behalf of all MPs and all our families. I hope that that is not unreasonable.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving notice of some aspects of his point of order. As he knows, we do not discuss security matters on the Floor of the House, but I understand that the police are investigating the incidents. I have had no indication that Ministers intend to come to the House to make a statement, but the right hon. Gentleman has put his points on the record.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek your advice on how to put on the record my concerns and those of my constituents about worrying allegations in the weekend press about the awarding of contracts by Martin Dowey, the Conservative leader of South Ayrshire council?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair, but the hon. Member has put his point on the record.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There are significant concerns in Whitehill and Bordon in my constituency about changes to healthcare provision and meeting the needs of the rapidly growing local population. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on 28 January about this issue, specifically about the future of the Chase community hospital. I have sent follow-up emails, but—three months to the day later—I have still received no response to that letter. The refusal of the Secretary of State to engage with my constituents on this matter is concerning. I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on securing a ministerial response to the proposals.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his point of order and for giving notice of it. Ministerial correspondence is not a matter for the Chair, but all hon. Members should be entitled to expect a timely reply when they write to any member of the Government. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted the hon. Member's comments.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At business questions last week, I asked a question related to JCB's hydrogen diggers. Given that JCB was a sponsor of my constituency jobs fair, I should have referred the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests before asking that question. I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how I can correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order, for notice of it and for putting his point on the record.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Further to the point of order made by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), we in Northern Ireland are particularly concerned about the threats against Conservative MPs, and indeed against any MP in this House. We are also concerned about the funding of this particular group, Kneecap—whether they get funding from here, back home from some councils, or whatever—and about their ability to travel right across the world, such as to the United States of America. Will the relevant Minister make a statement on all those issues that concern the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, and that concern me, the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and all of us who represent Unionism in Northern Ireland?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, although it is not a point of order. He has put his comments on the record, and he may want to make a further point to the Table Office.

Football Governance Bill [*Lords*]

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): The reasoned amendment in the name of Stuart Andrew has been selected.

4.55 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Today is a day of celebration for football fans in towns, villages and cities across England. Football would be nothing without the fans, and today we put them back at the heart of the game, where they belong. Football is genuinely our national game—it is the beating heart of our communities, a core part of what it means to be British, and one of our greatest exports. English football lights up the world through the premier league, and it lights up lives in every community through the magic that clubs bring, from the biggest in the world to our smallest grassroots clubs. However, while we celebrate the global success of the premier league, there is deep concern at every level of the footballing world about the fragility of the wider foundations of the game, which threatens its global success and the success of the whole game itself.

Since 1992, 60 clubs in the top four divisions have been plunged into administration, and behind that is the stark reality that fans have lived with for too long: that of being just one bad owner away from collapse. In my town of Wigan, we are no strangers to that; in recent years, we have fought two long, lonely battles to save our club. What I saw and learned over those long and difficult months appalled me, with rogue owners, asset-stripping administrators, and fans who were put last when they should have been first. In Reading, Fleetwood, Derby, Morecambe, Macclesfield, Chester and Bury are fans who have lived with a daily drumbeat of anxiety as leagues failed to come to agreement, owners came and went, and the systems set up to protect the fans failed one by one. We promised those fans that we would put an end to that. Today, we make good on that promise by bringing to this House a historic piece of legislation that has been far too long coming and putting fans back at the heart of the game, where they belong.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward this Bill and on strengthening the previous Government's Bill, particularly when it comes to financial sustainability. Not only are football clubs the beating heart of our communities; they give a lot back to those communities. As a former Hammersmith councillor, she will know that no club is better at doing so than Queens Park Rangers, through the QPR in the Community Trust and its chief executive Andy Evans. They are fantastic, and do wonderful work in some of the poorest communities in the country.

Lisa Nandy: I agree with my hon. Friend, at least about the Bill—we perhaps differ on what is the best football club in the world. I also commend him on his long support for not just his football club, but his community, in which it plays such an important part.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Before the Secretary of State goes any further in her speech, will she take the opportunity to pay tribute to Dame Tracey Crouch, whose work in government laid the foundations for what the Secretary of State is talking about now? Since independence should be at the heart of everything we do, will she also say that it would be a pity if this Bill were mired in another story about Labour cronyism?

Lisa Nandy: I unreservedly pay tribute to Dame Tracey Crouch. Without her tenacity and determination, we would not have this Bill before the House in such good condition. We owe her a great deal, as does every football fan in the country. It is a source of pride to me that from the Bill's inception—from the moment the fan-led review began—it has been a cross-party endeavour. I am grateful for the relationships we have been able to forge across the House to get us here.

Let me address head-on the question about the chair of the independent football regulator. David Kogan is by far one of the people in football most qualified to take on this role. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) likes to chunter, but he might want to listen for one moment, though I know it is not his normal mode of operation. Not only is David Kogan negotiating billions of pounds-worth of broadcasting rights, but he has advised the Premier League, the English Football League, UEFA, the National Football League and the Scottish premiership among others. He was also on the list that I inherited from the previous Government, who had headhunted him directly to ask him to apply for the job. Not only that, but top of the list was somebody who had donated over £50,000 to the Conservative party, so I will take no lectures from the Conservatives.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Lisa Nandy: No, I will not take the intervention, because I think a period of reflection and a bit of humility might be welcome from the Conservatives. They are embarrassing themselves. It is about time they listened and reflected on how this issue is perceived by millions of fans across the country.

We should be ashamed that it has taken so long to get to this Bill. It has been 14 years since parliamentarians first called for urgent change. It has been five years since Bury FC collapsed, sending shockwaves through English football. It has been four years since the European super league forced politicians to end years of violent indifference. It has been three years since the Crouch review called time on a system that has let fans down for too long, and it has been two years since the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) introduced the Bill to Parliament, calling it a landmark moment for fans.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I congratulate the Secretary of State on bringing the Bill to the House. I hope the House will join me in congratulating Bury FC, the Mighty Shakers, for their historic first promotion since the club's no-fan-fault eviction from the football league. We love a comeback

in Bury, and know all too well of the devastating impact when football clubs forgo good ownership and standards. The Government are right to deliver on their promise of an independent football regulator; that promise was a consequence, in no small part, of the trauma we experienced. Will my right hon. Friend support my call for the new regulator's home to be in Bury?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is a big fan of a comeback himself, as this House knows. I too declare an interest: my stepdad was a lifelong season ticket holder at Gigg Lane. I know that I would be speaking for him, were he still alive, in thanking my hon. Friend for the tireless work he did while the Conservative Government stood by and did absolutely nothing as his club was allowed to collapse. My hon. Friend worked tirelessly with fans in the community, and has been able to throw open the doors of Gigg Lane to fans again, so I am grateful to him for that.

The time for inaction is over. We have known for so long that for English football to prosper, it must be made sustainable. That is what the Bill does. We promised that, and we are doing it. We ask everybody who cares about the future of football to back our fans, our game, and the Bill.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome Bury FC's revival, not least because Rochdale FC can now beat them in the local derby. On Saturday, I was at Spotland to see Rochdale clinch a play-off place for the national league, thanks to a 5-1 win over Hartlepool FC. Many people there knew it was a super achievement, precisely because a year ago we were threatened with financial collapse. There was a poignant moment at the game when we all remembered the death of Joe Thompson, whom we lost to cancer aged just 36. His work is being carried on by the local cancer charity Team Thompson. That epitomises everything that is great about our game; it is at the heart of the community, and is giving something back, through players like Joe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that people like Joe are everything that is great about our English game? Does she also agree about the need to ensure that smaller clubs see a reverse of the inequity we see in the game nationally?

Lisa Nandy: May I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and add my voice to his in paying tribute to Joe? All our thoughts are with his family and the community.

That example shows exactly why this Bill matters. It also shows why, up until today, this has been a genuinely cross-party endeavour, backed by Members in all parts of the House. Against that backdrop, may I take this opportunity to say that this amendment is an absolute embarrassment? With the exception of stronger protections for fans, which the Conservatives supported, this Bill, which the right hon. Member for Daventry is opposing, is the Bill that he introduced. This is the system of light-touch regulation that incentivises football to get its own house in order that only a few weeks ago he was championing. In fact, not only is it light touch and pro-growth, but we got those measures into the Bill—something that the Conservatives failed to do when they were in government. He should be thanking us and welcoming the strengthened provision in the Bill.

[Lisa Nandy]

This Bill takes a proportionate approach that rejects one-size-fits-all, so that those with the broadest shoulders bear the greatest burden. The right hon. Member should know that because he presented the Bill to this House, and only a few weeks ago he was busy endorsing it. This is the Bill that every single Conservative Member supported at the election in their manifesto. Promises made, promises broken—we simply cannot trust a single word they say.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Secretary of State talks about a light touch and proportionality. The general secretary of UEFA wrote to her about the potential consequences of her proposals before Christmas. That letter is relevant to the decisions we have to make today, so will she publish a copy for the House before we vote this evening?

Lisa Nandy: They just cannot stop embarrassing themselves. Seriously, the hon. Member was the Whip on the Bill Committee. He knows full well that UEFA has confirmed in writing to me, as the Football Association confirmed directly to Members of both Houses, that the Bill before the House does not breach UEFA statutes. I will say to him gently, as I said to Opposition Members—[*Interruption*].—the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness might like to learn something—that it is one thing to criticise the Government for something they disagree with; it is another to criticise them for doing exactly the same thing that they did in government.

The hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) will know that the last Government—in which the shadow Secretary of State was the Minister responsible for the Bill—refused to publish any private correspondence, be it from UEFA or otherwise, because they said, rightly, that it remained confidential and was private. However, we have been happy to disclose to the House that there is no problem with the Bill presented as far as UEFA is concerned. I mean, honestly—

Mike Wood *rose*—

Lisa Nandy: No, the hon. Gentleman is embarrassing himself. Sit down, have a period of humility, and learn what is in this Bill.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): We will hear a number of speeches today, and we have a number of football fans in the Chamber, representing many football clubs across many leagues, so I expect that many of us will not be surprised to hear the chant: “Well, it’s all gone quiet over there!” Is the Secretary of State, like me, surprised at the apparent silence from the Opposition Benches, and at Opposition Members’ seeming reluctance to put fans at the heart of our game?

Lisa Nandy: Even though we are talking about the Conservatives, I am absolutely gobsmacked. We are talking about millions of football fans around the country. Certainly in recent years, I have never not been of the opinion that Conservative Members do not think about anyone but themselves, but even on that test, I would have thought that they would see that it was in the interests of the Conservative party to back something that means so much to millions of people in every town, village and city across this country.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con) *rose*—

Lisa Nandy: I will make some progress, but I will bring the hon. Member in when I can.

Let me remind the right hon. Member for Daventry what he used to think about the Bill. He used to say that a regulator was “substantial but necessary”; that not having one would be “catastrophic”; and that

“Without fans, football clubs are nothing. We would all do well to remember that as we work towards reform to secure a brighter future for football.”

The Conservatives have now worked themselves so far towards reform that they are virtually indistinguishable from the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). I can only think that he is writing their policy on football.

But seriously, how can the right hon. Member for Daventry look football fans in Hartlepool, Bolton, Portsmouth, Reading, Bury and Luton in the eye and defend this amendment, after making them a promise just two years ago, and again at the general election? [*Interruption.*] I have the full list. He might as well have it, because he is the only person in this room who does not seem to remember what he has said. I am left wondering whether he did not understand a word of his own Bill, which he introduced to this place just a few years ago and championed at the general election, or whether the sad truth is that the public cannot trust a single word that his party says.

Let me try to help the shadow Minister on what the Bill actually does. First, it introduces a licensing system to require clubs to have a sensible business plan that they stick to. That will include a clear financial plan that properly assesses risk. That is measured and proportionate, and it places requirements on clubs that reflect their circumstances. Let me address the concern that he has just discovered that he has. The Bill will take into account factors such as league, club size and financial health. That will ensure that the regulation is light-touch. We have cemented the proportionate approach that we inherited from him by adding two measures: a financial growth duty, so that the regulator will need to consider the financial growth of English football as part of its secondary duties; and a specific—[*Interruption.*] He cannot have it both ways. He cannot take credit for this legislation and then try to vote it down. Honestly, I have seen a lot from the Conservatives. I have seen people taking three different positions on two different options in front of them, but what I have not seen for a long time is a shadow Minister who has two different positions on his own view. It is just absurd.

We have also included a regulatory principle in the Bill to clarify that the regulatory regime is light-touch. That will provide clarity and certainty, and prevent any unintended consequences from deterring good owners from investing in our clubs. The Sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), and I have worked closely with clubs at every level to produce legislation that is clearer for prospective owners than the existing system, and we are confident that this stable environment will drive more investors with a long-term prudent approach into the game.

Dr Luke Evans: One of the sticking points in the Bill, and one of the things that has changed, is the approach to parachute payments. One of the Opposition’s concerns is that the Bill will deter investment. We are talking about literally the best league in the world. People from

across the world invest with security because of those payments. If the Government take them away, there is a worry that it will deter investment in other leagues. That is exactly what the German league, the French league and the Spanish league are looking for. Will she rectify the issue by putting a provision about those payments in the Bill?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Gentleman raises a decent point, and I will address it head-on. We have no plans to abolish parachute payments, and there is no measure in the Bill that allows us to do so. We also do not take a view on parachute payments; it is for football to determine its view. However, it would be nonsense to exclude parachute payments from the state of the game report, given that this Bill is about the financial sustainability of the whole game. The regulator must be able to take that into account and to use it to inform discussions with clubs in every league across the footballing world. That is the view that we took, but it is also far closer to the spirit, intention and recommendations of Dame Tracey Crouch's review of football, which was led and informed by thousands of fans across the country. It is the right thing to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Lisa Nandy: I will make some progress, as many Members want to speak. It shows how important this issue is to this House.

Some Members have raised concerns about competition, so let me be crystal clear. Football is an economic powerhouse. The Premier League and its clubs contributed more than £4.2 billion in tax in 2021, supporting more than 90,000 jobs. England leads the world when it comes to football, and the English pyramid is based on competition. That is why the regulator will not intervene in competition matters. Its scope is tightly defined, and I can say to the House with confidence that it will not risk contravening any international statutes. Members will have heard what I said to the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire about the view of UEFA, and they will have heard what the FA has confirmed directly to Members of both Houses. In fact, we are so committed to this principle, to protect England's ability to compete in international matches, that we removed a damaging clause we inherited from the previous Government. It would have required the regulator to "have regard to the foreign and trade policy objectives of His Majesty's Government"

when approving takeovers. The system will be better and far more independent as a result.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Given the enormous amount of money that sits with the Premier League, does the Secretary of State share my feeling that it and the FA in general do not do justice by the families of former footballers who suffer from neurodegenerative conditions? Footballers are four or five times more likely to have such conditions than the rest of the population, and those organisations are meant to help families with the care costs of such former professionals, but they do not do so. Will the Secretary of State meet Football Families for Justice so that we can put something in the Bill that will force the wealthy people in football to support those who suffer?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Friend for his advocacy. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who has done incredible work in this regard. I am due to meet some of the families shortly.

I will try to make some progress, because many Members want to speak and raise issues about their own clubs and communities. Let me turn to the subject of financial distributions. Our strong preference is for football to be able to reach its own agreement on broadcast revenue distribution, but regrettably, as the House will know, no agreement has been reached since the last deal was struck in 2019. That is why we agree with Dame Tracey Crouch that clubs must have a safeguard in these circumstances, and the Bill proposes a backstop power. It was explicitly designed to incentivise industry to come to its own agreement, and restores the right of the regulator to consider all elements of club finances, including parachute payments. By definition, a backstop is a measure of last resort, and we have strengthened the measures in the Bill to ensure that the regulator will have the power to intervene only as a last resort. We have also made it clear that the regulator will need to publish its "state of the game" report before the backstop can be triggered, so that all parties have a clear and common understanding of the problems that should be addressed before engaging in mediation.

I recognise that the exact process of how the backstop should work has been a matter of serious and considered debate in the other place, with thoughtful suggestions made by Lord Birt, Lord Pannick and others. We are confident that we have proposed an effective mechanism, but we appreciate the constructive and thoughtful debate on this matter. Before the Committee stage, we will consider whether there are sensible ways in which to improve the process and ensure that we present the best possible option to the House.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): May I return the Secretary of State to the Conservatives' position on parachute payments? I welcome the fact that the Government have not ruled out taking them into account when the regulator does his work. Surely the purpose of the "state of the game" report is to look at the health of the football pyramid as a whole, but before that report is published, the Opposition want to rule out allowing the regulator to take account of parachute payments. As 80% of the help that the Premier League gives the rest of the league is spent on parachute payments, surely that is a nonsense and at least should be considered for the future.

Lisa Nandy: I agree very much with what my hon. Friend has said.

Let me deal with the subject of owners' and directors' tests. Football clubs are the pride of our towns and cities. New owners bring important investment, but they are also the guardians, the custodians, of clubs that have stood at the centre of our communities and our lives for more than 100 years. Fans grow up attending matches with parents and grandparents; later, they take their own children and grandchildren. These clubs are handed on from one generation to the next. They are institutions that—as the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) once wrote—help to shape and define us as we help to shape and define

[Lisa Nandy]

them, and they are too important to be used as playthings by people who have no stake or care for the community that owns them.

That is why the Bill introduces a fitness test for owners and directors, a source of wealth test for owners, and a requirement for adequate financial plans and resources, also for owners only. Prospective owners and directors will have to pass those tests before buying or joining a club. Incumbents will not automatically be tested, but the power exists, if there is concern about their suitability, to remove them if they are found unsuitable. This approach reduces the regulatory burden, and is targeted proportionately where there is a risk of harm. It will bring peace of mind to clubs, their staff and their fans, who deserve nothing less.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I suspect that many in this Chamber will be surprised to hear that when I first supported Manchester United, “United will survive” was on the front of the match programme: the club were bankrupt, because the young men who were killed in the Munich air disaster were not insured, and it took a lot of effort to move on. My right hon. Friend is talking about directors and “right and proper” people. I think I speak for every Manchester United fan when I say that if the Bill does not enable the fans to get rid of the Glazers, who are sucking money out of Manchester United to support shopping centres in Florida, it is defective.

Lisa Nandy: We have purposefully set a high bar for incumbents, but it is right that the power exists.

Finally, I turn to the most important people: the fans. I said at the outset that the Bill maintains a tightly defined scope focused on financial sustainability and safeguarding heritage, and it will continue to take a light-touch, targeted and proportionate approach, but it is a new season and there is a new manager. Like all good managers, I could not resist making some well-timed substitutions to improve our odds of delivering on our manifesto commitment to make this country the best place in the world to be a football fan, and to deliver a Bill that is match fit. Too many fans have seen their teams’ owners change club badges and colours without any fan input, or have seen their club sell its stadium and up sticks until it is barely recognisable. Too many fans have watched as their clubs have tried to join closed-shop breakaway leagues against their wishes, and too many have seen their club struggle or even collapse under the weight of mismanagement and poor ownership.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Lisa Nandy: Nobody knows that better than my right hon. Friend, to whom I will happily give way.

Anneliese Dodds: My right hon. Friend has been passionate about the beautiful game for many years, and I am delighted that she is ensuring the Bill will be passed and make a difference for fans. One huge problem for fans has been their club getting trapped with an unsuitable, unsustainable and extremely expensive stadium because of goings-on at the club. We have that with

Oxford United now. Does she agree that the Bill will help to stop that kind of situation, and that Oxford United must be allowed to move to the Triangle as soon as possible?

Lisa Nandy: I am sure my right hon. Friend will continue to fight for Oxford United and all their fans. We have explicitly included provisions in the Bill to ensure that there are protections for fans around club relocation and the sale of stadiums. I know from my own experience at Wigan Athletic that one of the only reasons we still have a club is that the council had a covenant on the land, which prevented the stadium from being sold when we were in administration.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend for making a fantastic speech. We should also commend the good owners of football clubs, such as Frank Rothwell and his family, who have made such a difference to Oldham Athletic. He has not just ploughed money into the club, but raised millions of pounds for Alzheimer’s research. May I also associate myself with the comments from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about Football Families for Justice’s efforts to get an independent and comprehensive strategy on dementia for footballers, who are four to five times more likely to suffer from dementia?

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend not only for putting this issue on the record, but for raising it with me privately on a number of occasions—I know how committed she is. May I associate myself with her words about good football club owners? We firmly believe that this Bill will provide the clarity and certainty that allows good owners to invest without being outbid or having to compete with people who mean our clubs ill. I, too, have an extremely good owner at Wigan Athletic. We are fortunate to have him, and we know how important such owners are.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): During covid, non-league clubs took DCMS sport survival loans, but their repayment now threatens the viability of some. Will the Secretary of State assure fans that she will do all she can to assist them? As my local club, King’s Lynn Town, are in active discussions with Sport England about their loan, will she or the Sports Minister agree to meet me to discuss that?

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue, which affects many clubs around the country. The Department continues to engage regularly with fans and sporting governing bodies that are facing difficulties—not just in football, but across the board. We are working constructively to help support them, and I would be delighted to provide him with a further update on the individual case that he mentions.

We are determined to meet our commitments and promises to fans. We have improved the Bill explicitly to require clubs to provide effective engagement with their supporters, and to consult fans on changes to ticket prices and on any proposals to relocate their home ground.

Dr Evans: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Lisa Nandy: If the hon. Gentleman forgives me, I will make some progress. I think over 50 Members want to speak in this debate, and I want to give them an opportunity to contribute.

We are determined to ensure, through this Bill, that those protections are in place. Clubs will be required to establish that a majority of fans are supportive of changes to club emblems and home shirt colours, and obtain FA approval of any change to a club's name. For the first time ever, this will set a minimum standard of fan engagement in law. It will introduce financial regulation giving the regulator the power to oversee financial plans and step in where it has concerns. Many clubs are already delivering with and for their fans, but this should be a right of all fans, not just some. This Labour Government are delivering strong and sensible measures that respect the contribution of working people to this country, and our message is clear: if they value it, we will protect it, by putting fans at the heart of the game, where they belong.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The Secretary of State has been most generous in giving way. It is reported that Manchester United, Liverpool and others have advertised posts that exclude applications by white men. Will she say on the Floor of the House today that any such policy is illegal in that it infringes the Equality Act 2010, and will she give a clear message that any such policy must be reversed?

Lisa Nandy: I am not aware of that—genuinely, this is the first I have heard of it—but I am happy to look into it and come back to the right hon. Member.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Lisa Nandy: I am going to proceed, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I can see, by your nodding your assent, that you would like to do so.

Real change or lasting change never comes from the Government alone; it takes a nation. I thank the fans, the clubs and the leagues, including the English Football League, the Premier League and the National League, for their extensive and constructive engagement; the FA, UEFA and FIFA for their continued support of the Bill; the Football Supporters' Association, the Professional Footballers' Association, Kick It Out and clubs across the pyramid for their invaluable perspective and support; and noble Lords for their close scrutiny. I also thank the civil servants in my Department who have worked tirelessly for many years, across two different Governments of different political persuasions, to get us to this point. Most of all, I thank one woman, without whose passion for football and its fans, relentless drive and determination to make good on this long-held promise, we would never have reached this moment—Dame Tracey Crouch.

This effort has united clubs across every league, fans and governing bodies; towns, villages and cities across our country; and, until today, even political parties, in our determination to fulfil our promise to fans. For the Conservatives, this—the amendment—is genuinely a shameful moment, pitting themselves against fans, clubs and the national game. However, for football and its fans, this is a new dawn. Hard-fought-for and long-awaited, it will give our national game and our much-loved clubs

the most promising future, and put fans back at the heart of the game, where they belong. I commend this Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.28 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Football Governance Bill [Lords], because, notwithstanding the need for financial sustainability in the English football league pyramid, the Regulator proposed to be established by the Bill will damage the independence of English football, particularly given the Government's proposed choice for the Chair and because the Bill will increase the regulatory burden and costs on all English football clubs—particularly lower league clubs—leading to increased ticket prices for fans and will in turn reduce the international competitiveness of, and increase the risks to, English football.”

Let me begin by offering my congratulations to Liverpool FC on winning the premiership yesterday and to those who have been promoted, and I feel I especially need to mention two of my former homes—namely, Leeds and Wrexham.

I think I speak for all Members when I say that football is a defining part of our national identity. With clubs bringing fans and communities together week in and week out, football has been a great unifier since its inception. It was a football match that famously brokered a momentary truce on the western front on Christmas day in 1914. Since the inaugural FIFA world cup in 1930, football has brought nations together around one central purpose—the love of a game—in friendly competition. Football is a multibillion-pound industry with a truly global footprint, and I know that Members across this House want to secure its future growth.

The collapse of clubs such as Bury and Macclesfield, the devastating impact of the pandemic and the failed attempt by some English clubs to join a breakaway European super league have all highlighted that the future of the clubs we love and of the beautiful game is far from guaranteed. For this reason, we introduced the original Football Governance Bill, aimed at securing the future of football clubs for the benefit of both communities and fans. This proposed legislation, as we have heard, followed the fan-led review that was brilliantly chaired by our former colleague, Dame Tracey Crouch, and extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders and experts. I, too, want to pay tribute to Dame Tracey, and to all those who participated in the process and contributed to shaping our Bill.

However, it is because of the importance of football, both to our national identity and economy, that we have had to take a decision regarding our stance on this particular legislation. When circumstances change, so too will our approach—and things have certainly changed. This is not a decision we have taken lightly, but after careful consideration of our responsibility to the game, the clubs at its core and the millions of fans who cherish it, we have reached the conclusion that we must vote against Labour's version of the Football Governance Bill.

The Bill we are considering today is not the same as the one that we originally envisaged. It has been fundamentally altered to a point where it threatens to

[Stuart Andrew]

do far more harm than good. The Secretary of State says in one breath that it is same Bill, and in the next breath that she has changed it all, which is almost like saying that Manchester United and Manchester City are the same. The Government's decision to appoint a Labour donor as chair of the independent regulator raises serious concerns about political interference in football governance.

Mr Betts: Getting down to details, the right hon. Gentleman praises Dame Tracey Crouch's review, which everyone welcomed and supported. Will he now set out the specific measures in the Bill which contradict and differ from what Dame Tracey recommended?

Stuart Andrew: First and foremost, and I will come on to this, is the fact that the regulator is no longer independent.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making the key point. With the Secretary of State's choice of chair, it is no longer an independent regulator. If a Conservative party donor was being presented by a Conservative Secretary of State, does my right hon. Friend think that the right hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), as shadow Secretary of State, would support that stance? Is it not one rule for her and one rule for everyone else?

Stuart Andrew: I will absolutely come on to that point. When the regulator is being set up and you look for people, you cast the net wide. Of course you do. You want to know who is interested and you want the best candidates. But I tell you something: if any donor of any political party had been put forward and recommended to me, I would have said no. That is the difference. The right hon. Lady said yes to a Labour crony. I would have said no.

I confess that when preparing and drafting our version of the Bill, I went through a whole host of conflicts in my mind—what to include, what not to include—but after months and months of consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, from fans and fan groups, the FA, the Premier League, the EFL, the National League, UEFA, FIFA and many, many roundtables with MPs from across the political divide, the Bill that we presented was, I believe, measured and proportionate, tightly scoped to ensure the financial stability of football clubs, the sustainability of the leagues and fans given a say over their clubs' heritage. Two things stood out most to me throughout all my engagement: first, the consistent call for it not to be overburdensome and costly, particularly for lower clubs; secondly, that it must be independent, like all sports.

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the new chairman of the Labour football regulator gave £5,000 to the hon. Gentleman who has just chortled from his seat, the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), and another £70,000 to other Labour Members, and will be getting a return of £130,000 per year for a three-day week—half a million pounds of personal return on that £75,000 investment over this Parliament. If the Secretary of State was sitting on the Opposition Benches, she would be able to smell the hypocrisy and the stink of

corruption. That is why we cannot accept this appointment: it does not ensure the independence that this position certainly requires.

Stuart Andrew: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right. This is not—[*Interruption.*] From a sedentary position, Labour Members are saying, "You shortlisted them." Let me assure this House: I most certainly did not shortlist this gentleman. Even if he was presented to me, there is no way I would have appointed him, for precisely the reasons my right hon. Friend has set out.

Labour's expanded remit for the IFR significantly increases the regulatory burden on clubs. Make no mistake: it will be the smallest clubs—the beating hearts of their communities—that will be hit the hardest. The Government's own impact assessment estimates that the cost of compliance could reach a staggering £47.3 million, and make no mistake: that will push ticket prices up.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): At the FSAs' 2023 annual general meeting, the shadow Minister said:

"Despite the phenomenal success of football at home and abroad, we have seen too many examples of the devastating impact the failure of a beloved club can have on a local community."

My local club in Gateshead was nearly wound up in 2019. Is he really content to maintain the grotesque status quo, which allows too many of us to lose our clubs, to score political points on this matter?

Stuart Andrew: I say to the hon. Gentleman that his party is actually going to be adding cost to those clubs. I have just mentioned the £47.3 million, but with the football regulator's remit now considerably expanded, operational costs could rise to £150 million, which clubs like his will have to fund through the levy.

Baroness Brady, someone with deep knowledge of the football industry as vice-chairman—[*Laughter.*] Labour Members mock, but the Sports Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), had to retract similar comments, which she did graciously, I have to say. Baroness Brady has raised serious and well-founded concerns about these costs and the disproportionate impact they will have on clubs, as all this comes against the backdrop of Labour's wider economic mismanagement, which is already undermining the financial stability of our football clubs. Labour's new national insurance job tax will hit clubs' finances hard, with the Premier League saying it will amount to £50 million a year and £250 million over the life of this Parliament, compounding the pressures of increased regulation.

At the same time, football stadiums are facing higher business rates under Labour's watch. To give a few examples, Wembley stadium is set to pay £829,000 more, while the Etihad stadium will see a rise of £564,000. These are not abstract figures; these are real costs that will trickle down to fans through higher ticket prices, reduced investment on or off the pitch, or even clubs having to close.

Against this backdrop, we now have very real concerns about the impact of these changes on smaller clubs. Indeed, Mark Ives, the former general manager of the

National League, highlighted the financial strain that increased regulation will place on lower league clubs, calling it, quite rightly, “a huge concern.”

However, and most egregiously of all, the Government have fatally undermined the IFR’s independence. The fan-led review into football governance was unequivocal that a credible regulator must be fully independent, free from political influence, and certainly free from Government interference. It stated clearly:

“Independence means operations and decision making are independent from the government”.

That is a critical element for me personally. That point was made over and over again in almost every discussion I had, and quite right too.

Graham Stuart: This is not a Labour-leaning businessperson who is generally independent but decided to support Labour; this is someone who was a director of LabourList until just a few weeks ago. This is someone who is absolutely embedded in the Labour establishment, who funded Labour Members including the Chancellor, now being given this half-a-million-pound boondoggle for the next four or five years. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the regulator clearly is not independent and that Labour needs to think again?

Stuart Andrew: It feels like my right hon. Friend has already read my speech, because those are the points that I want to make. When I had those extensive meetings, that question of independence was absolutely raised time and again by fans who were worried that they did not want party politics or Government interference in the game they love, by clubs and leagues, who time and again wanted reassurances that a regulator would be truly independent, and by UEFA and FIFA in particular, who have strong statutes about political and Government interference in football, as indeed most international sports governing bodies do. I pledged and promised to all of them that independence meant just that. I fully understood the possible consequences if the regulator were seen as anything other than independent. That is why independence matters, and why I always held it dear.

Dr Luke Evans: There are not only political concerns about independence but concerns from the EFL about the regulator’s previous links with the Premier League. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when trying to make a digital decision when, for example, we come to the backstop and choosing one side over the other—the EFL or the Premier League—which is in effect what the legislation does, there would be a conflict of interest if the regulator had worked for the Premier League?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend makes really important points. This appointment is really important to the future of the regulator. What have the Labour Government done? They have announced the appointment of David Kogan, a key Labour donor and political insider, to lead the football regulator. It is deeply troubling—*[Interruption.]* No, I am sorry, but I feel really strongly on this.

Let me be clear: Mr Kogan is no impartial figure. He is a long-standing member of Labour’s inner circle, having donated thousands of pounds to the party and having spent five years on the board of LabourList, the party’s propaganda outlet, resigning only this month, as

my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) said. This appointment is not about qualifications or about merit; it is about rewarding a political ally. At the same time, Labour have totally thrown out any credible claims that the regulator is independent and free from political interference. Football fans deserve better, the British public deserve better, and our national game deserves protection from political meddling.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman must have been upset when the previous Government appointed Richard Sharp as chairman of the BBC as he was not only a former donor to the Conservative party, but a member of a think-tank. Did he express similar views to his Government back then when they made that appointment?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman has just highlighted the fact that Labour Members went mad about that, but now they are doing so because this is one of theirs.

Media outlets are now reporting that even some EFL clubs are deeply worried about this political appointment. If they are worried, we should be worried and we should listen. Members will recall that this is not the first time that alarm bells have been sounded about political interference in football governance. Well before this deeply questionable appointment, UEFA raised serious concerns that England risked exclusion from the European championship due to concerns that a Government-backed football regulator could lead to unacceptable political interference. We understand that in a letter from UEFA, which is still being withheld from Members by this Government, the general secretary said:

“One particular area of concern stems from one of UEFA’s fundamental requirements, which is that there should be no government interference in the running of football. We have specific rules that guard against this in order to guarantee the autonomy of sport and fairness of sporting competition; the ultimate sanction for which would be excluding the federation from UEFA and teams from competition.”

And that was written before the Government sought to install a Labour crony at the helm of the football regulator.

We began this debate by recognising football for what it truly is: not just a sport but a pillar of our national identity; something that unites communities, carries our shared history and inspires future generations. It is because we care so deeply about this game and everything it represents that we cannot, in good conscience, support a Bill that risks compromising its very foundations and its independence.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State says that he cares deeply about football and the communities that it unites. My patch is just down the road from Reading, where we have seen truly horrific scenes as a bad owner has ripped the heart out of the football club and driven it almost to the point of extinction. Reading fans back this Bill, and they do so because they know that the Bill will make it far harder for what has happened to Reading ever to happen again. So I ask the right hon. Gentleman: why will he not back this Bill?

Stuart Andrew: I have just been explaining why: it is because this Government have made an independent regulator a party political regulator. I am ashamed that they have done this.

I ask the Minister to answer this question in her summing up: does she not appreciate that the appointment of David Kogan drives a coach and horses through the independence of the football regulator? Does she not understand that the appointment of Mr Kogan only exacerbates the risk that the introduction of the regulator could lead to England being excluded from European competitions? Will she publish all correspondence received from UEFA so that Members and fans can be better informed of that risk? Given that there have been so many donations to Members of Parliament, including the £5,000 that was given to the Chancellor, will she publish all correspondence regarding the IFR from No. 10 and No. 11? Will she also explain how smaller clubs will be expected to cope with the increased regulatory burden she has brought in?

It truly pains me to see what this Government have done regarding this issue, playing fast and loose with the independence of the regulator. They have turned this into a Labour Government regulator, increasing burdens on clubs when the Treasury is already hammering them with its taxes. It is beyond disappointing and I am genuinely furious—[*Laughter.*] Labour Members may laugh, but when I met those stakeholders, I made it really clear that independence was sacrosanct. The Government have destroyed that in one appointment. They have put their crony before clubs and their friends before fans. They have put their donations ahead of football. That is why we have no confidence in this Government's ability to bring in a truly independent football regulator that will not raise more questions than it solves.

5.50 pm

Chris Evans (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me early, Madam Deputy Speaker—I ran the London marathon yesterday and do not think I could bob up and down all evening.

I respect the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) and count him as a friend, but his speech was hysterical at points. He claimed again that UEFA will ban English teams from competition as a result of perceived Government interference—he knows that is wrong. The fact is that UEFA would have made a statement by now, and it has not done so. It did not oppose mirrored legislation in Spain or Italy. It is not going to happen; it is not going to ban English clubs from European competitions. It is a fallacy to say that, and I am embarrassed that he has been forced to come here by his party leader and move an amendment against a Bill introduced and endorsed by the Conservatives. It means the Conservatives lose credibility and we cannot bring in a Bill that we can all unite behind, as we did in the previous Parliament.

I must declare an interest as the author of that great book, “Don Revie: The Biography”. I discovered in the research for that book how much football has come on. In the days when Don Revie won the league championship in 1969 and 1974—I see my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) nodding away—and the FA cup in 1972, football was not a place to take families. People

did not want to be in town on a Saturday morning, because fans were rampaging through cities and towns throughout our country. People did not want to go to stadiums, which were often crumbling. There was hooliganism, violence, vandalism and countless examples of clubs being banned.

I take issue with the right hon. Member for Daventry saying—sorry, I am not singling him out—that he believes passionately in football. It is pity that the Conservative Government of the 1980s did not believe that. They believed that the solution to hooliganism was to pen in our fans with electrified fences, and we have seen the tragic results of that. That is what Mrs Thatcher believed, and if the right hon. Gentleman does not believe that, I would ask him to read Dominic Sandbrook on what Margaret Thatcher believed about football. She did not like the game, like many other people on the Opposition side.

Football turned the corner only in the 1990s, and it is ironic that the Premier League is endorsing the Bill's prevention of breakaway league forming in the future given that it is itself a breakaway league, it having broken away from the EFL in 1992. It is a British success story. The premier league has become the most watched game across the world, with 1.5 billion fans in 189 countries. The global success story begins at home: it generates £8 billion annually in UK gross value added, contributes £4 billion in tax and supports almost 100,000 jobs. This is a success story.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for his wise words and for setting the scene so well. Does he share my concern that the premier league is very much a rich man's world? The tickets for Arsenal, for instance, cost £1,000 per person per season. I declare an interest as a Leicester City man. Last season, our three clubs went up; now they go down. Does he share my concern that the gap between the premier league and the championship and the gap between the championship and the first and second divisions are becoming too great? Does he feel that it is time for the premier league to share some of its wealth with the rest of us?

Chris Evans: Yes, the premier league has a responsibility to share its wealth. It is interesting that this is the second year running that the promoted clubs have gone straight back down, and the gap between West Ham and Ipswich is huge. There is no way that they were going to breach that with four games left in the season. There are issues we have to look at on that.

Turning to the Bill, even though I broadly support it, that does not mean that I do not have reservations, and I hope the Minister will bring some comfort on those. The new legislation includes a licensing regime requiring clubs to satisfy the independent football regulator that they have sound corporate and financial governance in place that provides financial stability. Licensing concerns me. The fact is that the likes of Manchester United, Liverpool, Tottenham, Arsenal—whoever we want to name in that traditional top six bracket—will have people in place who can bring about a licensing regime and they will be able to comply with it. That is not the case for a smaller club, and it could put unnecessary burdens on them. That therefore needs to be addressed in the Bill, and I hope the Government will bring that about.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Leeds United supporter. He talks about the top six. Is it not true that Leeds United could have found itself in the top six of the English premier division had it not been for bad ownership and bad financial decisions, and that is what this Bill seeks to deal with?

Chris Evans: Of course, Peter Ridsdale's name is blackened in Leeds. It is also blackened in Arsenal, Barnsley and wherever he has been. Leeds is an important point. We talk about the glory days of Don Revie. We forget about the early 2000s, when we were overspending on certain players. There were massive wages where players had been sold and wages were still being paid. It was ultimately trying to bring success to the club, but it failed, and when it started failing there were no safeguards in place, so my hon. Friend is absolutely right. I believe and hope—the eternal optimist—that we both will be celebrating a top-four finish next season and will be back in the champions league for the first time since the 2000s.

The huge issue I have with this Bill, though—again, this is a framework piece of legislation—is that when the independent football regulator comes about, they will have to set out their rules and guidance. That will likely run to hundreds of pages and will take time, so the Government must make regulations specify which leagues will follow the legislation initially. They also need to bring about a timetable to ensure that when that framework legislation is written out, it is done in a way that does not affect clubs' futures. The fact is that a lot of clubs with small budgets have to plan for the future, so I hope that a strict timetable is put in place for governance and other issues that clubs must meet.

I turn to my concerns about the Bill. I have already talked about UEFA and the scaremongering from the Conservatives about English clubs somehow being banned from Europe, and I hope I have addressed that. The second concern is that the owners' test might require some current owners to sell their clubs, although again that is scaremongering from the Conservatives. That is unlikely, though there is a possibility of some impact on the ownership of clubs in the next few years. The new test in the Bill develops the tests already applied by the Premier League and the EFL to date, and the most significant changes are likely to emerge in the long term as we see more in the guidance and overall approach from the IFR to how it applies to the test in practice.

It is also important to bear in mind that the Bill is focused on the application of the test to new owners purchasing a club, rather than owners already in place, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State touched on earlier. However, it is possible that some current owners may find themselves subject to the IFR applying the test if new information raising concerns about their suitability comes to light in future. I hope that amendments will be made in Committee to address that.

I broadly support the Bill, but I want to return to something that needs to be addressed, which was mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). Throughout writing the Don Revie book, I was heavily involved with the players and met Johnny Giles, who is probably the greatest midfielder to come out of Ireland—sorry, Roy Keane. I met his son Michael and his cousin John Stiles, who is the son of Nobby

Stiles, who was a 1966 World cup winner. Unfortunately, Nobby—like so many other professionals and many of that World cup winning side—succumbed to dementia and Alzheimer's. They formed the Football Families for Justice, a voluntary organisation that campaigns on behalf of ex-professional footballers who have died because of neurodegenerative diseases incurred in the course of their work.

Footballers suffer neurodegenerative diseases at four to five times the national average. It is something that needs to be investigated. Alzheimer's and CTE—chronic traumatic encephalopathy—which is usually suffered by boxers from blows to the head, is five times the national average for footballers. Motor neurone disease, which claimed the life of my hero Don Revie, is four times the national average, and Parkinson's is twice the national average. That needs to be investigated.

This is the goal of the FFJ:

“We call on the leaders of the football industry to act with urgency in allocating a small proportion of their massive wealth to address the tragedy of dementia and other neuro-degenerative diseases suffered by so many ex-professionals”

and

“to meet the needs of these victims with respect and kindness through best-in-class support, including care home costs and financial assistance for their widows, as required.”

When the football regulator comes about, I hope that research into medical conditions is part of its remit, to support people who have given so many others so much pleasure over the years.

I also hope that the football regulator will investigate not just the leagues but the Professional Footballers' Association and the way it is run as a trade union. There are serious concerns about the pay of the chief executive and the way in which that so-called union is being run. I hope that that will be part of the football regulator's remit.

I hope that there is something we can do to ensure that the tragedies suffered by Nobby Stiles, Jackie Charlton and Bobby Charlton—legends whose names trip off the tongue—are not suffered by their successors, such as Harry Kane.

As I said, in the main, I support the Bill. It is a good Bill. I am disappointed that Conservative Members have decided to take a crazy decision, even though the Bill is almost identical to theirs. I believe that the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. Member for Daventry, supports the Bill in his heart, but that other forces—mainly the leader of the Conservative party—have probably changed his mind somewhat.

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

6.1 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Football is irrevocably intertwined into our national story. It is about belonging, about the communities we live in and about what we do in our spare time, and it is what we daydream about when we are supposed to be working—I feel that on a very personal level every day.

Today I speak primarily not as a politician or a Liberal Democrat spokesperson, but as a football fan. I have been to more than 50 football league grounds, and to a fair few non-league grounds, too—Brimscombe and Thrupp FC in the Stroud constituency is well worth

[Max Wilkinson]

the attention of the non-league ground-hoppers out there. I have followed England home and away. These days, I mostly watch my local team Cheltenham Town, who have enjoyed a thoroughly mid-table season, but I grew up watching Southampton, and when time allows, I still watch them now—through the gaps between my fingers at the moment.

Despite that, the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), who is no longer in his place, will remember when times were so much worse for Southampton. I am sorry that he is not here to hear this. I had a season ticket when he was chairman—[HON. MEMBERS: “He’s there!”] Oh, there he is, speaking to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and not listening to a word I am saying. I remember this from when I was a fan in the stands, calling for so much better. I hope for the sake of football that today this Bill does not go the same way as the Saints’ season.

As Ministers know, the Liberal Democrats will support the Bill because the game needs financial sustainability. There have been too many Burys, Chesters, Herefords, Macclesfields and Readings. The heritage assets in our game need protection. Who can forget when Cardiff were forced to play in red, or when Wimbledon were moved against their will to Milton Keynes?

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The Bill must expand the list of protected assets to include training grounds, car parks and hotels. The owner of Reading football club, Dai Yongge, tried to sell the club’s training ground, Bearwood Park, which is in my constituency, without any consultation with the fans. When I was leader of the borough council, I worked to stop the sale with fan groups such as Sell Before We Dai, and we were successful. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill needs provisions to ensure that assets such as training grounds are never again sold off for the gain of the owner?

Max Wilkinson: I agree. There are too many examples of football clubs being separated from their stadiums, training grounds and assets, and it is a disgrace every single time when football clubs are asset-stripped.

I mentioned sustainability, heritage and fan engagement. Those are the three things we think the Bill will bring about—those are its aims. Although the Bill is not perfect, it will make important progress on all those points. Indeed, shortly after I was elected, the board of Cheltenham Town and the Robins Trust both asked me clearly to back the Bill. We will do so because it is the right thing to do.

The Bill is cross-party in origin. We should all thank Tracey Crouch for her work on the fan-led review and the shadow Minister for his subsequent work on the Bill in the last Parliament. It is a shame that Dame Tracey’s party has decided to score an own goal today. The Conservatives might seek to present themselves as akin to the England heroes in 1966, but in trying to kill the Bill, they are more like the villainous Maradona and his “hand of God” in 1986. By seeking to kill the football regulator, they are betraying football fans the length and breadth of the country—they are going in studs-up on football fans. That is the kind of political acumen that means that they represent only one football league club. Can anyone name it?

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Bromley FC!

Max Wilkinson: Bromley—there we go. I think that has rather proved my point for me. The Conservatives’ reference to the risk of increased ticket prices suggests that they are either uninformed about or wilfully ignorant of the existing problems that football fans suffer every week with ticket price inflation, as tens of thousands of fans will confirm. Unaccountable football club owners are not forced to engage with football fans on the issue of ticket pricing.

In my reflections on how to improve the Bill, I will begin with financial fairness. According to Simon Perruzza, the chief executive of the Cheltenham Town Community Trust, the Bill is needed

“to ensure clubs like ours continue to make a valuable contribution to supporters and the community, the game’s fractured governance model and inequitable distribution of finance need to be urgently addressed”.

The Premier League generates more than £3 billion each year from media rights alone, yet the share reaching clubs further down the pyramid is dwindling; it keeps 84% of the revenue now, up from 74% in 2007. Any suggestion that the Premier League is a golden goose that will be killed by the Bill somewhat misunderstands the problem in our game. The campaign group Fair Game warns that the balance of funding between the top division and lower leagues in this country stands in stark contrast to that in other major leagues. The fact is that the money simply is not trickling down here as it does in other European leagues.

Lincoln Jopp: Given that the person who negotiated that rights deal is going to be the regulator, how confident is the hon. Member that they will change the process that he criticises?

Max Wilkinson: Well, that person will be working within the boundaries of the regulator, and he is obviously very good at striking deals, is he not? If the hon. Gentleman’s contention is that he did a good job in his old job, we can be confident that he will do a good job in his new role.

The Liberal Democrats think that the redistributive mechanisms ought to go even further to promote financial sustainability, including by taking account of the restricted resources in the fifth tier, and redistribution beyond that level to cover more grassroots clubs in the national leagues north and south and beyond. Then, there is social responsibility. Football clubs are not just businesses; they are also civic institutions. They are often the most visible and well-loved organisations in any community.

Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords pushed for clubs to be mandated to report on their community work, so I welcome the new clause requiring clubs to do so. In my constituency, the Cheltenham Town Community Trust delivered £5.4 million-worth of social value work with young people and older people, and to reduce antisocial behaviour, in its last reporting year. What gets measured gets done. Clubs want to continue doing such work, but they cannot keep doing it if they cannot afford to because the Premier League is hoarding all the money. We need to go further to support clubs in that, particularly by providing help for smaller clubs that may struggle to fulfil reporting requirements. I agree with the Members who have made similar comments.

We believe that the Bill must go further on problem gambling. Nearly 30,000 gambling messages were posted across the premier league's opening weekend this season. That represents a tripling of ads compared with the almost 11,000 recorded over the opening weekend of the season before. Such ads are normalising a dangerous relationship between football and gambling that is destroying lives. Football should not be a gateway drug to problem gambling. It cannot be right that, whether watching on television or in the stands, we are bombarded with gambling adverts to the extent that the enjoyment of the game is now, for so many people, culturally intertwined with placing bets. It cannot be right that broadcasters can launch their own gambling platforms, and use advert breaks to promote those platforms, using the pundits who describe the games as mouthpieces for gambling. That merger of journalism and advertising should give us all pause for thought.

Graham Stuart: To be clear, is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that the regulator should intervene on the issue of gambling ads rather than this House taking responsibility for doing so? I worry about the regulator's reach spreading and about it forcing small clubs to engage with their communities over ticket prices and so forth; if there has to be a regulator, we must keep it highly constrained.

Max Wilkinson: The football regulator would have a wider role than currently envisaged in the Bill if the Liberal Democrats were in charge.

When the Lords tried to tackle the proliferation of gambling ads, the Government committed a professional foul. As the Bill makes its way through this House, we hope that MPs will show gambling companies a yellow card—yellow cards on this matter are very Liberal—not a red card; we do not propose the banning of gambling, shadow Ministers will be pleased to hear.

Lincoln Jopp: Do you want to bet?

Max Wilkinson: I will not be placing any bets from this Chamber today—not to the benefit of myself anyway.

On ownership, this Bill provides a stronger defence against owners who might have a dodgy track record, but there are still gaps at the back. The new owners and directors test still makes no explicit mention of human rights. That is a glaring miss. Sportswashing is an all-too-common tactic used by oppressive regimes to launder their reputations through our national game. As the historic home of the global game, we have a moral duty to seek to use the soft power of football. Those who want to run a football club in this country should not be able to do so while running roughshod over human dignity elsewhere in the world. Liberal Democrats will continue to push the Government to replace the red carpet for dodgy foreign owners with a red card.

On broadcasting, not a single premier league match this season has been shown on free-to-air television. All 380 matches in the premier league now lie behind a paywall, while matchday tickets are increasingly expensive. The latest deals will see Sky Sports and TNT Sports have the rights to show premier league matches for a four-year period. That means that those without a subscription will have no opportunity to watch a live match on television until the 2030s at the earliest.

Spain's la liga has one free-to-air game per week, as does England's women's super league. We will continue to champion expanded access to free live sport broadcasting in this Bill. We will also call for the strengthening of the Bill to ban domestic games being played abroad. The thought of Manchester City playing Arsenal in Dubai should leave us all reaching for the sick bucket.

We can go further to build a game that is open, accountable and properly rooted in its communities. Every good manager knows when to switch to a 4-3-3 and bring on the super-sub. It could be Steve Howard—I understand that the Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), is a Birmingham City fan. Now is the time for Ministers to embrace that principle of bringing on substitutes, changing the formation and being even more ambitious about this Bill; after all, they have more than enough players sitting on the Government Benches to be more ambitious. They should do that because football is not just a business. It is part of who we are as a nation, so let us treat it that way.

6.12 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Bill is very much rooted in what Dame Tracey Crouch recommended in the fan-led review. I asked the shadow Secretary of State if he could detail any ways in which this Bill deviated from what Tracey Crouch recommended. He mentioned independence and went on about that for some considerable length of time. No other proposal in the Bill differs from the fan-led review—not a single one. The reality is that the shadow Secretary of State did not even convince himself with his arguments today. There is a phrase that football fans chant—"You don't know what you're doing"—and it seemed to apply to his speech today. I am sorry about that because I respect his past contribution to the previous Bill, which is the framework for what is before us now, with one or two improvements.

Dame Tracey's recommendation H is clear and is key to the fan-led review:

"Fair distributions are vital to the long term health of football. The Premier League should guarantee its support to the pyramid". That is key. The pyramid is uniquely British. The strength of the pyramid is uniquely British. We therefore need to preserve it, but we need a fairer distribution of resources in order to do that. One change proposed in this Bill is the potential to include parachute payments when the regulator comes to a view on what the distribution should be. Instead of simply ignoring parachute payments—pretending they do not exist, as the previous Bill did—this legislation recognises the problem that currently 92% of the distributed funding for football goes to 25 clubs: the premier league clubs and the clubs receiving parachute payments. Those clubs receiving parachute payments have basically 10 times more resources than the clubs getting payments through the solidarity fund from the Premier League.

This is a nonsense. We can see the difference now between the championship and the premier league; this year is, I think, the first when all three promoted clubs have been relegated straight back down, and there is a great difference between their points totals and the points total of West Ham, just above them. This is not sustainable—not at that level nor going down the leagues, as clubs simply struggle to survive.

[Mr Clive Betts]

Dr Luke Evans: The English premier league is the best in the world. Any bar we go into across the world wants to show premier league football. There is a real danger of killing the golden goose if we try to pull that down. Also, the championship is the seventh most valuable league in Europe, and it is our second tier. I have a big worry here. We should look at the way England is playing, and at the way the clubs have come up. Leicester won the premier league in 2016, and the likes of Brighton and Brentford and Nottingham Forest are all flying up the leagues. The premier league is a competitive league, and that is what we want; we do not want to over-regulate it and kill both our national game and our international presence.

Mr Betts: I am sorry, but we must kill this myth that somehow the Bill is going to kill the premier league. It is not. This Bill is designed to sustain the rest of the football pyramid. We should look at the resources the premier league has: it has twice as much money as any other major European league. That is the difference. Taking a proportion of that away to support the rest of the pyramid will not undermine and destroy the premier league. It will help sustain the rest of the pyramid, and that is the message that we need to get across.

On the rest of the Bill, the issue of the sustainability of the pyramid is absolutely key, but I am still a bit wary about the rigidity of the backstop powers. There is some room for debate about giving a bit more flexibility to the regulators on that; I hope we can discuss that in Committee. The other key element is about ownership. We have heard stories about the problems that clubs have had with owners who simply are not fit for purpose, and I have no doubt that we will hear more. I was talking to colleagues in Reading on a Teams call the other day, along with other Sheffield MPs, and we discussed the problems facing Sheffield Wednesday supporters. We should stop clubs having to face such problems in the future.

On Sheffield Wednesday, the owner is not a bad man; he has put a lot of money into the club and he has not ripped it off, but he is clearly running out of money to make the club sustainable. He could not pay the players' wages last month, and he could not pay the tax dues a few weeks ago. Another failure to pay will mean the club is subject to a transfer embargo for three transfer windows. That would completely undermine both the competitive and the financial basis of the club. That is not acceptable. The chairman is the only owner and the only director; he does not have a board of directors and has no chief executive. He runs the club from Thailand by remote control, and when he could not pay the bills he said, "Well, my companies are owed money, so I don't have the money to pay the club's bills." We do not know what companies those are in Thailand. As far as we can see, he has no companies that earn money. We suspect that the money comes from the family trust that owns Thai Union Frozen Products, which owns John West and other brands. In other words, he is reliant on his family members to give him the money to pay the players' wages. That is not sustainable. This Bill compels the regulator to make sure that owners have the funds to sustain their club, and that the sources of those funds

are transparent and open for all to see. That is absolutely key, not only for Sheffield Wednesday but for lots of other clubs.

Finally, I am concerned that the owner, like owners of other clubs, has separated the ownership of the ground from the ownership of the club, and I hope we can strengthen the Bill on that issue. I do not think that was done for malevolent reasons; it was done to try to get around the financial fair play rules, and to help the club—that was his view. The fact is that the ground and the club are separate. Other clubs have that problem as well. In future, if an owner wants to separate the club and the ground, the regulator can step in to ensure that that is for proper reasons, and done in the proper way. Unfortunately, when ownership of the ground is separate from ownership of the club, there is a challenge. I would like a measure in the Bill that says that in order to get a licence, the owner has to prove that they have not only financial funding but a ground to play on. That should be locked in.

Changes and improvements can be made, but the Bill really helps football. It helps fans to ensure that their club is sustainable, and it holds owners to account. It is great that fans will now have a real role and involvement in their club. They can be properly consulted about what happens at Hillsborough; currently, there is an engagement panel for fans, but the chairman chooses who goes on it. When people join the engagement panel, they have to sign a document that states that they will not talk about what has been discussed outside the group. What sort of accountability is that? It is nonsense. The Bill will strengthen the hand of fans, so that they can properly engage with a club. I fully support it, and hope that the House overwhelmingly supports it, too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

6.21 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I start my comments by speaking not as the Chair of the Select Committee, but as a football fan—in particular, with apologies to the hon. Members for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), as a Portsmouth FC fan. I understand very well what a football club means to a community, a local way of life and the fans, and what they will do to protect it. In the five years that followed Portsmouth's fantastic FA cup victory in 2008, we really went through the wringer. The club boardroom seemed to have a revolving door. We had a succession of owners, each worse than the last. The club entered administration twice, and it had a 10-point deduction on two occasions. Pompey suffered three relegations in four seasons. I saw what that did to the city of my birth and to the fans, who feel as strongly about the club as I do.

The club was pulled from the brink of oblivion by the largest fan-led buy-out in history—fans put their money where their mouth is. They had to, because the club was at risk of extinction. The Pompey Supporters Trust was formed. Some 2,300 Pompey fans invested their own money and became shareholders, raising around £2.5 million. Remarkably, under that fan-led ownership model, the Pompey Supporters Trust was able to declare the club debt-free in September 2014, just 18 months after taking over.

Not all clubs are so lucky. Time and again we have heard in the Chamber stories of clubs falling into the hands of unscrupulous owners who have little regard or care for the club history, or what it means to the local community. They do not listen to the fans, who we all know are the blood that runs through the veins of our football clubs up and down the country. It was that, alongside the spectre of the European super league, that the previous Government had in mind when they commissioned the fan-led review, captained so brilliantly by my friend Dame Tracey Crouch. It was pivotal in the genesis of this Bill. I hope that this rebooted Bill will protect English football and keep clubs at the beating heart of their communities, just as much as its previous iteration did.

Some of the Government's changes to the legislation echo the previous Culture, Media and Sport Committee's recommendations. First, on enhanced fan engagement, we know that English football fans are some of the most passionate in the world. Their voices must be heard. For too long, fans have been left in the dark about decisions on ticket pricing, home shirt colour changes and home ground relocation. I welcome the Bill's commitment on that. I also welcome the removal of the requirement for the regulator to consider Government foreign and trade policy when deciding whether to approve club takeovers. That should ensure the regulator's operational independence from Government—a subject to which I will return.

There has been controversy around aspects of the Bill, and particularly on the inclusion of parachute payments in the financial distribution mechanism, which has inevitably sparked hostility towards the Bill. However, in a room of 10 people there would be 10 different opinions on how the parachute payments should work. The legislation will never please everybody. Some people oppose the Bill entirely, and others have voiced dissent for myriad reasons; there is growing criticism of the Bill this time around. The sheer number of amendments tabled in the other place was a sign of that discontent. It will be crucial to ensure that the legislation is right, and we have only one chance to do so.

I suggest we take a moment to remind ourselves of the findings of the fan-led review, and of why the idea of a regulator was conceived in the first place. It was conceived because self-regulation simply is not working, although it was given many chances over many years. The leagues have not been able to reach a deal on financial distribution themselves. We should not forget that, left to their own devices, six greedy clubs planned to break away to form the European super league, risking English football itself.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is shame that there has not been recognition from the Dispatch Box that there would be no premier league if there was no grassroots football? The better our grassroots football, the better the league will be.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is right. English football thrives because the ecosystem runs from the grassroots to the top of the elite. Our job is to ensure that it continues to thrive, and that every aspect of that ecosystem is protected and supported. Some irresponsible club owners continue to play fast and loose with club finances and assets. Far too many clubs have been on the brink of collapse, and that is why the

regulator must have a role in protecting English football. However, the regulator will need to bring together all voices in that complex ecosystem for it to work properly.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which I chair, is looking forward to our pre-appointment hearing with David Kogan, the preferred candidate, next week. It has been a long journey to get here, as I am sure the Secretary of State appreciates, having scheduled and then postponed hearings more than once, as Ministers have struggled to pick a candidate. The chair of the football regulator will be utterly critical to ensuring that the regulator performs its role well. They will steer the ship. They will set the temperature for football, going forward. They will have to come in on the front foot and broker strong relationships with stakeholders across football to get full buy-in. I have already spoken about some of the nay-sayers and detractors. The chair will need to build faith and demonstrate a good understanding of the dynamic football ecosystem to have the clout that they will need. However, they need to ensure they do not come with a load of industry baggage. It is a really difficult position to be in. At the same time, to be effective, they must demonstrate regulatory experience.

Ultimately, the chair will have to demonstrate that they can be objective, fair and, crucially, independent of Government, the leagues and individual football clubs. It is a very difficult job to recruit for. Indeed, UEFA has raised concerns and threatened sanctions over the prospect of Government interference. That is why I am surprised that the Government have proposed a candidate who is so close to the Labour party, and who has donated money to the Chancellor and others. It raises concerns about whether the regulator can truly be seen as independent, given their close ties to members of the Government. I expect that the Committee will want to explore that in detail when we hear from Mr Kogan next week. He will need to demonstrate that he intends the regulator to be operationally 100% independent from political interference. I struggle to see how that will happen, but my mind is open, because the Select Committee's job is to hold a pre-appointment hearing with this potential regulator.

As other hon. Members have mentioned, the former chair of the BBC, clearly a talented, capable and very smart man, was undone by the impression that he gave of lacking independence from Government. Like the BBC, very many people out there are willing this body to fail, and I do not want to see that happen. The worst-case scenario for everybody is if the regulator is undermined in its infancy.

Even before the chair is in place, there have been some concerning signs about the Government's approach to the independent football regulator. We know that many clubs in the premier league in particular have expressed misgivings and in some cases very strong opposition to the regulator. Despite what the Secretary of State has said—she has spoken very strongly on this—there are some lingering doubts. The whole process has been plagued by leaks and delays. Members have seen and heard the rumours that the regulator was poised to be thrown out on to the latest bonfire of quangos even before it had started. When discussing the so-called blockers, it seems telling that the Government chose to single out the Gardens Trust, Sport England and the Theatres Trust, which will no longer be consulted over planning. When considering AI and copyright, the

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

Government seem to be siding with big tech over creative industries. Members will forgive me for beginning to feel like the sectors we represent on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee are not valued by the Secretary of State's Department.

I look forward to hearing next week from the proposed regulator and to seeing the Bill progress through the House. I think the Bill can improve the resilience of clubs and encourage sensible financial decisions. I would like clarity on how the regulator will operate alongside the cost control measures that it will have no oversight of, such as premier league profit and sustainability rules, which we have recently seen clubs such as Chelsea manipulate to their own advantage and which will arguably undermine the regulator. I would be grateful if the Minister came back to me on that. I also want cast-iron assurances that the Bill will prevent the sort of painful, appalling situation that has been experienced by Reading FC with its owner, Dai Yongge. Otherwise, we will all be wasting our time.

It is imperative that this Bill safeguards English football, which is central to our communities and to the national fabric of our country. Football is a unifier: it brings people together for the love of the game, from the grassroots to the top of the elite clubs, and it is the envy of the world. All the other countries in the world would love to have our football leagues. We must secure its future for generations to come.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. With just shy of 50 Members wishing to contribute, the only way that I can guarantee the maximum number of contributions is by having a speaking limit of five minutes to begin with.

6.32 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I am wholeheartedly in favour of the Bill, as are many of my constituents. I place on record my regard for Dame Tracey Crouch; we would not be here today if she had not initiated this excellent Bill. I also give a mention to the former Members for South East Cambridgeshire and for Bristol West, along with all the fan groups and other bodies that have engaged in this lengthy process.

Sheffield is at the heart of football's story. Although I am sure that many hon. Members are aware of Sheffield Wednesday and Sheffield United, it has often flown under the radar that our city is also home to the oldest club in the world: Sheffield football club. The club is approaching its 170th birthday, and to this day it still plays in the oldest derby in the world against Hallam FC.

Critics of this Bill question why the Government are getting involved in football, but stories such as that illustrate that football clubs are no ordinary businesses. Many of our largest clubs were originally formed by workers in towns and cities up and down the country, and they remain an essential part of the heart and soul of our communities. I have had the privilege of seeing at first hand some of the excellent work being done in Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough by Marcus and

his team at the Sheffield Wednesday FC Community Programme, and I place on the record my thanks for all that they do. The good work that many of our clubs do for constituents in need and the joy that they can bring to many more only emphasise further why the Government are right to protect these vital assets. Our clubs are not the playthings of the wealthy, to be recklessly mismanaged and tossed aside when the lustre of custodianship wears off.

Last week, I and a number of other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), had the privilege of meeting with the SWFC Supporters Trust to hear its concerns about the direction of the club under its present custodianship. I do not have enough time to list the many issues highlighted at the meeting, but one key issue was the disregard for fan engagement and even abusive disdain for the trust and other groups from the club. I gently remind all those fortunate enough to be custodians of football clubs that without the fans, clubs are nothing. That is why I am pleased that this Bill will introduce a minimum standard for fan engagement and compel clubs to democratically select their fan representatives.

I strongly welcome another change that this Government have made from the previous iteration of the Bill in allowing the regulator to examine parachute payments. The strength of our football pyramid is the envy of many nations, but a pyramid is nothing without a stable foundation. I believe that providing support to relegated clubs is important, but parachute payments in their current form are undermining our pyramid; they have ballooned to become one of the most distortive elements of the modern game. Last season's parachute payments to five recently relegated clubs were three times as much as the amount that 67 other EFL teams received in total. In my view, that is the driving force behind many of our beloved clubs being run in increasingly unsustainable ways. It is no wonder that the majority of the top 92 clubs in the game are technically insolvent. The damage that irresponsible owners leave in their wake is immeasurable, as too many of my hon. Friends have sadly been able to attest to today.

I am pleased that Government are getting to grips with the situation, and I look forward to supporting this Bill as it makes its way through Parliament, helping to safeguard the future of all the clubs in the pyramid.

6.36 pm

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Wherever I have been in the world, whether it is in Hertsmere or at the United Nations, I am always asked two questions: "When did you meet the late Queen?" and "Which football team do you support?" Such is the strength and reach of English football.

As I have said to this House before, English football is a cherished cultural and soft power that ranks alongside our greatest museums, galleries and stately homes. Indeed, I saw that again this Friday at my brilliant local club, Boreham Wood FC, led by the indefatigable Danny Hunter. Three generations of his family have sustained that club, sustaining community life, providing education, nurturing us through covid and facilitating the next generation of stars to rise all the way to the top of the premier league. I did not hesitate to act when English football was threatened by the rapacious greed of the

proposed European super league, which would have deracinated six of our greatest clubs. It is in that resistance to the ESL that the roots of this Bill lie. The then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, threatened a “legislative bomb”, which resulted in us bringing forward the governance review led by my excellent former colleague, Dame Tracey Crouch.

In our consideration of this legislation, I caution that English football survives on cut-throat competition in which the rewards for victory are high and the costs of failure are equally high. It is also dependent on significant levels of global investment. Well-structured investment is not a threat to English football: it is one of its great strengths. I could list many examples. We have Manchester City, which is backed by the Abu Dhabi United Group and which has posted record revenues of more than £700 million and profits of £73 million based on solid equity, not risky leverage. That is exactly the sort of leverage that is demanded. Likewise, Newcastle United’s new ownership, led by the Public Investment Fund, has brought more than £300 million of fresh investment without debt, so we have a thriving team and jobs created, with silverware returned. Beyond the premier league, we have seen what the injection of funds at Wrexham has done for its extraordinary ascent through the league. And at Tottenham Hotspur, their fabulous stadium is now expanding to include things like the Eubank-Benn masterclass at the weekend.

This all leads to the core question before the House, which I have very little time to address, but I will try to make my point succinctly. There is undoubtedly a case for regulation. The pyramid is not working, with £100 million for TV rights at the bottom of the premier league as opposed to £4 million at the top of the EFL. We need to address that—it is not sustainable. Likewise, the movement from the national league to the EFL is something that we need to expand, as exemplified by the 3UP campaign. However, before we go down this path, we should look at how circumstances have changed in the past year. Look at the change in the global investment environment, principally as a result of instability in the US, and at the national insurance hike faced by every club up and down the country. Is this really the right moment to proceed with further regulation?

Based on my 20 years’ experience in and out of government, I caution the House that when a regulator is created, however benign the intention, a self-serving bureaucracy always seeks to expand its scope over time. That will be the case for this piece of legislation, and this regulator will be on the front and back pages of the newspapers every single day. We have already heard arguments from Lib Dem colleagues for expanding the scope of the regulator before it is even up and running. In this changed environment, and given measures such as the backstop and its application to the pyramid and to parachute payments, I think there remains a window in which we can threaten this kind of regulation but not actually introduce it, because I fear the damage it will do.

Peter Swallow: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I regret that I cannot give way. For the reasons I have described, I will be voting accordingly at the end of this debate.

6.41 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I declare my interest at the outset, as I volunteer as a trustee of Millwall Community Trust.

This Bill has been a long time in the making, and there has been more than a little bit of scaremongering along the way about the implications of a regulator for the future of the premier league. The Bill does not pose an existential threat to the premier league, and no one who supports it wants to undermine the success of the premier league. The existential threat is to the football pyramid, should we fail to secure a fairer distribution of resources. The EFL estimates that its clubs will lose £450 million this season. That loss will have to be covered by the generosity of those clubs’ owners, and where that does not occur, we end up in situations like we had with Bury, Derby, Wigan and many others.

In 2020, the EFL proposed a 75:25 split of the combined TV revenues of both leagues, which at the time would have meant approximately £300 million of additional funding for the wider football pyramid. Instead, in the four years since the EFL first made that proposal, spending on transfers in the premier league has gone up by £850 million. In the 2022-23 season, the premier league spent £2.8 billion on player transfers; the other major European leagues spent around £750 million per league. Turning to wages, the premier league spent a combined sum of €4.6 billion on players’ salaries. Its nearest rival spent an aggregate sum of €2.5 billion—that is a gap of over €2 billion. Compared with the Bundesliga, the gap is nearly €2.5 billion, and for France and Italy, the gap is about €2.8 billion. The £300 million extra that the EFL was asking for pales into insignificance when compared with those sums of money, so a fairer distribution of revenues would not impact on the ability of the premier league to pay the highest salaries for players or the highest prices for player transfers. It will, however, make an enormous difference to the sustainability of the pyramid.

Currently, the 20 premier league clubs and the five clubs in receipt of parachute payments get 92% of the distributable money, which is around £3 billion. The remaining 67 clubs of the EFL get a total of 8%, or £245 million. That distorts competition in the EFL and encourages clubs to overspend. The premier league clubs have to agree to change the distribution of TV revenues across the pyramid. In the four years that this has been under discussion, no acceptable proposal has been put forward, so it is clear that football needs an adjudicator to end this impasse. Although it is reasonable to help clubs adjust to being in the championship, it is not acceptable to sustain a system that forces clubs to overspend in order to compete with clubs that are receiving parachute payments. Over the past seven seasons, two of the clubs promoted have been in receipt of parachute payments. The top three places in the championship this season have gone to clubs in receipt of parachute payments, with two matches still to go. The 75:25 split will eradicate the need for parachute payments altogether, create a level playing field, and remove the incentive for non-parachute payment clubs to overstretch themselves financially.

Another major issue, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has mentioned, is that of clubs being separated from their grounds. That has happened to my local club, Charlton Athletic, and

[Clive Efford]

to many other clubs. It is difficult to see how the Bill could deal with that issue retrospectively, but it is one that we must not lose sight of. It may not be possible to solve it through this Bill, but it is something that we need to deal with urgently. The time has come for a football regulator, which cannot fail to recognise that the current situation is not sustainable and that it must usher in a fairer system. I pay tribute to all those who have played a part in getting us to this point, and I look forward to playing my part in assisting the Bill's passage through this House.

6.46 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Having been elected more recently, I am somewhat less burdened by previous legislation, but let me be clear: having worked in sports administration for many years, I have serious misgivings about a Government regulator in football. I know that this legislation started out as a very well-meaning initiative, but I have concerns—they have already been raised by other hon. Members—about creeping scope and the potential impact of Government meddling in a great British success story.

It is hard to argue that the premier league is not England's finest export. It is the envy of global football, a competitive and unpredictable league that attracts the biggest names in the game to play in front of packed stadia, with hundreds of millions more watching around the world. The league contributes over £8 billion to the UK economy, pays £4 billion in tax, and employs over 90,000 people. Its reach is truly unparalleled, as other hon. Members have referenced. I have seen kids wearing Chelsea shirts in rural Rwanda and met Man United fans in Pyongyang—in fact, it may surprise the House to know that the premier league is widely watched in North Korea, albeit through pirated broadcasts. However, I understand that Spurs do not regularly feature in the coverage, thanks to their captain Son Heung-min.

I am sympathetic to fans up and down the country who fear that the owner of their football club is going to run it into the ground. As a Leeds fan, I know a thing or two about bad ownership and financial mismanagement, and we have heard some good examples of that from Members representing Reading and Sheffield Wednesday. However, we should dispel the myth that every football club owner is some super-rich maniac trying to squander their fortune in order to destroy a local football club.

Peter Swallow: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that not all football club owners are maniacs determined to ruin their club, but I gently point out that this regulator will ensure that those clubs that do have such owners will be better protected in future. Does he not accept that point?

Charlie Dewhirst: I disagree on the ideological level—on the ideological point about who should regulate football. I will come on to that in a second, but I do not believe it is the Government's job. I believe that the football landscape already provides for regulation.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Charlie Dewhirst: No, I will make some progress on this point, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

As a former employee of a football club, Hull City, and as someone who has worked for a national governing body of a sport at the Rugby Football Union, and for a national elite sport funding body at UK Sport, I have some experience of this issue. Each of those bodies—the EFL, the EPL and the FA—has a role in regulation.

Chris Vince: As a fellow Leeds United supporter, the hon. Gentleman was probably prepared for me to talk about the finances around the transfer of Seth Johnson to Leeds United, but does he recognise the words of John Madejski, who said that the best way to become a millionaire is to be a billionaire and own a football team? Does he recognise that the current ownership model needs to change?

Charlie Dewhirst: Those of us who support a club that was previously owned by Ken Bates and Massimo Cellino have had our fair share of rough ownership over the years.

Coming back to the wider landscape and who should regulate, above the Football Association, EFL and EPL we have UEFA and FIFA as international bodies representing the global game, and they each have a regulatory function. I believe that instead of the Government creating yet another quango, headed up by a Labour party crony, they should be working with the Premier League, EFL and FA to resolve current concerns such as financial sustainability and fit and proper ownership. That would be a far more satisfactory outcome for the clubs and ensure that sport and politics are kept at arm's length.

Mark Ferguson: The hon. Gentleman mentions UEFA and FIFA. Would he categorise those as organisations where politics is kept at arm's length and where there is no place for cronyism?

Charlie Dewhirst: The hon. Member raises a very good point. FIFA's recent history is not a proud one, but we do not have time to go into that. There is an important point about the way in which UEFA and FIFA operate within the landscape. There is a danger that measures including parachute payments, which affect competition tools and structures, being in the scope of the Bill places the Government on a collision course with those international federations. That has already been discussed.

Ultimately, the fact we are here discussing this Bill today is a sad indictment of the relationship between the existing stakeholders. However, it is not beyond the wit of Government to find solutions that do not involve a new regulator. [Interruption.] Well, I am not burdened by previous legislation. I also worry that the Bill is playing to a certain viewpoint among EFL clubs that money from the bottom half of the premier league should be redistributed en masse to the championship. Those clubs argue that that would give the promoted clubs—one of which I am a fan of—a better chance of success.

I fear that could have serious unintended consequences. It could create a small group of entrenched successful clubs at the top of the premier league and ultimately damage competition, as the top clubs accumulate more and more wealth, to the detriment of clubs lower down. It would effectively end any chance of a club such as

Leicester winning the title, or teams such as Brighton, Bournemouth, Brentford and Nottingham Forest cementing themselves in the league and challenging for Europe. It would be another two-tier system created by this Labour Government.

The idea that the championship is a poor relation is also false. Every championship club receives £7.8 million from the Premier League, which is between 20% and 40% of their typical annual revenue. The EFL has recently signed a domestic broadcast deal worth more than £900 million, increasing its own revenues by 50%, and the championship is already the sixth-richest league in Europe.

Finally, I want to address the issue of the medium to long-term future of the regulator. This legislation has morphed from creating an independent regulator with a narrow scope to creating a Government regulator headed up by a Labour party donor, with sprawling powers. Once the regulator has dealt with the most pressing issues, who knows how it might justify its existence in future. The devil will surely make work for idle hands. My fear is that the football regulator will not behave as a guardian of the sport but will instead look to involve itself more and more in day-to-day club operations.

We have come a long way since the dark days of the 1980s—an era that reached its nadir just under 40 years ago with the Heysel disaster, which saw English clubs banned from European competition for five years. It was a period when the best English players sought to ply their trade in Serie A, La Liga and Ligue 1. English football is now the envy of the world. I am sure our competitors in Spain, Italy and Germany are watching and would be delighted if we were to regulate ourselves into a less competitive place. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

6.53 pm

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Football is the beautiful game, and it is truly the world's game. For a century or so, the game had an ever-changing churn of clubs having periods of success. The game was not totally dominated by money, though money has always been a factor. With the inception of the premier league, quite literally the game changed. I am not being overly critical of the premier league—it has, after all, made the English league the greatest and most watched league in the world.

The money that has flooded in from TV rights and sponsorship has led to many of the world's greatest players plying their trade in this country, which only adds to the global appeal. But the money, vast as it is, is nearly all in the premier league. The gulf between the bottom of the premier league and the top of the championship is enormous. The prize money for coming last in the premier league is four times greater than the prize money for the winners of the championship, and that is before the over £80 million that each premier league club gets from TV rights. This makes the desperation to reach the top flight greater than ever. Promotion does not just mean competing with the best teams; it now represents financial security.

One of a number of clubs that have fallen foul of too much risk and overstretching themselves in order to reach the promised land of the premier league is my beloved Derby County FC—one of the founding members of the football league, champions of England twice, FA cup winners, and European cup semi-finalists. Sadly,

having failed in the championship play-offs four times in six years, Derby could not quite take the final step to financial security. Therefore, its unusual take on amortisation and its questionable way of making money out of its own stadium became much bigger problems. It was the premier league or bust, and for Derby it was very nearly bust.

Derby went into administration, which in itself cost the club about £3 million just for the administrators. Despite the club's proud history and remarkable fan base, with home gates averaging 28,000, Derby County almost ceased to exist as a result of financial issues, with the club being, according to the current owner David Clowes, just one week away from going out of business. I imagine that most Derby supporters would say that the creation of an independent football regulator would be a good idea. The concept of a regulator comes from the people who make football what it is: the fans. It is, after all, a recommendation from the fan-led review.

The objectives of the IFR are sound: to protect and promote financial stability and financial resilience, and to safeguard our football heritage. Under the Bill, each club will have to submit regular financial plans and regularly consult with fans. Clubs will also have to demonstrate that they have the resources to sustain operations and show that they have the systems in place to manage financial risk. The measures will help ensure that the risks taken by Derby County cannot be taken again.

I welcome clause 46 of the Bill, which will require clubs to get approval IFR before selling their home grounds or using them as security for a loan. Clause 45 will prevent another European super league debacle—a situation where there was no consultation and no real competition, just a licence to print money at the expense of the integrity of the English game. Cardiff fans will no doubt be pleased to see clause 49, which prevents a change of team colours.

While I strongly support the Bill, I want to raise an issue brought to my attention by one of my constituents, former Arsenal and Leeds goalkeeper John Lukic. He has highlighted the growing number of ex-players suffering from CTE, which is a form of dementia caused by repeated heading of the ball. I am encouraged to hear that the Secretary of State will meet with Football Families for Justice. Football can and should do more to look after its former players.

English football has been such a success, bringing joy and occasional pain to so many. I do not want another mass march to save Derby County. I do not want another 21-point deduction. Everyone wants their team to be successful. More than that, everyone wants their team to exist. I urge Members to support the Bill.

6.58 pm

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): I want to start by congratulating Cheadle Town Stingers, which yesterday confirmed its second place in the women's national league division one north, just missing out on promotion by goal difference in what was their first season in the national league. I hope the House will share my congratulations to manager Dylan Wimbury and the whole team for this fantastic campaign. I have every confidence that the team will go one better next season.

[Mr Tom Morrison]

Football has been a key part of my life since I can remember. When I was a youngster of about seven, I remember scoffing down my Sunday lunch so I could rush in front of the TV and watch my heroes, John Barnes and Ian Rush, put every team they played to the sword. I was a seven-year-old glory hunter, transfixed by the way Liverpool would seem effortlessly to breeze past teams. The iconic red kit became my uniform whenever I played in the park with my friends.

I can still remember my first game. I remember the long walk up what seemed like an endless mountain of steps to then come in full view of that bright green carpet, surrounded by a sea of scarves, banners and flags, and the players. My heroes were warming up on the pitch. I can still remember how it made me feel. It felt like falling in love for the very first time, because football has that power. It can bring people together in a way that only a few cultural spectacles can. Whether it is a few hundred people watching a non-league club in Greater Manchester or 90,000 people watching the FA cup final in Wembley, for 90 minutes football encourages us to dream together.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I am interested in the community involvement aspect. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Mental health among men particularly is at a crisis point; in fact, suicide is a leading cause of death under 50. Will the hon. Member commend my club, Forest Green Rovers, which is trying to re-enter the English Football League, for developing a scheme of "football on prescription", which refers men to football so that they can feel better and more socially included?

Mr Morrison: That is absolutely fantastic work. Football creates togetherness and is incredibly important for our communities. That is why the Football Governance Bill is so important. For too many years, we have seen our game threatened by a variety of actors, be it poor owners, the creation of super leagues or the ever-increasing prices of matchday, which mean that only a smaller and smaller group of people can experience the game. The aims of the Bill to fix that are highly commendable, and I fully support them.

Clive Jones: Terms for the sale of Reading football club have been agreed, but we are currently waiting for Dai Yongge's signature for a deal to go through. Sadly, we have been here before. His ownership has been a Shakespearean tragedy. He has attempted to asset-strip the club, bleeding it dry and holding it back from success. Does my hon. Friend agree that Dai must sell and allow Reading football club to enter a new era?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the hon. Member for Cheadle responds, let me say that if interventions are long, even fewer colleagues will be able to get in. Interventions should be short. They should not be speeches.

Mr Morrison: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, which is absolutely key. We have a history in this country of poor owners taking our clubs for granted, and it is the fans who pay.

There are things in the Bill that I would like us to consider further. I would like to see more detail and

focus on how football governance can support the wider football pyramid outside the football leagues. I mentioned Cheadle Town Stingers at the beginning of my comments. Cheadle Town is a wonderful example of a community-run football club that champions excellence, not only on the field but off it. The club sits in the heart of Cheadle and plays an active role in its community, providing support for local food banks and coaching for local schools. It is also, in my view, an exemplar of how both the men's and women's game should be championed in this country. There is a true "one club" mentality in Cheadle Town, where the successes of both teams are worked for and celebrated equally, exactly as they should be. This is a true community club, and everything that the Football Governance Bill needs to protect.

The campaign organisation Fair Game puts it best:

"Addressing the deeply flawed financial flow in the game could see extra money flooding into the towns and cities that have lower league football clubs."

We all know that the Premier League receives the lion's share of the market revenue. In 2023, just 25 clubs received a massive 92% of the revenues across the English game, while the other 67 clubs in the football leagues received just 8%. This disparity is completely eye-watering, but it does not even begin to take into account the clubs further below. These are the clubs that are at real risk. They have to fundraise and save to make sure they can put the floodlights on. Many non-league clubs are now struggling with the rise in energy prices, which have quadrupled in the last few years, while others have had to sparingly cut the grass on their pitches to save further costs. Facilities are also a key issue. Across Cheadle, there are just three full-sized 3G pitches, which are shared between 40 different teams, while of the 18 grass pitches in Stockport, five have no changing facilities at all, which has a disproportionate impact on women's teams and disability teams.

The issues in our game are not just impacting the premier and football leagues; they are having a massive and sometimes fatal impact on our grassroots game. Although the Football Governance Bill starts to mitigate these issues, it does very little to encourage clubs, particularly the larger premier league clubs, to support the very lower tiers of the football pyramid. I would like to see that changed as the Bill progresses and more thought given to how our grassroots game can be supported. Football is about community and often represents what is best about community spirit, so supporting the game at its very base needs to be more of a priority. This Bill is a step forward for football in this country and should be welcomed, but there is more to do. I hope the Government will take that on board and introduce a regulator that not only protects this wonderful game but promotes it at the community, grassroots level.

Finally, if I may crave your indulgence for 10 more seconds, Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to channel that seven-year-old who was obsessed with the likes of John Barnes, Jan Mølby and Ian Rush, and say this: Arne Slot, Big Virg and Mo, thanks for bringing home No. 20.

7.5 pm

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): Congratulations to Liverpool fans.

As we have been hearing this evening, football is more than a game. For my constituents and me, it represents community, joy and sometimes a fair bit of despair, too. It provides jobs, brings people together and is a source of immense pride, in spite of—or especially perhaps in—the darkest of times. Among the most haunting images of the pandemic were those of the football games that had to be played behind closed doors. It was just not the same, for the players, fans or anyone else.

Last night, I was honoured to be invited to join Rotherham United at the English Football League awards. It has been a difficult season on the pitch for the Millers, but the incredible work that the club does in the community never wavers. It supports so many fantastic initiatives across the borough: walking football, the women's game, youth clubs, fitness classes for pensioners, active travel—the list goes on. I am pleased to be working with the club on projects in Maltby, Kiveton Park and Swallownest in my constituency.

Rotherham is a town that has had a difficult recent history, but it remains proud and has, in my mind, the opportunity to flourish again. The football club will be critical to that mission and right at the heart of it. As we have seen in Bury, Reading, Macclesfield, Bolton and Derby—the list goes on—anything that threatens the existence of clubs like Rotherham is an existential crisis for the town. These are places where the football club, the team, is at the heart of their identity, economy and society.

Offering some security for clubs down the football pyramid must be a priority. That is why I support the Government's legislation today. The stories of financial ruin are becoming too common. The dam is close to breaking point, and there are increasing signs, not least in the premier league and championship tables today, that the competitiveness at the top of our game is also wilting. This statistic has been quoted many times in the debate, but ultimately, 25 clubs—the 20 premier league teams and five in the championship—receive 92% of the revenue, or £3 billion, while 67 professional clubs share just 8%. This inequality cannot continue, not because of inherent unfairness or moral distaste, but because the game we love is now seemingly stretched to breaking point.

I am sympathetic to the premier league's position. As we have heard from Members across the House, we should be clear that the premier league is one of the most successful exports in modern Britain. I would not support any measure that could seriously threaten the league's position at the pinnacle of sporting competition, but in my mind the Bill simply does not do that. First, the financial might of the premier league will not be threatened. There is a €2 billion gap between the premier league and any of its rivals when it comes to wages. Secondly, the Bill purposefully maintains the lightest touch, unless forced into more intrusive action. The Government amendments in the Lords assisted with that, ensuring that the regulator's focus does not stray beyond a tight remit.

Thirdly, the football pyramid relies upon a thriving premier league. There is no benefit to any party in the negotiation to stifle the competitiveness or commercial success of the premier league. The EFL and the independent regulator must and surely will recognise that in their decision making going forward. Ultimately, there should be a symbiotic relationship between the EFL and the

premier league. Each needs the other—a thriving football pyramid producing talented footballers and ambitious clubs, and a premier league that excels.

I would also like to raise the wider football ecosystem. Rotherham United is not in my constituency, but the football ecosystem of the borough, and indeed South Yorkshire and the country, is made up of brilliant non-league clubs. Maltby Main FC, Kiveton Park, Dinnington, which is flying high in the league, and Swallownest, with its famous Swall Siro stadium, all play crucial roles in our communities and are run through the sheer will and hard work of volunteers. Once the Bill has passed, I hope the professional game can consider how we can better help those non-league teams, too.

I have spent nearly 30 years watching football with my dad. I think each of my best friends is someone I met playing the game several years ago. I spend lots of time—too much, many might say—watching, playing and reading about the game. It is the game I love, and I am proud tonight to support this Bill, which goes some way to ensuring that it has a flourishing future for decades to come.

7.9 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): I should declare my interests, as on the Register of Members' Financial Interests, in two football-related businesses as a result of my chairmanship of Southampton football club. We do not have many success stories left, but English domestic football is one of them—so what do politicians want to do? Regulate it, of course. The biggest beneficiary from the success of the Premier League is His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, through tax and national insurance levied on player and staff wages. That is money flowing out of the beautiful game. Salaries have correlated closely with the growth of broadcasting income, particularly from overseas television rights. Lord Sugar referred to it as the prune juice effect. No regulator played any part in laying the foundations of the world's most successful league. English football works and has worked for many decades. My message to all Members today is to leave it alone.

Football is a risk business, supported in this country by the most passionate fans in the world. It requires a balance between risk taking and business savvy, if the aspirations of the supporters are to be delivered in the form of entertaining, successful football of which they can be proud. Many of the failures in our game, such as Bury under Hugh Eaves and Leeds under Peter Ridsdale, were driven by boards dominated by fans rather than by more logical businessmen. The job of running a smaller club in the premier league is difficult at the best of times—I should know—when competing with clubs that have substantially greater turnover. A regulator will simply make the job of smaller clubs more difficult and limit their ability to take calculated risks to successfully compete for promotion, league position or cup success. It is the larger clubs that will benefit, and the dynamic that has driven the premier league's success will be undermined.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman really saying that fan involvement in clubs is a bad thing?

Rupert Lowe: I think the passion of fans can be a dangerous thing if they are on a board, yes. The FA

[Rupert Lowe]

Premier League's success has been driven by the prescient founding formula for financial distribution, ensuring a competitive league. Under the Bill, fans collectively will suffer, and another more innovative league in another geographic region, probably in Asia, will emerge as a leader. Members might all feel good about themselves, but billions and billions of pounds will be driven out of the country. There is no need for a football regulator or indeed any more wokery in the game, exemplified by the support for a questionable organisation such as Black Lives Matter, when the knee was taken before each game: the world's best football meets the world's best virtue signalling.

Just last week, I uncovered two coaching roles offered by Ipswich and Fulham, both specifically excluding white men from applying. Ipswich made the right choice and removed the racist ad; Fulham have not. These roles have been pushed by the Premier League itself. Match-going fans are overwhelmingly male and overwhelmingly white. They would be surprised to hear that clubs are banning them from applying for certain roles based on their skin colour. Racism is racism, even when white people are on the receiving end of it. I hope that all of us in this House call it out for the wickedness that it is.

We must eradicate the poisonous DEI from our beautiful game. Fans attend football to escape all that nonsense. A functional football team is the perfect analogy for any successful society, based on merit and merit alone. Fans do not want ideological lessons from their clubs; they want to watch exciting football, enjoy a beer and have a proper day out. Good for them, I say. All of us here need to leave them alone.

Those responsible for this Bill must also take full responsibility when the premier league inevitably wanes as the woke do-gooders perpetrate the damage that history teaches us is inevitable. The Chancellor speaks oxymoronically about trying to revive our financial markets by regulating for growth, after the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 destroyed London as a centre where capital meets risk. You do not regulate for growth; you deregulate for growth. We do not need this interference by tyre-kicking regulators in our national game. Judging by this debate, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport looks like she is pretty handy on the terraces. I say to her, in football lingo: you don't know what you're doing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Luke Murphy. Is it your birthday?

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): It is indeed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Happy birthday!

7.14 pm

Luke Murphy: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is no place I would rather be than following the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), with his interesting view that the issues of the game are the fault of fans—it was truly enlightening. I am so pleased to speak in this debate on the Football Governance Bill—gifts from colleagues in the form of interventions to extend my speaking time will be gratefully received—not

just because the Bill will empower fans, protect clubs and keep them at the heart of their communities, but because it gives me an opportunity, after Basingstoke Town's final home game of the season, to pay tribute to a wonderful football club and the entire community that surrounds it, supports it and stands by it through thick and thin.

It was a delight to see the team get the victory they richly deserved on Saturday by beating the league champions, Merthyr Town, 4-0. The result secured our position in the southern league premier south for another season. The 'Stoke are staying up. More than that, it was just a joy, after a tough season, to see the dedicated team who lead and manage the club, the players, the support staff, the volunteers and our loyal fans celebrating after so much hard work. In his open letter to the fans after Saturday's game, the manager Dan Brownlie gave

"a massive thank you to the staff, volunteers, board and players. It goes way beyond match days. Endless meetings, endless hours behind the scenes trying to create the best experience for supporters. You would not believe the half of it...It is selfless, and it deserves celebrating. From the stewards, the board, the bar staff, the kit room and everyone in between, you are remarkable."

I could not agree more, whether we are talking about Jack Miller, Liz Lockie, Jacquie Meechan, Katie Oliver, Brian and Sarah Parsons, Neil the head steward, Adam Robinson, Aaron Nicholson, or the many volunteers, players and fans, past and present. They are remarkable.

For all the money, well-deserved global attention and sporting excellence of the premier league, it is the community and the fans of local football clubs such as Basingstoke Town that make football truly great. Football is more than just a sport; it is a source of civic pride, community identity and economic opportunity, but for too long the governance and financial model of our game has left clubs vulnerable to mismanagement, unscrupulous ownership and, ultimately, financial ruin. A stark example is the case of Basingstoke Town and its much-loved Camrose ground. The Camrose was gifted to the club by Viscount Camrose in the 1940s, and a covenant was placed on the land, restricting its use to football or as a sports ground. For more than 70 years, the Camrose was the heart of our town's club, and a vital community hub where generations of fans came together to support their team. People of all ages came there to play the sport that so much of our nation holds dear.

The covenant on the ground, which should have guaranteed a sports facility to the town for another three decades at least, was and continues to be blatantly and disgracefully disregarded. In 2016, the then chairman of the club sold the freehold of the Camrose to a company that he owned. Following years of under-investment in the stadium, he eventually evicted the newly formed community club from the Camrose in April 2019. The club was forced to relocate to Winchester City's grounds, over 20 miles away, causing disruption to not only the men's first team, but the women's team, the youth academy and an array of vital community projects. A once iconic stadium that brought pride and opportunities to the town was reduced to a distant memory.

Our town and club have lost a historic football ground. We have lost a large sports and community facility, and those responsible have been able to escape accountability and to profit handsomely from a disgraceful episode in our town's history. Basingstoke Town has since transitioned to a 100% fan-owned model, but that example is why I

am so passionate about this legislation protecting not just fans of EFL clubs, but supporters of non-league teams like Basingstoke Town. I would like these measures to protect clubs at all levels of English football. I would appreciate any information that the Minister could give on how the Government will work with the FA to support and regulate non-league clubs, in order to protect clubs like Basingstoke.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. It is terrible what has happened at Reading due to the ownership. The women's football team have gone from being in the women's super league to being in tier 5. Will he join me in supporting women's football, and in asking the Government for an update on their plan to implement the Carney review on the future of women's football?

Luke Murphy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her gift of an intervention, and I wholeheartedly agree with her sentiments about women's football, which is a basic part of Basingstoke Town football club as well.

Stronger governance is vital. We need tougher ownership tests to stop reckless takeovers, better financial oversight to prevent clubs from drowning in debt, and more support for fan-led ownership models. Football belongs to the fans. They pour in their passion, time and money. They deserve a system that protects their clubs and their communities, not one that puts them at risk. The Bill provides that system, and I commend the Government for it; but I want to see just as much attention paid to the grassroots, non-league football, and its fans and volunteers, because as I said, they are what make football truly great.

7.20 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): As has been mentioned, only one Football League club is represented by a Conservative MP, and that is the mighty Bromley football club. My efforts to bring about a chant of "You've got the only Tory" across opposition stands in league two are ongoing, and I will keep the House informed of how well they proceed.

Hayes Lane, the club's ground since 1938, stands proudly in my constituency. Bromley FC is a football fan's dream. We have gone from strength to strength in recent years. Earning promotion to the conference south league in 2006, the club was crowned champion eight years later. We climbed the national league, reaching the FA trophy final in 2018 and earning promotion in 2021, but our rise did not stop there. Bromley faced Ryan Reynolds's Wrexham at Wembley for a second shot at the FA trophy in 2022. It was an amazing day, and one that I remember well. While we may not have had "Deadpool", we did have Michael Cheek—Cheeky, the Maradona of Bromley—who secured the silverware with the game's only goal. I love Michael Cheek, and I congratulate him on being named league two player of the year last night; it is well deserved. Last year, a moment 132 years in the making arrived as Bromley was promoted to the English football league for the first time in its history.

Why is this story relevant? Bromley's football dream was realised thanks to sound management, private investment and raw talent, not a state regulator, and I congratulate Robin Stanton-Gleaves, Mark Hammond—

Hammo—and Andy "Woody" Woodman on all that they have done for the club. As a Ravens fan, when I look at Labour's supposedly independent football regulator, I have to ask whether it would help Bromley FC or aspiring clubs like it, and in its current state, the answer is a resounding no. When the Bill was first proposed, it was proposed with the right intentions. It would protect cherished community clubs from bad owners, and would prevent a breakaway European super league. However, Labour's regulator is morphing into a meddling, costly political deadweight for English football, because the regulator will be neither independent nor impartial. This is cronyism at its worst.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): My hon. Friend is a football fan. Does he recall hearing any fan group saying, "What we really need is a Labour donor crony regulating the beautiful game"?

Peter Fortune: What fans tell me is that they want the money to move more freely through the sport. I shall say more about that in a moment. The cronyism is what we are concerned about. With political leadership, the risk of mission creep is greater. More state intervention would threaten English football's independence, and UEFA warns that without independence, English clubs could not compete in European leagues. The Government know that their Bill could torpedo English football, and I wonder whether that is why Ministers refuse to publish UEFA's letter about it.

The regulator will also cost clubs a small fortune. The levy to pay for the new bureaucracy will cost them nearly £100 million, and the regulatory burden will cost them nearly £35 million more, hurting the smallest clubs, such as Bromley, that do not have the staff to handle yet more red tape. For clubs it means higher taxes, more paperwork, and staff working on state demands, rather than football. For fans it will inevitably mean higher ticket prices, especially in view of the new jobs tax that Labour has instigated, and employment red tape. We should be focusing on getting money to the league clubs, not tying their hands with bureaucracy. That is what the clubs need.

Football is about risks and aspirations. Teams win or lose, are promoted or relegated. This is not banking; it is football. While I recognise that smaller clubs need support, a partisan regulator is not the answer. English football's independence is worth protecting.

7.25 pm

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Let me begin by declaring my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I think most of us have agreed today that football has a governance problem. Just last Friday, I attended a meeting with Sheffield Members of Parliament and fans of Sheffield Wednesday—fans who are desperate for their owner to sell their club, so that we can share the lessons from Reading football club. We are well aware of the problems of bad ownership at Reading; its stadium is in my constituency. Our club is on the brink of expulsion from the English football league, after its absent owner was disqualified by the EFL more than a month ago. Reading and Sheffield Wednesday are the tip of the iceberg. As we have heard during the debate, and as we have seen over the last few years, there have been crises at Wigan, Derby, Portsmouth, Bury, Bolton,

[Yuan Yang]

Macclesfield, Southend and beyond. Football definitely has a governance problem. I am heartened that this Labour Government are serious about fixing it, although sadly the same cannot be said for all parties in the House.

It is shameful that the Conservative party, which initially backed the Bill, has spent the past few months delaying its progress. In those months, many Members, including me, have spent our time fighting for the future of our local clubs. Every day is another day on which Reading fans are left in the dark, another day when Reading staff and local businesses are left waiting for late wage payments. I ask Conservative Members: how much longer would you like us to wait? The shadow Secretary of State likes to talk about business and the economic case. I ask him this: when the average club in the championship spends more than 100% of its revenues on wages, and when, according to the non-governmental organisation Fair Game, more than 50 of the top 86 clubs in the country are technically insolvent, with liabilities exceeding their assets, is this a successful market? Is it a functioning market? I would argue that that is not just unfair, but financially unsustainable. As we heard from the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenege), self-regulation has not worked, so we need to find a system that works.

Joe Robertson: Has the hon. Lady not received a payment of £8,000 from the man whom her own Government want to install as an independent chair of an independent regulator? Does she not accept that that is a major compromise of the independence of that chosen nominee?

Yuan Yang: I have already declared my interest, and I do not agree with that intervention. It is for us in this Chamber to decide whether we want a regulator, and whether we want the Bill to be passed. The Leader of the Opposition has said that she believes that any regulator would be a waste of resources. I presume that that means that her party believes that football does not need regulation. It is for the Select Committee—previously chaired by the hon. Member for Gosport, who, in her speech, seemed to support the idea of independent regulation—to scrutinise the appointment of regulators.

Reading is one of the oldest clubs in England. It once prided itself on good governance, and was known for “the Reading way”. Since the current owners took over, we have seen four winding-up petitions and five points deductions. Sadly, the EFL, which tries to support and intervene, has been unable to effect change for our club because it lacks sufficient regulatory powers. This is where the new ownership test, as well as the new licensing regime proposed in the Bill, would have been so helpful. Reading’s crisis was avoidable, and if we had a strong, independent football regulator, we could start to fix football’s governance problems.

Mr Quigley: As a Sheffield Wednesday fan, I understand the financial pain that clubs experience. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Opposition do not actually know why they are objecting to the Bill?

Yuan Yang: I feel that I have seen a lot of fancy footwork from the Opposition that probably belongs on the pitch.

We need to build a football system that is fair, transparent and sustainable. That is why I strongly welcome the Bill, and in particular the creation of an independent football regulator. I also strongly support the new owners and directors test, but let me be clear: this regulator must have real teeth. As well as a light touch, it must have the right touch. I hope that, as well as having the power to disqualify bad owners, it will also have the power to enforce that disqualification, and that the Bill, by being able to force the sale of shares or through other interventions, can ensure that the regulation bites.

I am confident that this Bill will support clubs around the country. As I said in my Westminster Hall debate, we need a regulator that passes the Reading test, so that fans of other clubs do not have to go through what we have had to endure. I have spoken to the Sports Minister and the Secretary of State a number of times about Reading, and I am grateful that we share a vision of what English football could be—although I am sure the Sports Minister will disagree with my particular vision that Reading deserve to defeat Barnsley this weekend in order to reach the play-offs. I hope that Ministers will, in theory, support a strengthening of the ownership test by the time this Bill leaves the House.

Olivia Bailey: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her excellent campaigning on this issue. Does she agree that Reading football club is at the heart of the community in Tilehurst—in my constituency—and in her constituency? We have to act to protect clubs like Reading. Does she agree that in their obfuscation on this legislation, the Conservatives are letting down fans of Reading football club?

Yuan Yang: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Conservative party is letting down many Reading fans, not just in our constituencies but in many neighbouring constituencies, as well as fans across the country.

This matters because Reading are not just a club but a community institution. They are a source of pride, opportunity and identity, which I am heartened that many thousands of fans have come together over the current crisis to try to save. Over 10,000 fans have signed my petition to launch an inquiry into the governance at Reading, and over 30 Members of Parliament belonging to various parties spoke in the Westminster Hall debate that I led, on the topic of financial sustainability in football. That demonstrates how much football clubs mean to people, but unless we act to change how football is governed and run, fix the distribution model, rein in reckless spending and stop absent owners hiding from fans, we will keep losing community clubs up and down the country.

Football deserves better, fans deserve better, and with this Bill we have a once-in-a-generation chance to get it right.

7.31 pm

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): I draw Members’ attention to my membership of the football APPG and the women’s football APPG, which both exist to safeguard and improve the game that we love. I have also attended various briefings by interested organisations, such as Fair Game.

It is clear that there is wide support for the principle of establishing a regulator for football. It was in the Conservatives’ manifesto, and the Labour Government

are delivering their own manifesto commitment, but the Bill is also welcomed by the EFL and the Football Supporters' Association. There is even some support from the Premier League, so I am confident that it will pass its Second Reading later. Once enacted, it will help us to sustain our truly national game.

There are over 14 million grassroots players, including me—still—and over 40,000 association football clubs. Football brings people together on a weekly basis to celebrate, to commiserate and to enjoy the unfolding drama that only sport can deliver. Football is also crucial to our local economies and local identities, but too many clubs are facing uncertain times, which is why I support the Bill's focus on financial sustainability, the ownership of clubs and fan engagement. Had these areas of focus already been realised, my nearest EFL club, Reading FC, would not be in the situation in which they currently find themselves. That is why this Bill is needed. We cannot let something of so much social and economic value be unregulated, and this Bill can improve the connection between fans and clubs, and protect their heritage.

The first half of this Bill's legislative journey has now been completed. Although the Government did not formally accept any Opposition amendments from the other place, the Bill has been improved. I welcome the amendments that have been made, including the requirement that board members and expert panel members must declare their interests, greater inclusion of players and fans, the introduction of a social responsibility duty, and the inclusion of a club's contribution to the economic and social wellbeing of its local communities.

Football clubs must be held to account. Selling off assets such as car parks and training grounds, transferring ownership of the stadium or even selling the trophy cabinet cannot be allowed to happen.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): What's that?

Mr Dillon: A Tottenham fan would be able to sell the dust.

Although football clubs are owned by wealthy individuals or investment groups, they belong to their communities. Financial fair play has created unintended consequences such as selling home-grown players to get greater profit, or selling off a women's team as an accounting trick. As the legislation progresses, we must ensure that it does not do the same.

One area where there has been criticism of the Bill is the unintended consequence of increasing ticket prices. That was raised in the other place, and I note that the reasoned amendment, which would decline to give the Bill a Second Reading, also raises this issue. My team, Manchester United, who were joined by Liverpool as 20-time league champions yesterday, have already increased ticket prices, without consulting the fans, due to the level of debt. That debt has not strengthened the club, the fans did not ask for it, and it has only benefited the owners.

The main focus of the Bill is to ensure the financial sustainability of the English game, so with less debt and more money going through the football pyramid, I do not hold the view that the regulatory burden will increase ticket prices, and paragraph 4(2)(c) of schedule 4 to the Bill gives fans a legal right to be engaged on ticket

pricing. I support the principle of the Bill, but I want to explore how we can work with football clubs on fairer dynamic pricing, concessionary ticket pricing and the cost for away fans, alongside how fans can own a meaningful stake in their clubs.

Finally, I accept that the women's game is not covered by the legislation, but the Secretary of State has the power to bring it into the new regulatory regime. In Committee, I will seek more concrete commitments on what trigger is needed for that to happen, as the financial success or otherwise of the men's game is already impacting on women and girls' ability to play organised football, and I will ask colleagues to explore these six areas.

7.36 pm

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): In Derby, our football club is not just a team; it is at the heart of our community, uniting us across generations. Derby and Derby County have a rich footballing heritage, heroes to inspire us and a bright future ahead, but the future has not always looked so bright. In 2021, we entered administration. Fans were left on a constant cliffhanger as administration negotiations dragged on and offered little clarity. We were celebrating that the club had been bought one day, only to find that the promised funds had not arrived the next. Thankfully, local man and fan David Clowes stepped up to ensure that generations of fans to come will be able to enjoy a Saturday afternoon at Pride Park. As he has said,

"We would never want to see another club and its fans suffer in the way Derby did both before and during the period of administration. Anything that can prevent that, including this Bill, should be supported and applauded."

Up and down the country, from Birmingham to Burnley, fans are rightly proud of their clubs. Despite that fan base, it is not just Derby County facing financial peril: EFL clubs across the country will lose around £450 million this season. This financial instability undermines the clubs that unite our communities, risking the matchday magic for fans. That is why I welcome the Government's plan to introduce an independent football regulator through this strengthened Bill. It is right that clubs are required to stick to tough financial regulations, and that the independent football regulator will ensure a fair distribution of revenue. Having experienced Derby County's separation from its stadium, I know it is right that clubs will have to seek approval to sell or relocate from their home ground. This Government recognise that a stadium, such as Pride Park in Derby, is a huge asset to fans.

When interviewed on the opening day of his first season as chairman, David Clowes was asked what he wanted Derby County to stand for. His response was "stability, integrity and progress", which is exactly what the Bill stands for: stability, integrity and progress, to preserve and protect the game we all love.

7.39 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. As it has for so many Members across the House, football has given me some unforgettable moments. I grew up listening to the scores on Saturday afternoons with my dad, and I can still remember the pride I felt when my son had the opportunity to be a mascot at Stamford Bridge and we spotted him on "Match of the Day". Football gives us

[Liz Jarvis]

joy, community and a feeling that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. That same spirit, connection, pride and sense of belonging is exactly what my constituents feel when they go to watch the Eastleigh Spitfires at the Silverlake stadium or away—and I am pleased to say that we drew with Woking on Saturday.

Football clubs are part of the cultural DNA of our towns and cities, with rich heritage built by generations of fans who turn up for every match—in the cold, in the rain—all for love of the beautiful game. This Bill is long overdue to put the necessary guardrails in place to protect our local clubs and the communities that support them. What is football without stories such as Leicester City's premier league win or Wrexham's remarkable rise? Teams, no matter how small—with or without the support of Hollywood A-listers—should be able to have the same opportunity to compete. That is why I support measures to empower the independent regulator to block teams from joining a breakaway super league, which would tear the heart out of English football.

Currently, 95% of the £3.2 billion annual broadcast revenue stays with the top 26 clubs—premier league sides and those receiving parachute payments. While the Bill takes steps to address some of these issues, it unfortunately leaves the national league and grassroots football outside the scope of the proposed regulator. The regulator will only require clubs to consider the interests of their own fans and members, not the long-term health or sustainability of the entire pyramid. This is a missed opportunity that I hope the Government will address as the Bill progresses.

We must also recognise the need to strengthen the owners and directors tests by including clear human rights checks. A repressive regime should not be allowed to buy its way into our national game, using English football to sportswash its image simply because it offers the highest price. That is why I hope the Government will strengthen the Bill by embedding a human rights test into the regulations for owners and directors.

This Bill must strike a balance in protecting the success of our globally admired game while ensuring fairness, access and sustainability across the pyramid. Recently, I visited the Crescent primary school in my constituency, and I was blown away by the passion and commitment of the school staff in encouraging girls as well as boys to play football. It was a powerful reminder of what football can offer future generations when access, inclusion and opportunity are at its core. Football belongs to the fans, the communities and the kids kicking a ball about at school or in a local park. They have made this game what it is, and we owe it to them to get it right.

7.43 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I will start by quoting this historic football match commentary:

“It's Grimsby giving it away in a very dangerous part of the pitch, for the first time the visitors becoming the architects of their own downfall, it's tucked in by the substitute Luther Wildin and Stevenage you sense are going up today!”

With apologies to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), that was the moment on 3 May 2023 when the Mighty Boro,

Stevenage FC, scored the final goal in a match that sealed their promotion to the EFL league one, where they remain today. Our club, whose colours I am wearing, is part of the lifeblood of the town not just on the pitch, but off it, with the incredible work they do in the community. It is the exemplar of a local football club being a truly community asset.

I speak in favour of the Bill because it is not just about much-needed regulation, but about safeguarding the future of our national sport, ensuring financial stability for clubs across the pyramid and making sure our fans—the people who spend their money, week in and week out, to follow their team across the country—are given a real say in how their clubs are run.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He is telling a very similar story to that of my local club, Leyton Orient. Its fans warmly welcomed the reinvestment from David Gandler, building on the leadership of the chairman, Nigel Travis, who has delivered sustainable growth, promotion to league one, clear championship ambitions and a new stadium, and has strengthened the community with up to £6.7 million in social value. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that all ownership transitions should be like this and should follow this model of fan engagement?

Kevin Bonavia: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. We both represent constituencies with clubs that are good examples of what can be done, but our duty here is to safeguard our clubs and all clubs in this country from future failure. They are not businesses; as I have said, they are community assets.

Last season, 23.7 million people attended matches in EFL competitions, demonstrating the profound connection between these clubs and their local communities. It is not just on the pitch that clubs are contributing to their communities. In the same season, EFL clubs contributed over £1.2 billion of social value through their community programmes, with my local club's community arm, the Stevenage FC Foundation, alone generating £10.7 million of social value in my constituency and the wider area. In that timeframe, the foundation also delivered 185 training sessions per week, engaging over 15,000 unique participants annually and delivering over 9,000 hours of activity. That is an incredible feat.

However, the financial stability of all clubs across the football pyramid is in a precarious place, with EFL clubs expected to lose around £450 million this season alone. Alongside this, the financial disparity between the premier league and the EFL is stark. In the 2022-23 season, 20 premier league and five EFL clubs with parachute payments received 92% of the distributable revenues, while the remaining 67 professional clubs shared just 8%. This imbalance undermines the systemic sustainability of English football, and I am glad that this Bill proposes change so that a 75%-25% split of combined media revenues between the premier league and the EFL will become the new normal and provide much-needed financial support to EFL clubs.

It is clear that the financial situation in which we find ourselves across the pyramid is untenable, and this has directly led to financial crises in clubs across England. It is beyond belief that the Conservative party, which sat on its hands for most of the past 14 years, claimed in

its manifesto that it wanted an independent football regulator, so why on earth do we not have cross-party consensus on this principle?

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Quite simply, because it is no longer independent.

Kevin Bonavia: The hon. Member will know that the Bill has been improved to make the independent regulator more independent, for example—and there are plenty of examples of improvements in the Bill—by giving the regulator a greater ability to actually regulate the game. Conservative Front Benchers say they support independence and say they want regulation, but many of its Members do not like regulation at all. This is not a party that believes in protecting the national game; it is a party that wants to play party political football with something that should have cross-party consensus.

Alongside the financial stability that this Bill will bring to our clubs, we need to respect fans' involvement in these community assets, so I want to pay tribute to all the clubs that already engage in good faith with their fans. I am proud of the work that Stevenage have done to involve fan representation in their yearly engagement plan, and for the initiatives of other clubs, such as Blackpool, whose directors I chatted with at the match with Stevenage last week. They explained how they had had a pint with Tangerine fans from across the country to hear their views on how the club should be run. That said, they did get a bit lucky at our place, although I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) would agree with me that both our clubs have great foundations and trusts that support their fans.

I am also pleased that the amendments the Government have made to the Bill during its passage in the other place actually do strengthen that independence, as I said to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French). Under this Bill, poor and reckless behaviour that ignores local fan communities will not be tolerated by the regulator. This Bill provides the safety net that clubs need to be financially secure and to be able to deliver for their local communities for a long time to come. Let us all support this Bill, and therefore support our fantastic football clubs.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Lengthy interventions are eating into time, so the time limit is now four minutes.

7.49 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I declare an interest as a supporter of Norwich City and King's Lynn Town.

Other Members have referred to the success of the premier league and the fact that the EFL is one of the best attended in Europe. Football, we should take it as read, is a success story. I want to focus on the risks posed to the game by the Bill and regulation. Indeed, even the Government concede that the new regime and distribution provisions in particular are unique and unprecedented. The objectives of sustainability, preventing breakaway competitions, safeguarding heritage and strengthening engagement are supported by fans, but much of that is already happening under the existing rules of the FA, the Premier League and the EFL.

My concern—the one I expressed in the previous Parliament when we debated a similar Bill—is that it will lead to overreach and over-regulation. We have heard bids already from across other parts of the House to load burdens on football, including protecting car parks. The Prime Minister has said on regulation:

“the key test...Is this going to make our economy more dynamic? Is this going to...unlock investment?”

Yet he is creating a new regulator that will take £100 million out of the game, including for smaller clubs, and regulatory scope and costs will inexorably increase. The task of the regulator is already vast. It will have to approve business plans for 116 clubs as part of licensing. Applying such banking-style regulation to a sport is inappropriate.

The provisions on revenues of course attract a lot of attention. Let us be clear here: the Government are taking powers through the backstop to mandate the division of commercial revenues. These are unprecedented powers that will cause significant regulatory and investment uncertainty. There is a voluntary agreement at the moment, which is essential to the health of the game and to get funds flowing through the pyramid. The backstop, which is meant to be a last resort, is now the frontstop. The EFL has been very clear that it is waiting for the provisions to come into force and it will not agree to anything until then. The Government have made the situation worse by including the parachute payments, which will prevent clubs that want to invest when they get promoted and take a risk so they can compete from doing so, which will weaken the competitiveness of the game.

Then there is the untried binding final offer arbitration model. Rather than considering the proposals put forward by the Premier League and EFL to determine which is the best approach—it may be a compromise between the two—we have a Russian roulette approach where the regulator has to pick one or the other. Lord Birt put forward an amendment in the other place to introduce an approach based on commercial arbitration instead of that model, which incentivises gaming. The Secretary of State had some warm words for what Lord Birt had done in the other place. I would be grateful if the Minister, in winding up, can clarify whether the Government are still talking to Lord Birt and other legal experts in the other place, with the intention of changing the flawed backstop model.

To conclude, the Bill would introduce unprecedented regulation of our national game. There are clear risks, through excessive regulation the Bill will introduce, to the very elements that make football the great success it is. That is why I will be opposing the Bill. The Government and the Prime Minister will be rightly held responsible if they get it wrong and undermine football.

7.53 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): We are here to discuss football, an unmatched force of pride and passion across all corners of the country, from Barnet to Brighton and York City to Yeovil. That is why the Labour Government are introducing an independent football regulator.

Today, I am speaking in this debate with a somewhat unique perspective: as a former national regulator at the Financial Conduct Authority, but also as an ordinary person who enjoys watching my local team. I was involved in the FCA's development of strategy. It moved

[Mr Luke Charters]

from what is called a rules-based approach to an outcomes-based approach. In my view, the IFR should adopt a similar approach, based on focusing on what good looks like for football governance and community benefit. Its core goal must be about putting fans at the heart of the game.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on this important matter. Fans are the heart and soul of our football clubs. At Ebbsfleet United football ground, the Fleet Supporters' Trust is absolutely cracking in that space. Does he agree with me that fans will respect transparency, civility and a voice in the game they love?

Mr Charters: I certainly do, and that should be the goal of the regulator. Fan engagement is great at York City, but it is not a given elsewhere. That is why the IFR should have a fan advisory board of its own feeding back on its own effectiveness, just as I saw at the FCA with its advisory panels.

Moving on, there is no greater problem in football that needs fixing than ticket pricing and I think the football regulator should look at it in future. This is all about giving back to the ordinary working people of this country: the grafters who pay their taxes, working hard all week, just waiting for those 90 minutes on a Saturday. Some championship clubs charged away fans £45 this season, and some league two sides will be charging over £30 a ticket next season. York could be playing in that league next season and it is just not on, so in my view the IFR should have a greater role in relation to pricing.

Mr French: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Charters: I am going to make some progress and allow other Members to speak.

Let us roll out an away ticket cap across the EFL and national league, like the one that already exists in the premier league at £30. That is up for review this year. It should not only be kept, but expanded across all divisions as a ceiling, not a target for clubs. I understand the careful balance to be struck on the regulators' remit, but with prices climbing and no controls we must do something before it is too late.

The regulator will cover men's football, but we should also consider how revenue could be shared to boost women's football and foundation clubs. Perhaps that should be considered too. The IFR will cover the top five divisions, recognising the great progress the national league has made in recent years. Take Wrexham, who won a third successive promotion, to the championship, over the weekend. The problem, though, is the cap on promotion places, with only two teams going up this season from the national league. There has been a debate for some time about introducing a third promotion spot. In my view, with the IFR, now is the right time. I should declare an interest as York City would be all but promoted by now. This is about opening our wonderful pyramid up, not closing off competition.

If I may, I will finish by sharing a further idea about English football. It is 40 years since alcohol was banned in view of the pitch. Perhaps it is time for a modern

approach to a modern game. The days of hooliganism are gone. Fans of other sports can drink in the stands, but football fans cannot. Limited trials of designated drinking zones in view of the pitch could be an interesting idea. For me, we should always keep family areas free of that, but let us give fans who want to drink in the stands the chance to do so responsibly, or at least let us have a conversation about it.

To conclude, fan engagement has to be at the heart of the reinvigoration of English football. This moment should kick-start a broader conversation about what fans want. It is this Labour Government leading the charge for the hard-working fans of this country. Today is about protecting the fans to inspire the generations of tomorrow and to protect the sport we all love.

7.58 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Unlike many Members of this House, I can remember a time when football was in the shadows. Overwhelmed by hooliganism, it was looked down on, as the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) noted. Like all across the House and the country, I am delighted at how football has changed. As a lifelong Crystal Palace fan, much to my Wimbledon constituents' shame, I have followed my team across the country—not to mention gloriously up the road at Wembley this weekend, in the company of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed), another fellow Eagle—and have seen how a spectator sport once renowned for mindless violence and prejudice has transformed into one that champions inclusivity.

The game I love is no longer marginalised; it is now celebrated and supported by people from all backgrounds. It holds a central place in our national identity, while the growth and success of the women's game has been particularly inspiring and is critical to the sport's overall development. I look forward to Crystal Palace Women regaining their place in the super league next season.

As I said in my maiden speech, I welcome the Bill. It is vital to introduce a regulator that can ensure the professional game is sustainable and puts those most important to its success—namely, the fans—at its core, despite the contempt of the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) and the bizarre volte-face from the official Opposition.

As we have heard, the premier league has unrivalled global reach, but in celebrating its international reach and national popularity, we must not forget football's origins. Football clubs are not assets to be bought and sold like superyachts, but the lifeblood of communities. My Wimbledon constituents understand better than most what happens when clubs are treated as mere assets, with the purchase of what became nothing more than a commercial franchise when the original Wimbledon FC moved to Milton Keynes—adopting the still controversial name of MK Dons—remaining a deeply traumatic event for many of my constituents. Despite opposition from the FA and the Football League, Wimbledon FC was stolen from the fans and ripped from our community. Thankfully, AFC Wimbledon rose from the ashes of the MK Dons debacle and now serves as an inspiration to many. As a majority fan-owned club, they are rightly admired. Their success also demonstrates that clubs can thrive when fans are in control.

In Wimbledon, we are fortunate to have two professional clubs that are deeply involved in the community. Fulham FC, whose training ground is in my constituency, undertakes significant community work partnering with local schools, community groups and disability charities, while AFC Wimbledon embodies this community spirit even more fervently. When the covid-19 pandemic began, three AFC Wimbledon fans established the Dons local action group to help to combat the impacts of poverty in our community. Last year, it distributed almost £1 million-worth of food to the poorest in Wimbledon.

The sustainability of our football clubs is crucial, but we must be cautious about stifling ambition. A rigid regulatory framework could prevent clubs, especially those from smaller leagues, from making their way up the pyramid as swiftly as we have seen in the past; Fulham FC, for example, experienced a meteoric rise from the fourth tier to the premier league in just six years. Along with other clubs, Fulham have raised concerns that excessive financial constraints could stifle the ambition of smaller clubs that aspire to emulate their success. We must strike the right balance, ensuring that reckless behaviour is curtailed while allowing clubs the freedom to chase success in a responsible, sustainable way.

I finish by saying that I support this Bill and that I am so surprised by the Tory volte-face—it makes no sense.

8.2 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): This evening's debate demonstrates to all of us, regardless of our opinion on the Bill, just how important our football clubs are to our communities. The sense of pride with which we have all spoken this evening is, I think, a tribute to all our clubs.

Sadly, my remarks tonight are tinged slightly with sadness. On Saturday, Carlisle United confirmed their relegation to the national league, losing 3-2 to Cheltenham. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) is not currently in his place, because I was going to congratulate him—through gritted teeth—on his team's win.

My spirits are, however, somewhat restored by the provisions of this Bill—namely those to improve the financial stability of our football clubs, protect our clubs' important cultural heritage and assets, and ensure that they engage with fans on matters important to them. I am pleased to say that on those three counts at least, Carlisle United are on good form.

Thanks to the Piatak family, who bought Carlisle United just 18 months ago, the club's financial position has vastly improved. The new owners not only bought the historic debt but have invested millions in Brunton Park, creating new fan facilities including an excellent fan zone that befits loyal Blues fans. The owners have also agreed terms with Cumberland council to develop a new training ground adjacent to the city's athletic facilities.

The board is also conscious of Carlisle United's important cultural heritage. Last year, to mark the club's 120th anniversary, a special exhibition was created at our city's Tullie House museum, featuring among the exhibits Jimmy Glass's blessed boots—if you don't know, you should look it up. Fan engagement is also strong, with open forums, community involvement and an active commitment to diversity and inclusion. This was recognised

last August, when the club was ranked second in English football for fan engagement by Think Fan Engagement. Therefore, although I might be saddened by Carlisle's relegation, I am confident that the club's foundations are stronger than ever. Not all clubs can say that, though, and that is why this Bill is required.

I do not need to tell this House that our football clubs are more than just clubs; they are the lifeblood of our communities, bringing us together, giving us moments of collective joy and sorrow and engendering local pride. That is why I am glad we are finally stepping in to give football fans up and down the country some peace of mind about the future of their clubs. Although Carlisle might be in the national league next year, I know the club is in good hands and I am reassured that the Bill will keep other clubs safe, too. That is how it should be. As former Carlisle manager the great Bill Shankly once said,

“Some people think football is a matter of life and death...I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.”

8.5 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I broadly agree with the Bill, but I hope you will kindly indulge me this evening, Madam Deputy Speaker, especially as my team, Leicester City, which has languished near the bottom of the premiership, is now confirmed relegated to the championship. Relegation is not a new experience for Leicester City fans. What is new, however, and what made this season hard to bear, was the absence of fight and passion and the complete lack of competitive edge, which brings me to the heart of my remarks today.

Those of us who have long admired the beautiful game will remember why English football captured the imagination of the world. It was not merely a technical exercise; it was a game of passion, grit, and blood and thunder. Teams would throw the kitchen sink at the opposition to get a goal, and games were contested with courage as much as skill. Within the fabric of the sport lived characters, mavericks and personalities who made the game more than just a business—they made it a spectacle.

Football today is different. While there have been many improvements, as has been mentioned by other Members, it is now a highly technical game. Players are physical specimens, sculpted by science. There is widespread feeling that character is being coached out of our players, leaving behind robotic individuals tasked with executing tactical blueprints. If football on the pitch is already at risk of losing its fire to rigidity and over-formulation, will regulation off the pitch risk extinguishing the spirit of competition entirely?

Let me speak from a personal experience. Under the late Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha—a man we still sing about from the terraces; a man who dared to dream—Leicester were promoted from league one to the championship and, within six years, were crowned premier league champions in perhaps the greatest miracle in sporting history. How did that happen? It was by taking certain risks. One such risk was spending £1 million on a non-league player in his mid-20s—an absolutely unheard of move at the time, and an absolute gamble for a club of our size. That player, of course, was Jamie Vardy, who went on to break records, represent his country and inspire an entire generation. As Jamie now announces

[Shockat Adam]

his departure after 13 magnificent years, I will take this opportunity to say: Jamie, you are the GOAT—thank you for everything you have done for us.

Leicester City's success gave hope to every so-called smaller club, showing that ambition, risk taking and dreaming could defy the odds—the essence of competitive sport. That is why some of us are concerned about this Bill. Will regulation inadvertently consign clubs like Leicester to knowing their place and simply participating, rather than competing? Will it entrench a system where a few are dominant and others merely survive? Of course, reforms are necessary; we must improve fan engagement, protect club heritage, stop breakaway leagues and insist on proper conscientious ownership. However, we must not create a sterile landscape where ambition is stifled and dreams are confined to the past.

I seek reassurance on a couple of points. Will the funding from this legislation be channelled properly into grassroots clubs—the lifeblood of our national game? Will the financial distribution address, rather than exacerbate, the widening gap between the premier league and the lower divisions, particularly regarding parachute payments? Will the arbitration process be fair, promoting compromise rather than extreme outcomes? Lastly, will club reviews be targeted and proportionate, instead of Ofsted-style tick-box exercises?

We invented the beautiful game and shared it with the world. It is played in every gully, alley and favela across the globe—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

8.9 pm

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): When Christine Seddon sat down with me and the Secretary of State in Blackpool last year, she spoke with the quiet, fierce pride of someone who had fought for her club and won. Christine is a third-generation Blackpool FC fan, and as chair of the Blackpool Supporters Trust she helped lead a movement that brought integrity, pride and professionalism back to a club on its knees. She told us that the situation in Blackpool was unique, and she hoped that it would stay that way. She said:

“To have to politicise football fans is not something we ever wanted,”

but after being let down so badly, it was felt there was no choice. Christine's words have stayed with me.

Imagine having to go head-to-head with the very club your family supported for generations because you love it too much to watch it being recklessly destroyed. That was the reality at Bloomfield Road. After years of mismanagement and failure to reinvest significant earnings, and a complete disregard for supporters, Blackpool fans took matters into their own hands and a four-year boycott, led with the courage and unity of the Blackpool Supporters Trust, restored pride in our club and gave hope to fans everywhere. Christine told us that if we had said to her five years ago that a football governance Bill was coming, she would not have believed it—it would have been the answer to her prayers. Now we must get it right.

The Bill must give fans like Christine, groups like the Blackpool Supporters Trust and millions of fans across the country the voice they have earned through their loyalty and sacrifice, and by parting with their hard-earned

cash to support their clubs through every high and low. Since its founding in 1887, Blackpool football club has been a constant in our community, but, like so many others, we have seen a growing disconnect between those who own our clubs and those who make them matter—the fans. Fans are the beating heart of local football. They turn up rain or shine—there is a lot of rain in Blackpool—win or lose, but too often they have been let down and ignored.

Nowhere was the need for change more powerfully demonstrated than at Bloomfield Road in 2015. Blackpool's story is not just about survival; it is about what fans can achieve when they are respected, heard and empowered. That is why in 2018 the Blackpool Supporters Trust became one of the first fan organisations to formally petition Parliament for an independent football regulator. It saw what was coming and acted. Today, with this Bill, we are answering that call. It will tackle rogue and incompetent owners and start to rebalance power between the boardrooms and the stands. It will ensure that no club—not Blackpool, not Bury, not Reading and not Macclesfield—is ever again allowed to fall into crisis because of rules.

The premier league is a phenomenal British success story, watched and envied across the world. Nobody in the House seeks to punish its success, but even the greatest leagues cannot stand without strong foundations. When 95% of the £3.2 billion of annual broadcast revenue remains with just 26 clubs at the top, the case for fairer distribution to sustain the whole pyramid becomes impossible to ignore. Protecting the pyramid is an investment in the future of our national game. That is why the Government's approach, in giving the regulator targeted backstop powers to intervene as a last resort, is the right one.

Christine also reminds us of something else—that fans are not just spectators, but a massive untapped resource of knowledge, passion and experience that clubs would do well to harness. This weekend, Blackpool will play their last home game of the season. Sadly, they have fallen short of their promotion hopes, but the stands will be full because loyal fans will turn up and do as they always do: give unwavering support to a team who have shown professionalism, determination and ambition for our club. This is the Bill for them, and for every supporter who never gave up.

8.13 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I declare my interest as an Aston Villa season ticket holder and therefore speak as somebody experienced in the highs and lows of football. I refer not to the FA cup semi-final on Saturday but to the moment in 2018 when Villa almost went bust under Dr Tony Xia.

To own a football club is to respect one's responsibility as a custodian of an important community institution. That is something, despite some of the speeches we have heard, that most owners respect. We cannot debate the Bill without acknowledging the extraordinary success of English football, because the premier league is the greatest show on earth. It is broadcast to 189 different countries, and nearly 2 billion people follow the league weekly. The revenues that football accrues are invested not only in top talent but through the divisions and in grassroots facilities overseen by the excellent Football

Foundation. The New Croft in my constituency, for example, is home to Haverhill Rovers, who just became champions of the Thurlow Nunn league first division north, and incredible all-weather pitches that host more than 50 teams of different ages and abilities.

What is the problem that the Bill seeks to fix? The Government say that the new regulator will protect and promote the sustainability of English football. The examples given to justify regulation are Bury and Macclesfield Town among others, but the experience of those clubs shows the power of community and supporter activism. Bury was rescued by a supporters' group, and Macclesfield by a local businessman. Both are going concerns today.

Lisa Nandy: I gently point out that Bury FC were allowed to collapse. They were expelled from the league and they lost their football share. I know acutely from my own family experience that supporters continued to gather at the gates every Saturday because of that drumbeat of a ritual that had meant so much to them and their families. I know that the hon. Gentleman cares deeply about community, so surely he agrees that that can never be allowed to happen again.

Nick Timothy: Of course, I agree that Bury was a very sad incident. The right hon. Lady mentioned 60 clubs, I think, that had gone into administration. My point is that I am not aware that any of them collapsed to the extent that they are not going concerns or not participating in league or non-league football. We know from the examples of Bury, Macclesfield and AFC Wimbledon that it is possible for clubs to come back. Supporter activism is not the only solution.

Peter Swallow *rose—*

Nick Timothy: I will happily give way to the hon. Member. Perhaps he can name one club of the 60 who are no longer live, and no longer participating in competitive sport.

Peter Swallow: I am genuinely astonished. The hon. Gentleman seems to be suggesting that a football team can be stripped to its very bones, and can limp along, barely alive but still being called a football team, and that should be good enough for fans. Is he genuinely suggesting that we should not have any more hope or ambition for the community clubs that make our towns?

Nick Timothy: What the hon. Gentleman just said about Bury football club is rather insulting to the fans who have kept it going. Of course it is a football club. Supporter activism is not the only solution when finances go wrong. When Villa were in trouble, we were quickly bought out by new owners. Such is the draw of English football that new owners are almost always ready to step in and invest. Even Birmingham City managed to find new owners two years ago.

We are told that we need a regulator to stop travesties such as the European super league, but again that is wrong. Those English clubs that were tempted by the super league backed off as soon as supporters made their views plain. The real motivation for the super league was European envy of the premier league, but we risk the strength of that league with this proposal.

We are also told that we need a regulator because football finances are unsustainable. Everyone knows of the issues caused by the leveraged buy-out of Manchester United by the Glazer family. There is action that the sport can take to prevent such cases, but debt itself is not necessarily a problem. Spurs have borrowed to invest in their new stadium, for example, and many owners are willing to invest more in their teams but have been blocked by financial fair play rules. Those rules demonstrate why regulating football in this way is such a risk. They have protected the most established clubs from challenge, prevented teams from building on their success through investment, and caused all sorts of perverse decision making.

Premier league teams are selling promising young players because they represent pure profit in the financial fair play system. Players are signed on long-term contracts to amortise the cost. Some clubs have sold their grounds to comply with the regulations. Chelsea sold their women's team to a company belonging to their owners for an inflated sum of £200 million, just to get around the rules. It is not difficult to see how a football regulator would lead to similar perverse outcomes and a loss in the competitiveness of English teams.

Just today, we have heard calls from parliamentarians to extend the role of the regulator. We can imagine interventions on ticket prices, kit sales and carbon footprints, and perhaps quotas for English players, wage equality between men's and women's teams, the distribution of revenues, restrictions on heading the ball, and diversity mandates for youth schemes and the appointment of coaches. I heard something said about human rights checks.

Football does not need this regulator. The vast revenues of the premier league and their distribution, and the extraordinary continuity of almost every professional club in the country, show that the sport is balancing commerce and community well. Our clubs are performing in a tough international market and the most competitive of leagues and cups, and they are surviving and thriving as vital community institutions. When it is not even clear what the problem is that we are trying to fix, why would we risk something that is so cherished by so many?

8.19 pm

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I would first like to thank the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), for bringing the Bill before the House today. I have it written down here somewhere that I should thank the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) for gallantly coming forward on this issue before the election, when he supported the Bill, but I am flabbergasted; to think that I came in here this afternoon to thank him, when he has changed his mind completely! What will Dame Tracey Crouch be thinking, watching this on her television? She will be utterly ashamed, appalled and disgusted. She did an incredible amount of work to bring this Bill to the Chamber. She spoke to the Football Supporters Association and to every organisation she could to try to get to people's true feelings in her work on the Football Governance Bill.

I would love the right hon. Member for Daventry to explain what he said about this chap who is being appointed as regulator. The Conservatives want to kill

[*Ian Lavery*]

the Bill because of that. That is absolute nonsense, man, and the Tories and the Government understand that. They just say what they do for the sake of opposing a fantastic Bill.

Stuart Andrew: Surely the hon. Gentleman understands that across all sports, political interference is frowned on, and has consequences for teams across the nation. Surely he agrees that the independence of the regulator is paramount.

Ian Lavery: I think I agree with that, but from what I have heard from my hon. and right hon. Friends, the proposed independent regulator was on a list that they received from the Tory Government. This bloke who everyone on the Tory Benches has hammered was on a list proposed by the Tories—

Stuart Andrew indicated dissent.

Ian Lavery: Of course he was. He was on the list, and there were other people on the list who were Tory donors. This fantastic Bill, which will give a lot of comfort to football supporters, is being opposed by the official Opposition because of one individual being appointed. He is obviously the best man for the job. The way I measure it is this: the louder the Tories scream and the more opposition they give to anything we say, the better it is, so I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman. The louder he shouts, the better. This was the best the Labour Government could do. Let us hope that this individual is welcomed with open arms. He has a hell of a job to do to make sure that football supporters in this country are actually listened to—and it is the football supporters' game.

Not so very many years ago, the rich and the elite tried to steal the working man's game in Europe. They tried to take it abroad, without any consultation with the fans who pay for season tickets. Football supporters absolutely love the clubs, and they are greatly insulted by the rich and the elite who are trying to take away their traditions, their culture, and their history, because that is what that is. Football is not just a religion, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) said; it is much more than that. This Bill goes a long way to support fans up and down the country and give them that bit of reassurance that the Government have their back.

8.25 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): If you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, as a lifelong Liverpool supporter, I would like to congratulate Liverpool and Arne Slot on winning the premier league in Arne's first season as manager. This is my first season in Parliament, and I hope to follow in his footsteps, but I do not know what the parliamentary equivalent of winning the premier league is.

I welcome this Bill, and I commend the Government and the Secretary of State for standing up to the opposition to it, from the Tories and from the football industry. I noted the recent comment from one of the Chelsea owners, who felt it was hard to “appreciate the need” for a regulator. As an overseas owner of an English football club, he might not see the need, but I can assure him that football fans who have to pay increasingly extortionate

ticket prices to see premier league games do see the need. Two of my nephews were lucky enough to see Liverpool win the premierships yesterday, but they had to pay over £50 for the privilege, and Liverpool is more sensitive to fan pressure on ticket prices than most.

Attending a premier league game is beyond the means of most fans, especially if they want to share that experience with family members. There is a desperate need to introduce an affordable ticket model. There is much to be learned from the German Bundesliga on that, despite our different ownership models. The current model of regulation is not working for the fans, or for the long-term interests of the clubs. If professional football clubs were treated like any other business, most would go bust tomorrow as their loans were called in.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): I agree wholeheartedly with all that the hon. Member has to say. Will he join me in congratulating Blackburn Rovers on their outstanding community work, especially to support young boys and girls from all backgrounds in football? Their commitment to inclusivity and development at grassroots level is truly commendable.

Iqbal Mohamed: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's comments, and I pay tribute to the work of Blackburn Rovers in their community.

We are probably all aware of the examples of Everton and Manchester United. Both are up to their ears in debt while either building or planning to build stadiums that cost between £750 million and £1 billion. If we look lower down the leagues, the sums are still eye-watering. York City lost £235,000 last season, Salford City lost £5.3 million and Stockport County lost £7 million. It is difficult to see how, at some stage, without regulation, more and more clubs will not simply go to the wall. The financial precarity in football is such that it leaves the clubs open to bad actors seizing on their financial vulnerabilities to offer a route to potential success. I am, of course, referring to dirty money and the pernicious practice of sportswashing by dubious owners who see club ownership as a PR vehicle to airbrush their misdeeds and human rights abuses to reconstruct their reputations and exert geopolitical influence. It is deeply regretful that this odious and morally corrupting practice has been allowed to establish a foothold in our game since Roman Abramovich came to England as the owner of Chelsea football club with dirty money from Russia. He was found to have funded or donated over £100 million to illegal settlement expansion in the west bank.

The other issue I want to raise is around agent fees. In 2022 to 2023, over £408 million was paid by Premier League clubs to agents and facilitators, and in the football league over £65 million was paid in agent fees. Some agents are acting on behalf of both the player and the club and receiving remuneration from both. If that is not a conflict of interest or a potential bribe, I do not know what is. I strongly encourage the Government to look at this and try to stop as much money going to agents and get it back into grassroots football.

8.29 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Football is more than a business; it is one of our country's greatest exports and a pillar of local and national identity. Football would be nothing without its

fans, and this strengthened Football Governance Bill will put fans firmly back at the centre of the game. For too long, financial instability has meant that loyal fans and whole communities have risked losing their cherished clubs as a result of mismanagement and reckless spending. The previous fan-led review was instigated following three trigger points: the collapse of Bury FC, the coronavirus pandemic, which suspended football, and the European super league. The fan-led review recommended in the light of those events and the structural issues in the pyramid that the Government should establish an independent regulator for football finances.

I am delighted that our Labour Government have reintroduced and improved this Bill without delay to deliver on our commitment to football fans. The Bill's primary purpose is to ensure that English football is sustainable for the benefit of fans and the local communities that football clubs serve. It will improve the sustainability of club finances, prevent rogue owners and directors, and strengthen the voice of fans. This legislation will protect our football pyramid for future generations. The independent football regulator will have three main objectives: club financial soundness, systemic financial resilience and the safeguarding of club heritage. The proposed regulatory activities are pretty standard—it is a light-touch regulator.

The improvements that our Labour Government have made to the Bill include clubs providing effective engagement with their supporters on changes to ticket prices and any proposals to relocate their grounds. The regulator will be given a remit to include parachute payments to be considered through any backstop mechanism when considering finances across the game. The requirement to consider Government foreign and trade policy has been ditched, which is appropriate, and the regulator will ensure that clubs democratically elect fan representatives for the club to engage with, which is right. We must have that clear commitment to improve equality, diversity and inclusion within the game.

I was therefore gobsmacked when I heard the thoroughly disappointing and embarrassing amendment from the official Opposition in the name of the shadow Culture Secretary, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), to decline to give the Bill a Second Reading. As a member of the Bill Committee, he well knows that there was genuine consensus on the Bill. It is fundamentally the same Bill with just a few changes, and I do not understand why he does not support them. As has been mentioned, the former Member for Chatham and Aylesford Dame Tracey Crouch worked so hard on the fan-led review.

Joe Robertson: Will the hon. Member give way?

Rachel Hopkins: No, I will not; I have only four minutes.

I remind the shadow Secretary of State what he said on that last day of Committee when unfortunately the previous Bill did not make it to wash-up. He said,

“I genuinely think that this is an excellent Bill”

and

“a good Bill to crack on with, because it is important for the future of football and, crucially, for the future of football fans”.—
[*Official Report, Football Governance Bill Public Bill Committee*, 23 April 2024; c. 244.]

By declining to give the Bill a Second Reading, the Conservatives are now opposing greater financial sustainability across the football pyramid, the tackling of rogue owners, greater fan engagement and club heritage protections. It is a disgrace that they are not supporting the Bill, but I support it wholeheartedly.

8.33 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I want to focus on the distribution of revenues through the pyramid. Thornbury and Yate is a largely rural constituency with no league clubs, but it does have a number of clubs with passionate supporters in steps four to seven—otherwise known as levels eight to 11 of the men's football pyramid—as well as teams in levels five and 10 of the women's pyramid. I have already had the pleasure of watching Tytherington Rocks and Yate Town. I congratulate Yate on clinching the southern league division one south title on Saturday. I wish them well in the premier division.

Tyrone Mings played for Yate before he played in the premier league and for England, and he illustrates one reason why investment in the grassroots is so important. The benefits go far wider, though. For supporters, it can be an affordable way to watch football and feel a connection with their community, and many of them contribute to their clubs through volunteering. Players of all abilities have a chance to find a level at which they can play, with all the health and wellbeing benefits that football brings, as well as the opportunity to progress to the professional game for the most talented. The wider community benefits are community outreach programmes and fans using local services and shops.

Sadly, although there is great wealth at the top of the game, in recent years the share of revenue making its way even to football league teams has decreased, never mind to grassroots teams such as those in my constituency. Grassroots teams are outside the scope of the proposed regulator, and I feel that is a missed opportunity. The issues that keep non-league managers awake at night are more likely to be fundraising drives, or the difficulties of securing finance for ground upgrades. Making a ground safer at the next level up can be a real challenge when a club cannot secure funding. That has prevented at least one local club from taking up its rightful place.

It would be fair to say that football has given me long periods of resilience-building interspersed with moments of sheer joy—an experience common to many supporters. The Bill has the potential to ensure that those emotions are tied to actions on, rather than off, the pitch. I am astonished that some people are trying to pretend that everything is currently fine. I would not be so blasé, as an Oxford United fan who lived through the Maxwell years, which included his bizarre proposal to merge the club with Reading FC and the entire first team being put up for sale after his death. We cannot rely on the benevolence of owners in what is a cutthroat business.

If we are to make football in this country truly sustainable, it must be done from the ground up. I urge the Minister to think again about the scope of the regulator to ensure fairer funding throughout the pyramid.

8.36 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for introducing the Bill to Parliament and building on the great work of former MP Dame Tracey Crouch. I am sure that Dame Tracey is, like me, absolutely bewildered by the new-found opposition of the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), to the Bill—unbelievable.

I congratulate Lower Breck, a fantastic non-league football club in my constituency, on winning a thrilling game on Saturday to reach the play-off finals of the north-west counties premier league. It would of course be remiss of me not to mention the historic achievements of my beloved Liverpool football club, who yesterday won an incredible 20th league title. I thank Arne Slot, the team and staff at LFC for that wonderful achievement of putting our club back on the perch, and for giving all Red supporters a day—and a night—that will live long in the memory.

The long-awaited Football Governance Bill represents an opportunity to fix the game once and for all, but I will touch on three areas where I feel we could strengthen the Bill for all who play and watch the beautiful game. We need a Bill that will tackle the pricing-out of working-class supporters. Of those announced, the majority of prices for 2025-26 have been frozen at premier league clubs, but that has only happened following a concerted and co-ordinated effort by fan groups, led by the Football Supporters' Association. I commend the supporters who have driven that campaign—so many groups and people deserve a mention. For fans to put aside sectarian differences and campaign in such a way shows the level of concern about ticket prices. It has been a privilege to stand alongside many of those supporters.

Despite the news that prices are frozen, the reality is that those prices are already too high, especially for younger fans. Thousands of young working-class supporters were priced out of Anfield yesterday, as some tickets were going for over £1,000. It remains of great concern that we are seeing a gradual reduction in season ticket and general admission numbers in favour of a growing number of hospitality and one-off admissions, at prohibitive costs for the regular fan. In 2025, the Premier League's global and domestic commercial and broadcast revenue has gone up by 17% to £12.25 billion. There is no income problem in football; it is an expenditure and mismanagement problem that needs to be addressed.

I therefore ask the Secretary of State to consider amendments to ensure that the new independent football regulator has involvement in ticket pricing, including by reporting on that activity in its "state of football" report and ensuring that fans have genuine input into their club's ticketing policy through the structured engagement that it will oversee, and that the IFR undertakes a review of concessionary rates across the game to ensure that loyal younger and older fans are not priced out of their sport. We can never allow the greed of some owners who have no idea about the importance of this working-class game to the communities it should always serve.

Today, on Workers' Memorial Day, it is apt to remind the House that evidence shows that former professional footballers are four to five times more likely to develop dementia or other neurodegenerative conditions. Football

families for Justice is now looking to Parliament to intervene, and I hope the Minister will listen to its calls and look at the amendments.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention how PSR—profitability and sustainability rules—are perceived by many to have unfairly targeted certain clubs, including the blue half of my city in the form of Everton. Many Evertonians believe that the Premier League's handling of their case represents an abuse of process. They would like to see an amendment passed to this Bill, the Everton clause, giving the new regulator a backstop power to require the Premier League to rerun a PSR process if there were concerns about its fairness. As a minimum, supporters of all clubs should have the ability to appeal to the regulator to ensure fair and due process in PSR cases to prevent any perception of unbalanced treatment.

8.40 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Football is not just an important cultural institution in Britain, but one of our great successes and our most successful export. I accept that the Government have only the best of intentions in wanting to set up an independent regulator and I am sure Labour Members genuinely believe this Bill will achieve good things, but I fear they are mistaken.

I fear that the regulator will hinder growth in a sector that should be powering our economy forward instead of being held back by red tape and political interference. The Prime Minister says he wants to reduce the number of quangos yet has set up 41 new ones in his first eight months in office. That is because this Government's first instinct is always to regulate first and ask questions later. How long will it be until an independent cricket regulator is proposed, and perhaps rugby after that—we could have two, one for union and the other for league?

I believe we should make a different choice: we should accept that the state already does too many things in our country and does many of those things not very well. I believe that we should limit the role of the state to a smaller number of areas and demand that it performs those roles better.

This Bill threatens the future health of English football. Labour's changes to the remit of the regulator will impose a significant regulatory burden, which will be felt particularly harshly by lower league clubs. The ultimate cost will be borne by the fans. Ticket prices, already rising on average by 7% this season, will rise further. Compliance costs for clubs are estimated at £35 million; that is money that could be spent on football instead of compliance. Is that really a good use of money?

The operational costs of the regulator are estimated to be £97.9 million, all funded through a new levy. Small clubs will struggle under the burden. What the Government are saying is that they want to take £130 million out of the game and spend it on administration. That means that the cost of Labour will yet again be felt by working people, despite what the Government claim.

I am fully aware that it was a Conservative Government who launched the fan-led review into football governance chaired by Dame Tracey Crouch. That review made targeted recommendations for an independent regulator, focused solely on financial stability and protecting club heritage. The previous Football Governance Bill, introduced last year, tried to strike that careful balance.

While I would have had questions about that Bill, I have even more significant concerns about this one. That is because Labour's version is a different beast. It has expanded the regulator's remit to cover parachute payments, solidarity payments, fan engagement mandates, new spending controls, and unnecessary diversity, equality and inclusion reporting.

This Bill will take £130 million out of football and spend it on administration. It will expand the role of the state into a sector that is commercially successful and where that intervention is unnecessary. It is more Government at a time when we need less, and that is why I shall oppose this Bill tonight.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. As hon. Members can see, a number of Members still wish to speak, so the time limit will be reduced to three minutes after the next speaker, Jon Pearce.

8.44 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): On Saturday, at 12.30 pm, I and thousands of other Derby County fans will be racked with nerves as the club faces Stoke City, hoping to avoid relegation from the championship yet again. The fact that we have been through such occasions so often over the years will not make it any easier to endure. We have heard from supporters of many other clubs, from Charlton, Blackpool, Sheffield Wednesday, Reading and too many to mention, but here is my case for why I believe that Derby County provides the best example of why we need this Football Governance Bill—finally, a competition we can win.

Any good football anecdote should obviously start with Brian Clough. Having won us the league for the first time in our history in 1971-72, he was sacked less than a year later by the club's chairman, to the horror of our club's supporters. That led to protests in the streets and a threatened players' strike. It is fair to say that there were no minimum standards of fan engagement back then, as the board of directors hid in the boardroom and relieved themselves in champagne buckets to avoid the fans' protest.

A league championship in 1974-75 aside, years of financial mismanagement led us to drop down into the third tier and face a winding-up order in the High Court. We were saved by a certain Robert Maxwell, a once honourable Member of this place, although in hindsight he was not a fit and proper person to run any business, and certainly not a community asset like a football club. He ultimately lost interest, stopped coming to games and stopped investing in the club. All the while, he was defrauding the Mirror Group pensioners. In retrospect, Derby County got off rather lightly.

Skip forward to October 2003, when "the three amigos" bought the club. John Sleightholme, Jeremy Keith and Steve Harding bought the club for £1 each, but they had no money of their own and very quickly—not for the last time—they sold the club's stadium, Pride Park, and then charged us £1 million to rent it to stay there. The requirement in the Bill for clubs to seek pre-approval from the independent regulator for the sale or relocation of their stadium is absolutely essential.

It was at that point that I first joined the Rams Trust, the supporters' group that campaigns for a stronger voice for supporters in the decision-making process at

Derby County. Such trusts play a vital role in clubs up and down the country. The tireless efforts of fans to scrutinise the activities of the management of the club led to the conviction of four people.

Maxwell and the three amigos would have passed any fit and proper person test, which is why it is so important that this Bill introduces both a minimum standard of fan engagement and a club licensing regime, to help ensure a more consistent approach in how clubs are run and club finances are monitored. I am also delighted that parachute payments are included, because they have been the driver of our most recent dalliance with financial ruin. We desperately tried to get into the premier league, competing against clubs with parachute payments, ultimately leading us to a 21-point deduction, relegation and near extinction again.

The club was saved by a local businessman, but not without a dalliance with the fraudulent activities of somebody who was trying to buy us. The truth is that football—and Derby County in particular—is constantly threatened by fraudsters and by terrible ownership that is ruining our communities. This Bill will begin to stop some of the damage that is being done to clubs up and down the country, and I will be supporting it today.

8.48 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Supporters of lower league football clubs know the score: relegation all but confirmed, millionaire financiers abandoned, desperately clinging on to former glory, leaky at the back, midfield absent, not much going on up top, leadership completely out of their depth—but enough about the Conservative party. Despite the Conservatives' attempt to turn this debate into a game of two faces, I have a serious point.

In 2008, business partners Yasuaki Kagami and George Synan became majority shareholders at Plymouth Argyle, which had been shortlisted to host games at the 2018 world cup, had England's bid been successful. It was not, of course, so their interest in the club collapsed. Finances were withheld and Argyle, with one eye on the premier league, were relegated from the championship to league one and then league two, in the space of three years. They were on the brink of insolvency before they were rescued by James Brent.

English football clubs such as Argyle should never become cash cows for vultures such as Kagami and Synan. Our largest clubs should never become money laundering operations for oligarchs tied to murderous dictators. Our football clubs are the beating hearts of our communities, around which local economies thrive; identities, friendships and rivalries are forged; and our culture is expressed.

I broadly welcome this Bill for the regulation of ownership that it will introduce, but there are no mentions of slavery or human rights in the ownership test. Will the Government answer whether they consider those issues important in the fit and proper ownership of clubs?

I have one more point. It is unfortunate that the Government voted down an amendment from the Lords that would have reduced gambling advertisement and sponsorship in English football. There is an obvious opportunity here to protect our young people from a toxic industry that deliberately preys on the vulnerable. I do not often give too much credit to Arsenal alumni,

[Cameron Thomas]

but I know that Paul Merson would have wanted this. Will the Government tell me why they voted down that amendment?

8.51 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Football clubs command a special place in the hearts of their community and the hearts of their fans. Their continued success is key to the identity and community spirit of their areas, and local clubs bring a great deal of economic benefit. I know that is the case with my team, Southend United—the Shrimpers—in the heart of Southend and in my constituency.

Over recent years, under the former owner, Ron Martin, we nearly lost our club. Financial mismanagement left the club unable to meet its obligations. It was put up for sale, but in the meantime creditors queued up at the door waiting to be paid. The club was taken to court, had numerous deadlines and point deductions imposed on it by the national league and faced a winding-up petition due to debt owed to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

What are we talking about risking the loss of here? We are talking about a club that was formed in 1906 and that started its life on the current Roots Hall site before moving to the Kursaal during the first world war, before finally finding its way back to Roots Hall in 1955 to a ground built almost exclusively by the supporters' club under the leadership of Sid Broomfield. It is a community asset to so many. It is a place where people come to share a common purpose, a place for community engagement and, for some, a place that gets them out of social isolation.

There is then the social impact of the club, estimated by the Shrimpers Trust to be worth £10.3 million annually. In one of its publications, the trust drew the following conclusions:

"Fans are not customers; we are the key stakeholders in the football clubs... Football clubs are not businesses, they are cultural heritage assets born of and represented by their communities".

I am proud to see that this Bill tackles those issues head on. The Shrimpers Trust welcomes its provisions, while having some sensible suggestions to improve them further. I am glad to see that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has said that she will look at those in Committee.

It is disappointing that the Tories want to kill this Bill, despite it being in their manifesto. Fans are clear that they are not happy about that. A statement released just today by the Shrimpers Trust thanks Members on both sides of the House for the work that they have done so far, but it also says:

"We urge those parties to continue to work together to progress this legislation and...to listen to the fans as the game's primary stakeholder, rather than be swayed by out-of-touch figures with vested interests".

I welcome this Bill.

8.54 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important piece of legislation and what it will mean for football fans in Hertford and Stortford, thousands of

whom travel week in, week out to premier league games in London, to which we are ably linked by our rail services.

Before I turn to the specific measures in the Bill, I would like to touch on why football is so important to communities such as mine. Since my election in July last year, it has been a pleasure to visit and watch a number of the non-league clubs across Hertford and Stortford, and to meet some of the managers, coaches, players and volunteers who keep them going and bring our community together. So many players at non-league clubs such as those go on to much larger teams in the future, too. We cannot overestimate the importance of grassroots football in our communities, and I pay tribute to Bishop's Stortford football club, Sawbridgeworth Town FC, Hertford Town football club and Ware football club. I particularly pay tribute to Bishop's Stortford and Sawbridgeworth, which have just avoided relegation in the latest season.

I would also like to briefly update the House on the 93rd birthday of John Staines. Some Members may remember that I have raised the topic of Hertford Town football club's drive to get 1,000 people down to their game against Flackwell Heath to mark John's birthday following more than 60 years of dedicated support for the club, 30 of them as a volunteer. It was heartwarming to see our community turn out to recognise John's contribution to the club, and I am pleased to report that we saw just over 1,000 people turn out in Hertford to do so.

It has become apparent in recent years that we need to protect our game, and I applaud the Bill's aim of protecting and promoting the sustainability of English football in the interests of fans and the local communities that football clubs serve. I welcome its core objectives of ensuring sound club finances and systemic financial resilience and safeguarding club heritage. In particular, the creation of an independent football regulator is most welcome, delivering on this Government's manifesto commitment to protect clubs and empower fans.

In the time I have left, I want to mention one quick point that was raised with me by some of our non-league clubs ahead of this debate, which I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could address. Clubs have highlighted the disparity in contract regulation between non-league and professional football; currently, non-league players can be offered a full-time contract only at the age of 18, while in professional football players can be contracted at 17. To ensure fairness to our grassroots clubs, will the Secretary of State consider equalising the age at which non-league clubs and professional clubs can offer full-time contracts to players in the future?

It has been my absolute pleasure to spend time speaking to our local non-league clubs. I know that our residents are immensely passionate about football, and it is fantastic that this Bill is being brought forward to put our fans right at the heart of that great game.

8.57 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I declare an interest as a proud season ticket holder of Hartlepool United and—I am told—the first member of Hartlepool United Supporters Trust to be elected to represent our town as its MP.

As we have heard today, football is not just a game; it is a vital part of our community and our identity—it is the thing that makes a town such as Hartlepool truly a

place. The importance of this Bill, therefore, cannot be overstated. It is about putting fans back at the heart of our football clubs, where they rightfully belong, because for a town such as Hartlepool, our football club means everything. As Pools fans know, the establishment of an independent regulator to ensure that clubs operate with integrity and accountability really matters. The Bill will create a new owners and directors test, ensuring that those in charge of our clubs are suitable custodians of their history, their heritage and their place within our communities—Pools fans absolutely know that that matters. Owners come and go, but fans remain in our football clubs, and that is what we must protect.

I believe that the new regulator has a chance to act on the campaigns and priorities of fans. As a proud supporter of a national league club who sincerely hopes that we leave that league—in the right direction—as soon as possible, I propose that the newly established regulator focuses on and champions the 3UP campaign, which is being led by the National League. That campaign calls for the promotion of three clubs from the national league to the football league, aligning it with the rest of the football pyramid. Finally, as the new regulator leads discussions with the Premier League regarding the redistribution of football income, it must ensure that the needs of the national league are not overlooked during that process. It must use its new powers to intervene if necessary in the distribution of revenue if it becomes clear that the national league is being ignored. Redistribution of the vast wealth that exists in football clubs to places like Hartlepool is critical not only for the clubs but for the communities they serve.

We can foster growth in every part of our country if we get this right. Our football clubs, communities and fans are at the forefront of this legislation. If done right, it has the ability to return football to what it always has been and should be: for the fans, by the fans—once more, the people's game.

9 pm

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a big week for Derby County, as we fight valiantly to stay in the championship. There are no guarantees of who will rise and fall in the football league, but we trust that our clubs themselves will go on. To be able to speak in support of a piece of legislation that gives more control and certainty back to our communities is a great privilege.

Our club's recent financial struggles are part of the reason we have this Bill. In 2021, the heartbeat of the club—the fans—had no say in or influence on the financial mismanagement that led to the club going into administration and the 21-point deduction we saw as a penalty. We ended up relegated to league one. The RamsTrust, one of our fan associations, set out that the most important provisions of the Bill—certainly those that will resonate most powerfully with supporters of Derby County—are those that seek to improve financial resilience in the game. The RamsTrust asks local MPs to support the Bill, so I am glad that all Derby and Derbyshire constituencies have Labour MPs to help us get this Bill through, despite opposition from the Conservatives.

I stand with fans today, as I did when I marched alongside over 10,000 fans to Pride Park on 30 January 2022, carrying banners and singing in solidarity to demand

that the club was saved. It was saved by local fan and businessman David Clowes, after a disastrous attempt to buy the club by Chris Kirchner, who was sentenced to jail for fraud last summer. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce) rightly said at the time that there is no clearer example of the urgent need for better governance of football in this country and to protect football clubs.

I hope that some good can come from that terrible time for Derby County fans and that the Bill will make it less likely for such a situation to happen to others. The Bill is so important in giving fans a louder voice. My brilliant staff member Sarah Chambers already uses her impressively loud singing voice to sing Derby County songs louder than anyone I know, including in the office.

This Bill is for the fans on cold terraces and in the stands, the volunteers and mascots and those in the wider football community, the coaches running the grassroots teams that our children play in and the parents who run the line in all weathers. I hope we can all support the Bill and make it stronger still. I wish Derby County every success in its final crucial match of the season on Saturday. Up the Rams!

9.3 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Fans of Reading football club, including the many in my constituency, will be anxious as they wait for the final game of the season. We are neck and neck with Leyton Orient, and a good result against Barnsley on Saturday—apologies to the Minister for Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock)—will send them to the play-offs. Any football fan knows these jitters; they are an essential part of what makes the beautiful game so beautiful.

The sad reality is that Reading fans are anxious for another, entirely avoidable reason: the stranglehold that their absent owner Dai Yongge has on their club. I will not rehearse it all now; I spoke about it in a Westminster Hall debate a few weeks back, and we have heard a lot tonight about the state of the club. However, with the EFL now finally forcing Dai Yongge to sell up, with a deadline of 5 May, Royals fans really are nervous. The Bill will come too late for Reading fans, but it is so important, because what has happened to Reading should never be allowed to happen to another club.

I want to take this opportunity to praise the Supporters' Trust at Reading, which has been fantastic in standing with the club and fans throughout this process. I thank the Secretary of State for meeting me and colleagues to discuss the plight of Reading, and I thank the Minister for meeting with us and staff. Staff welcomed the Bill, as have fan groups up and down the country, which makes it all the more shocking that the Tories have U-turned and are proposing to vote against it tonight. What the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) said—that it is all okay because no club has been lost irrevocably—is an indictment, and there is one party that has been completely silent tonight. Where are the Reform MPs? Why are they not in the Chamber standing up for the clubs in their constituencies? It is not good enough.

I will quickly touch on three aspects where the Bill could go further and do what I hope it will: ensure that what happened to Reading is never repeated. The first is

[*Peter Swallow*]

the protection of community assets. The Bill rightly protects stadiums, but it would be great to see more action on other community assets, including training grounds. The second is about giving fans a say in their club. It is so important that the Bill is strong, so that bad-faith clubs are not allowed to get away with simply paying lip service to these matters. Finally, it is so important that a fit owners test is included in the Bill, but we need to work out what will happen when bad owners are already in post or slip through the net. I recognise the huge complexities here, but Reading really is a cautionary tale.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): From Reading again: Matt Rodda.

9.6 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow). I speak in favour of the Bill, which I hope will prevent what happened to our club, Reading FC, from ever happening to any other English club. I realise that time is short, but I want to put some of the key facts across in my brief remarks.

Reading is one of the oldest clubs in the EFL. It has a proud history, with two spells in the premiership and glorious cup runs. Reading holds the record for the most points ever scored in the championship: 106 points in one season. It is also a family club, with a strong track record in women's football. Sadly, all that has been put at risk by really, really irresponsible ownership. This has led to points deductions and relegation, threatening the very future of the club. Reading fans have had to suffer an impossible emotional rollercoaster for more than three years. We hope there is now some light at the end of the tunnel.

To explain our story, I should say that Reading, like many other English clubs, was owned by a responsible local owner who had the best interests of the club at heart. I pay tribute to Sir John Madejski and all those who worked with him, and to other Reading players and managers. Dai Yongge bought the club in 2017, and while things started out well, with investment in the new training ground, that quickly changed and Mr Dai appeared to be losing interest in the club. He was subject to winding-up petitions and fines after a series of financial issues, which led to severe points deductions and the club being relegated to league one. Things went from bad to worse in the 2023-24 season, and it seemed that the future of club was in doubt. Thankfully, Mr Dai finally announced that he was going to sell, but the process was drawn out for more than a year and a half. As I know from dealing with the EFL, the current rules mean that there is little the league can do—one sale even fell at the final hurdle last summer, to the agony of fans.

Despite that, our young team has performed brilliantly, and there are hopes of us reaching the play-offs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell said. It has been an emotional rollercoaster, and I again praise fans, but I would not want to wish this on any other club in England, or indeed anywhere in the world. I urge Members from across the House to rethink their position and

consider how an effective regulator would have prevented this awful situation, which we have had to suffer for far too long.

9.8 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I am pleased to support the Bill, which will protect our football clubs and the heritage of our game. My club Burton Albion, the Brewers, which plays in league one—that position will hopefully be secured under the stewardship of Gary Bowyer—is fully in support of the Bill. We are looking forward to our match against the Secretary of State's Wigan side; I know that she will want to wish us luck.

It is fitting that one of the key measures in the Bill is designed to protect the heritage of English football, given that Burton Albion will mark its 75th anniversary on 5 July.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Dudley FC, which is one of the oldest teams in the west midlands, is so important and integral to the community. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need funding through the entire football pyramid, and not just for the elite?

Jacob Collier: Absolutely. Our club was formed at Burton town hall, with the name Burton Albion chosen through overwhelming support on a show of hands. From the humble beginnings of non-league football, in 2016 the Brewers would go on to be promoted to the championship. It was a remarkable achievement for a club rooted firmly in the local community, built not on vast fortunes but on good management, the strong leadership of Ben Robinson and loyal support. The club touches the lives of so many local people, and like so many Burtonians, it is a key part of my family story, too. My very first football game was at Eton Park with my dad, and one of my first jobs was pulling pints behind the bar in the ground, which set me up for politics, as I served fans in the away end, so I got used to dealing with difficult people, like Derby fans.

The town fondly remembers the FA cup in 2006, when the mighty Brewers took on Sir Alex Ferguson's Manchester United, and despite Rooney and Ronaldo coming on in the 58th minute, they still could not stop the Brewers. Like thousands of Burtonians, as a nine-year-old, I made the trip to the rematch at Old Trafford, and came back on the coach having lost 5-0. It was not to be, but it was a proud part of our town's story. These memories live on in our town and show the power of football to bring people together. That is key to this Bill, which recognises that football clubs are not businesses to be brought, traded or asset-stripped at will; they are living parts of our communities.

Improving fan engagement is a key part of the Bill. BAFC already works hard on that through the fan advisory board and the Burton Albion Community Trust. The recently formed Brewers Union adds a splash of black and amber, and loud cheers, wherever the Brewers go. The Pirelli would not be what it is without the fans, and Burton Albion already goes way beyond what is required in this Bill. The work of the Burton Albion Community Trust, which was a strong focus of Ben Robinson as chairman, continues to touch so many lives on and off the pitch, from vaccinating local people to mental health support within our communities. That

is not to mention the grassroots teams that the club supports across Burton and Uttoxeter, of which there are too many to mention.

The fabric of our town would be totally changed were it not for Burton Albion. I am privileged to represent such a community-rooted club that uplifts lives every day. This Bill protects clubs like Burton Albion, it strengthens the future of the national game, and it puts communities back where they belong: at the heart of football. Up the Brewers.

9.12 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): For places like Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, football is more than just a game; it is a source of pride, identity and belonging. Whether it is the roar at Blundell Park or the celebrations at the Linden Club, football unites our communities in a way few other things can. That is why my local clubs and I warmly welcome the steps that this Labour Government have taken to strengthen the Football Governance Bill and ensure the future of our national game.

Football is nothing without its fans. The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) is not in his place, but he has previously been on record saying that this is

“a good Bill to crack on with”.

He said it had been pursued

“crucially, for the future of football fans. They are the ones we have been thinking about through the whole process.”—[*Official Report, Football Governance Public Bill Committee*, 23 May 2024; c. 244.]

What on earth has happened? The Conservatives say it is another Bill, but it is not. It is their Bill with a few additions. The Bill has not been changed. They have shifted their position and it is a shameful situation. By putting supporters back at the heart of decision making, this Bill honours the passion and loyalty that sustain clubs up and down the country.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I thank my Member of Parliament for giving way. She talks about strengthening the Bill even further, but does she acknowledge that the fans at Blundell Park would not blame a supposedly independent regulator, like Ofwat, Ofgem or whatever, but would blame the politicians, if the regulator made a decision about potential investment in the club that they did not like?

Melanie Onn: The hon. Gentleman will know that politicians are blamed for just about everything anyway, so it will not make much difference. This is a very tightly drafted Bill, and the role of the regulator is detailed in it. That is what the regulator will have to follow, and those are the parameters that have been set.

While the very top of English football enjoys huge success, the financial foundations for many clubs in lower leagues are far too fragile. Bad ownership, financial mismanagement and unfair wealth distribution have pushed too many proud institutions to the brink. This Labour Government are taking action. We are delivering on our manifesto promise—and, in fact, the Conservatives’ manifesto promise—to establish a regulator to protect clubs, ensure sustainability and empower fans, in stark

contrast to the Conservatives, who are now anti-regulation, preferring the continuation of the current wobbly, unfair system. They are taking a hands-off approach, reversing their previous policy and backing the elite premiership clubs at the expense of those in lower leagues.

Our local clubs are adored, and with good reason. We have so much to celebrate. Cleethorpes Town FC have made my community proud, having been crowned champions with three games to spare, and securing their well-deserved promotion. Meanwhile, Grimsby Town are pushing hard for the play-off—although I remember that I said the same thing during the Westminster Hall debate, and then we lost, so we are still trying. I hope that Members will give us a cheer on Saturday if we get through. The success of these clubs is not limited to the pitch: initiatives such as Grimsby Town Foundation generate more than £4 million in social value in our area, which shows that clubs are not businesses but engines of hope for communities. We must never again allow them to be treated as disposable assets. They belong to the fans, and to the towns that they represent. The Bill introduces the protections that are needed if local clubs are to thrive and continue to bring enjoyment for generations to come.

9.16 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): In my constituency, we are lucky to have Mansfield Town as our local club. The Bill will give us an independent football regulator, and new rules to protect our clubs and empower fans. Pro-growth and light-touch, it will help to ensure that all clubs throughout the football pyramid thrive. While football is certainly an incredible sport, full of excitement, it has the power to do more than just provide entertainment. Our local football clubs are often a focal point for our community, and it is important for us to nurture and support that in our constituencies. I am pleased to say that Mansfield Town do just that. I wholeheartedly support their work, which helps to break down barriers to opportunity, and as a local MP, I will do whatever I can to support their civic-minded aspirations. I hope that Mansfield Town will continue to go from strength to strength over the coming years.

I will be proud to vote for a Bill that delivers on our manifesto commitment to establish the independent football regulator and a new set of rules to protect clubs, empower fans, and keep clubs at the heart of their communities. Football would be nothing without its fans, and this strengthened Bill will put them firmly back at the centre of the game. The fans, the board and the management of Mansfield Town football club have told me that they welcome the Government’s commitment to delivering this important legislation, and I thank the Secretary of State for bringing it to the House and giving us all an opportunity to support it.

9.18 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): In my constituency, we are and will always be proud of our club, Morecambe FC. Just one week ago, Morecambe lost a match and, unfortunately, confirmed our relegation. I was gutted, but I know that we will come back fighting, because resilience runs through our town, our fans and our club. In Morecambe, we have the best fans in the country. When we went to Chelsea, we overwhelmed

[Lizzi Collinge]

the home fans a little bit. I do not think they were expecting that level of noise, energy and passion from a club that went on to get beaten 5-0.

The truth is that Morecambe FC and its fans have been badly let down by poor ownership, which has damaged our club. Throughout the difficulties, the Shrimps fans' trust and the board have done an incredible job of holding the club together. They have shown what it really means to care about a club. Despite their efforts, they have been kept at arm's length while ownership talks drag on, leaving the club stuck in limbo and going from transfer window to transfer window. That is why the Secretary of State and I directly promised Morecambe before the election that we would deliver an independent football regulator. This Bill, which delivers the regulator, will strengthen suitability tests for owners and directors. It will introduce a licensing system to make sure that clubs are run responsibly. It will give fans a proper voice in how their clubs are managed. These are crucial steps to fix English football.

This Bill started in the last Parliament and was brought forward by a Conservative MP, Dame Tracey Crouch. It had cross-party support but, surprisingly, the Conservatives seemed to have spun on a dime. Their leader said that introducing a football regulator would be "a waste of money", but one only has to look at the wider social, cultural and economic benefits of football to know that this is simply not true. Grassroots football gets people into the game. On matchdays, football brings people to pubs, cafés and shops in the area. Clubs often provide facilities for schools, youth teams and community groups. In my constituency, we have the Morecambe FC Community Foundation, which works with young people, elders, veterans and others. It is a really important local organisation.

Clubs such as Morecambe are part of the fabric of our towns, and part of what gives us our identity. They bring pride, passion and unbeatable matchday traditions, and in Morecambe we bring the best pies to football. Let us back this Bill's sensible, light-touch regulation, and back clubs and their fans, who mean so much to so many towns.

9.21 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister and the Secretary of State on bringing forward this Bill. My love affair with football started with World Cup Italia in 1990: David Platt volleying the ball into the net in Bologna, giving us a 1-0 win over Belgium; John Motson's fantastic commentary; Gazza's tears; and Gary Lineker saying, "Have a word". I was stunned. Thirty-five years later, I watch my resident Max Stokes's "Villa On Tour" videos as he tours the country following the Villa, and my life is more reflective of Colin Firth's character in "Fever Pitch" than an MP.

Why is this Bill so important? Frankly, despite the Conservatives not recognising it, the regulation and governance of football is not working. My football club, Aston Villa, almost had to sell car parks to pay a bill to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs five or six years ago because of poor governance. The European super league, led by the big six—or the big five and Spurs

—tried to ruin European qualification. During covid, we had the sight of premier league football clubs going with their begging bowls to the Government to get through, because they would not pay their own staff. We have had the collapse of Bury FC, and we have heard stories about Reading—and other clubs are to follow.

As someone who travelled the football pyramid as a player, I can tell the House that Macclesfield Town do not exist anymore, so the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) was inaccurate in what he said. I am sure he did not mean to be, but Macclesfield Town went bust. Macclesfield FC went to the bottom of the pyramid, and it is a new club.

Football clubs are about more than just what happens in 90 minutes on the pitch. They are where I spend time with my dad, and where it is still okay to hug and kiss strangers. My boy's first word was "Mama", but I was never prouder than when he said, "Up the Villa!" In coming to the estate today, I almost fell foul of the security guard, Stuart, who said that we were not allowed to wear offensive clothing—I was wearing a Villa shirt.

This Bill is important. It is a light-touch Bill; it is not major. Neither the Secretary of State nor the regulator will be telling Unai Emery to buy Marcus Rashford, or telling Wes Edens to invest in the north stand, although I wish he would. The Bill meets the challenges that we face as an industry, as clubs and as communities. It stops terrible things, like Cardiff City having to wear red because their owner thought it played better in China, or asking Wimbledon fans to go to Milton Keynes and lose their FA cup.

This should have been a policy that unified both sides of the House. I think Geoffrey Howe's cricket analogy applies to the way the poor shadow Secretary of State defended today. Like Mrs Thatcher, he broke his bat before he came out.

9.24 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): This Bill enables Labour Members to fulfil our manifesto commitment to make this the best place in the world to be a football fan. As outlined by the Secretary of State, the Bill will put in place a new set of rules to protect clubs, empower fans and keep clubs where they belong—at the heart of their communities. It is even more pleasing to be here after a successful trip to Wembley to see Crystal Palace overcome Aston Villa, with apologies to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore). However, it was particularly pleasing to hear Birmingham City fans providing a great rendition of "Glad All Over" at their match the following day.

My long experience as a Crystal Palace fan, which has seen the club go into administration twice in a little over 25 years—in 1999 and 2010—has shown me the need for change, but this is not really about the larger clubs such as Palace. It is about the fact that the system is not working for clubs further down the pyramid, where the risk of takeover and abuse by malicious owners is even higher. We have heard from Members across the House about the clubs—Reading, Bury, Southend, and the litany goes on—that have been brought low by poor ownership. Since 1992, over 60 clubs have gone into administration. Notoriously, we have seen

club owners simply uprooting clubs and moving them around the country, and changing badges and shirt colours without fans being able to prevent it.

Over my time as a fan and since being elected to represent Dartford in this place, I have seen the power of football clubs, not just as sporting organisations, but as the vessels for community identity and aspiration. They are often the most important local institution that binds a community together, and that gives a borough, town or city a sense of itself and of its potential. Dartford football club is an integral part of our town, having been founded over 130 years ago by members of the Dartford working men's club and saved by its fans in the early 1990s. I wish the manager, Ady Pennock, and the players the very best of luck in their play-off match on Wednesday against Cray Valley in their bid to return to national league south, where they belong.

We all agree that football clubs must be solvent and well run, and every fan will dream of their club seeing success on the field, but they are and must remain so much more than companies competing in a marketplace. That is why the protection and regulation provided by this Bill are so vital. I hope that all Members of the House, for the sake of communities up and down the country, will support the Bill tonight.

9.27 pm

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Football is more than a game, and our clubs are more than corporate assets. The game is part of our national identity and heritage—from jumpers for goalposts to the local pub team, all the way up to the elite standard of the premier league.

We rightly talk about the premier league, which is a fantastic export from this country, but in my speech I want to celebrate the English football league, which has also provided immense entertainment, as well as having social and cultural value for communities up and down the country. It is home to some of the biggest clubs around the world, including the mighty Crewe Alexandra. Who, for example, can forget Nick Powell's screamer for Crewe Alexandra against Cheltenham in the 2012 league two play-off final? I am sure that the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) has not forgotten it, but if Members want to look it up, I recommend that they do. It demonstrates perfectly why football truly is the greatest sport on the planet. It is unfortunate that I am making this speech merely days after Port Vale, our nearby rivals, secured promotion to league one. I congratulate them on that achievement, but I cannot say that I wish them well.

Our national game is about more than winning trophies and signing world-class players. The game is part of the social fabric that binds our communities together. It is the week in, week out trips to Gresty Road with family or friends, the few pints beforehand, and the buzz from singing your club's songs on the terraces. As custodians of these traditions, we have a duty to ensure we secure a sustainable future for the game we know and love, not just for elite clubs but the entire football pyramid. That is why I recommend, as a key provision in the Bill, the independent football regulator, which will have at its heart these objectives: the protection of clubs and cultural assets; the empowerment of fans; and financial sustainability for our beautiful game.

I conclude by thanking the Government for bringing the Bill back to the House. I support the measures in it to safeguard and protect one of our biggest cultural institutions.

9.30 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak as the proud Member of Parliament for Rushcliffe, the home of Nottingham Forest football club.

Many will know that Forest fans have had a season to remember. It has been brilliant to watch the men's team performing so strongly in the premier league and I am hopeful that a place in Europe beckons, but we must also remember our women's team. I congratulate them on their double success, lifting both the FA women's national league cup and the northern premier division. Of course, there was also huge excitement this weekend as the men's team reached the FA cup semi-final. Many local fans made the journey to Wembley and although the team were beaten by Manchester City, a club with one of the deepest squads in the world, Forest gave a fantastic account of themselves. I am sure many neutrals would have liked the City goal to have been just a touch bigger—perhaps that is something the Minister can think about as part of the Bill! It was a performance full of spirit and determination. I have no doubt that under the club's ambitious leadership team, it will build on that going forward. The club's commitment on and off the pitch has made our community in Rushcliffe immensely proud.

Football matters deeply to communities like mine. It is about not just matchdays but civic pride, shared memories, and a sense of belonging that spans generations and communities. Clubs like Nottingham Forest are part of our national story. Who can forget Forest's wins in Europe in 1979 and 1980? But these clubs are also part of the everyday fabric of places like Rushcliffe. With the prospect of Nottingham Forest being back in Europe, I can assure everybody that the contribution the game makes to our local economy cannot be overstated. That is why the Football Governance Bill matters so much.

Football has long been one of the UK's great success stories—it is one of our great exports, watched by billions around the world, generating jobs, investment and opportunities up and down the country—but too often we have seen how fragile the foundations can be. That is why I think the establishment of a football regulator will change things for good. It will protect the financial soundness of clubs, secure the systemic financial health of the football pyramid and safeguard the heritage that fans treasure. That is why I welcome the Bill. I applaud Ministers for bringing it forward and I will back it wholeheartedly.

9.33 pm

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): My constituents in Gateshead have, by and large, been subjected to a lot of dodgy owners in their time. The vast majority of my constituents are Newcastle fans. Many people remember the Mike Ashley era: the grotesque nightmare for Newcastle fans of seeing their football stadium named the Sports Direct at St James' Park Arena, or being sponsored by Wonga. Even as a Sunderland fan, I found that pretty appalling. But

[Mark Ferguson]

Sunderland were not spared the nightmare of bad ownership. We had owners who used parachute payments—as chronicled in the Netflix nightmare show, “Sunderland ’Til I Die”—to buy a football club. I am therefore delighted to hear that parachute payments are within the scope of the Bill. Frankly, for me, that is a unique selling point of the Bill, not a downside.

A lot of my constituents also support Gateshead, which has had challenges with ownership as well. In 2019, Gateshead football club faced a winding up order, and the club was preserved only thanks to football fans including Neil Pinkerton, now Gateshead’s chairman, and Gateshead Soul. I say a big thank you to them, because it is thanks to Gateshead Soul and the current fan ownership of Gateshead football club that I still get to go to Gateshead matches with my dad, and that my son might one day be able to come and watch Gateshead matches with his dad. Ultimately, that is what football and football clubs are about: a sense of place and community.

Gateshead has faced a huge number of challenges as a football club. Somewhat infamously in the town, we were relegated in 1960, the last time we were in the football league, but we were not relegated on the basis of sporting merit; instead, we were voted out of the football league. Although there were two teams below us—Oldham and Hartlepool—it was Gateshead who were chosen to be kicked out of the football league. I am pleased to say that if Gateshead are successful in beating Southend this weekend and then progress through the play-offs, we will hopefully have an opportunity this season to right 65 years of wrongs and get back into the football league. However, it should never have happened in the first place. It is something that matters a great deal not just to me, but to my wider community.

Opposition Members talk about how football clubs do not disappear, but I am afraid that is simply wrong. The Gateshead who were relegated, Gateshead AFC, disappeared in the 1970s; they were soon followed by Gateshead United, who also disappeared in the 1970s. Those football clubs do not exist any more. The current Gateshead FC is not the same football club as before. That is very important to me because my grandfather, Allen Forster, played for the original Gateshead in the 1950s. In the limited time I have left, I hope the House will allow me to talk about him, because he was passionate about football. He was not only a professional footballer but, in his later years, the secretary of the Northumberland FA.

My hon. Friends the Members for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) and for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) have talked about dementia among footballers. My granddad was a footballer who headed big, heavy, wet leather footballs. He did not care—he would not have it any other way. He was a defender; that is what he did. In his later years, he began to forget things. I once found him driving around the village where I grew up, unable to remember how he got there or even how to drive his car back. It has a profound impact. I will never be able to prove that it was anything to do with heading footballs in the 1950s, but it is what I have always suspected, so I think it is important that it is part of our debate.

I thank the Secretary of State for bringing forward the Bill, which will be a huge benefit to teams like Gateshead.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): It is unusual for me to say this, but, having heard about Southampton earlier, we shall conclude with Portsmouth.

9.37 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): What an honour that is, Madam Deputy Speaker. I start with an apology for my over-zealous intervention earlier and refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and by taking the opportunity to congratulate both Portsmouth’s men’s and women’s teams on securing championship status this season.

As a football fan, and as a Pompey fan in particular, life is a rollercoaster. The men’s team’s history is one of highs and lows. We are one of seven teams in the country to have won all football leagues, but we have also faced relegation—not just because of performance on the pitch, but because of financial instability and docked points. Pompey’s troubles were a combination of ownership that was poor at best and corrupt at worst. With a sell-off of assets and debt, our story is incredibly complex, with a series of owners including some who had international arrest warrants issued for them, others who had their assets frozen by Government, and one who no one could prove actually existed and was never met by the EPL prior to taking over. Club assets were sold off to other companies, but it was not clear if the club ever received those moneys, and items of important historical heritage were just chucked in the skip. The club ran up debts in excess of £100 million, including debts to local businesses and charities, and was basically written off after multiple administrations. This all took people’s love of our club for granted and cost people their livelihoods.

At one point, Pompey was such a toxic club that the only people willing to save and own it were its fans, and we began the rebuild. Fans and communities are the people hit the hardest, and often the people who pick up the pieces and rebuild, which is why they should be central to football regulation.

A new regulator can protect against poor ownership; force clubs to control their finances better, working to prevent the build-up of unsustainable debt; ensure that we have a competitive pyramid and a fairer distribution; prevent the sale of key assets; and ensure that fans are at the centre of the national game. A new regulator can protect clubs like mine, who are the beating heart of my community. Pride is everywhere in football. I am proud of my football club, and I am proud to have been a season ticket holder for more than 30 years at Portsmouth football club. I am proud to be an elected member of Pompey Supporters Trust. I am proud that our football club is now owned by people who genuinely love and are invested in Fratton Park, and I am proud to be in a Government who once again deliver on a manifest commitment.

I am also proud to have written a joint letter with Andy Cullen, Portsmouth’s chief executive, to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, in favour of the Bill and to invite them both to see how our club has risen from the ashes and is truly at the heart of our community. I am proud to back the Bill, and I am proud to be a football fan. For all fans, I am proud of the Bill.

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

9.40 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I put on record my thanks to all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions and everyone who has engaged with the process outside the Chamber. Like in politics, in football there is always a risk of scoring an own goal, and the Government have just done that with this Bill. It is plain common sense that a Labour donor and a key crony cannot lead an independent football regulator. It is yet another spectacular own goal by this Labour Government—so bad that one has to question whether match fixing is in play.

Is that highly controversial appointment the reason that it has taken so long for Labour to bring the Bill back to this place? For months, this Labour Government have held the ball in the corner, counting down the clock as the Prime Minister enjoys his free prawn sandwiches in a suit paid for by Lord Alli in his free box at Arsenal. So delayed is the Bill that Liverpool have already won the premier league, Leeds and Burnley have already been promoted to the premier league, the Toon Army have ended their long wait for a trophy, Birmingham and Wrexham have been promoted to the championship and a Labour MP has been sent off for punching a constituent in the street.

Introducing the Bill in the other place was an attempt to avoid the issue here for as long as possible, and the question that fans across the country will want an answer on is why? Was it because of Labour Members' entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests or because they would not know a football if it hit them in the face?

We Conservatives put fans first by launching the independent fan-led review of football governance, which focused on the long-term sustainability of the game. The review stated that this area of regulation should in time be returned to the Football Association. Having spoken to a great many football fans across the country and in my constituency, I can say with confidence that they would agree even more now that Labour is trying to directly interfere in English football.

As we have heard, the Government are putting our football clubs' participation in UEFA-licensed competitions at risk. Does the Minister recognise that one particular area of concern stems from one of UEFA's fundamental requirements, which is that there should be no Government interference in the running of football? Those are not my words but those of UEFA. Reports also suggest that UEFA has made it clear that it has specific rules to guarantee the autonomy of sport and fairness of sporting competition, the ultimate sanction for which would be excluding any federation from UEFA and teams from competition. Are the Labour Government prepared to be the reason that English football clubs risk being banned from the champions league, the UEFA league, the conference league, the super cup or—even worse—national competitions?

Moreover, UEFA, like the Conservative party, reportedly has concerns about scope creep from the Government's regulator. Our Bill intended that the regulator would oversee the long-term financial sustainability of clubs and help protect fans and heritage assets. However, this new Bill makes it more likely that, once established, the

Government's regulator may expand its mandate beyond those areas and amount to Government interference. If Labour has nothing to hide, it should publish the letters.

There are already obvious ways in which the Government's regulator will increase its own scope. The Minister in the other place was unable to provide a clear answer to questions asked on the following two matters. First, on a concern raised with me by serious and senior football people, where does the Government's new Bill leave Newcastle United's Saudi majority owners in relation to the regulator's powers to investigate club owners? Are the Government saying to all those Newcastle fans who have seen cup glory for the first time in a generation that that will have to stop? Where will the Labour Government's interference end? Labour and Liberal Democrat peers have voted down Conservative protections for such investment, risking the withdrawal of billions of pounds in investment from clubs.

Fans will have heard the comments today from MPs about scope creep in the ownership test. Could the Minister also clarify where this will leave clubs that are involved in multi-club models? For example, Manchester City head a worldwide group of partner clubs, and in 2023 Chelsea acquired a majority stake in the French league 1 club Strasbourg. How will the regulator assess these clubs? Will they assess the whole ownership group, in which case they suddenly become an international football regulator, or will they assess only clubs in England, in which case the super-wealthy clubs will simply hide losses in other jurisdictions, as other Members have pointed out. This could directly impact the flourishing women's game, given the multi-club model in English football.

The own goal is already so much bigger than this place and politics. We on this side of the pitch understand football and we know why the independence of a football regulator is so important. The Labour Government do not. Apart from their donor, this Government already have 38 civil servants working on their regulator, making it clear that there is already political and Government interference in the function of football. This legislation and the Government's action in proposing their own donor, David Kogan, as the chair explicitly and deliberately compromise the FA's autonomy as the primary regulator of football in England. It is also clear that this compromises the competitiveness of English football in its purest form: using your jumpers for goalposts in the local park and standing on the terraces with family and friends to support your local club.

We cannot lose sight of the business side of professional football and the delicate international ecosystem that sees fans from around the world enjoying English football. For example, only a handful of owners in the premier league are actually English these days. This country is a football global powerhouse, and every single one of us benefits, with billions of pounds for the economy, investment in towns and cities across the country and tens of thousands of jobs. A phenomenal export, our beautiful game is watched across the world, with the premier league a true British success story that attracts the most fans and the best players and managers. The EFL and the national league are also fantastic competitions enjoyed by many across the country.

Football clubs up and down the pyramid are at the heart of our communities and are a force in many people's lives, so much so that they even have the ability

[Mr Louie French]

to split family loyalties. That is the case in my Old Bexley and Sidcup constituency, where historically you tend to be either a Millwall or a Charlton supporter. But as any football fan will know, competition across the world is rising fast, not just across Europe but in America, the far east and, of course, the new Saudi league, all of whom want a slice of the premier league's success. Let's be honest today: if this Labour regulator had been created many years ago, the premier league and all the benefits that Labour talks about would not exist. Let's be honest with the fans about that.

I understand that the premier league is the first and only domestic competition in the United Kingdom where the international media rights strip out those of the domestic rights deals, and the Government are hitting it hard. As we have heard, the premier league alone will be hit across the course of this Parliament by £250 million of costs by this Labour Government's Budget of broken promises. All clubs will see their costs increase, first from the Chancellor's tax rises and secondly from the ever-increasing amount of red tape introduced by this Government and exemplified by this Bill. Football might have changed over the years, but the Labour party has not.

A Bill touted as reducing costs for fans does nothing of the sort. In fact, plain as day, it will increase the costs for every fan across the country. The Government can stand at the Dispatch Box today but they know full well that this regulator will increase the cost on fans, so much so that Labour peers voted against an amendment that would have disclosed the true cost of this regulator on football ticket prices. What are the Government trying to hide? I ask the Minister: why is she blocking transparency over ticket prices? Not one Labour MP has been able to say how their regulator will reduce ticket prices for fans across this country.

I will conclude, as I am conscious of time and want to give the Minister a chance to speak. This shameful Labour Government have once again put their party first—cronies over clubs, favours over fans, greed over the beautiful game. It seems that the Government have taken inspiration from John Barnes and taken his lyrics too literally when he sung,

"They'll always hit you and hurt you".

I am sure he did not mean that the Government should hit fans with increased ticket prices and hurt English football. The Conservative party is under new leadership and will not shy away from telling the fans the truth. Labour has shamefully cut grassroots sport funding across the country, including the Lionesses fund, and its regulator will mean even higher ticket prices for fans at every level of the game. As every Conservative knows,

"The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people's money."

We are calling full time on Labour's shameless power grab over English football, which will certainly see them relegated in the minds of voters and put English football at major risk internationally.

9.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I would like to return to the substance of the Bill. English football is the envy of the world. It is one of our greatest exports,

watched by billions globally with some of the most exciting players, clubs and stories in any league. The premier league, the EFL and the national league contribute billions to our economy, support thousands of jobs and provide the infrastructure that supports the next generation of sporting talent.

Despite the global success of English football, nothing can disguise the underlying fragilities of the game. Too many fans have watched on as their club sells their stadiums, changes colours or collapses under malicious ownership. Since 1992, over 60 clubs have gone into administration, and expert analysis suggests the financial picture across the pyramid is worsening, not improving. For each club that fails, there is a devastating knock-on impact for local communities. Indeed, these clubs are more than just businesses; they lay at the heart of communities up and down the country, steeped in history and providing sources of identity and pride across our towns, cities and villages. I have seen that at first hand when visiting clubs across the country—from Southend United to Everton, from Barnsley to Brighton. Those fans deserve to focus on what is happening on the pitch rather than off it.

Of course, it was the previous Government that launched a fan-led review into football governance. That review, led by the former Conservative Sports Minister Dame Tracey Crouch—I pay tribute to her for her tireless work on this topic—identified the need for an independent football regulator. Of course, it was the previous Government that published their Bill to do just that. It fell due to the election, when Members on both sides of this House stood on election manifestos that committed to bringing forward a regulator again.

Ultimately, the purpose of the Bill is simple: it introduces a new light-touch regulator for the game intended to cover the top five levels of men's football. At a basic level, the regulator will require just three things of clubs: be a fit and proper owner, have a sensible business plan and consult the fans. It will of course be applied proportionately.

Several Members across the House have highlighted the experience of their local clubs with rogue owners, including my hon. Friends the Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), for Blackpool South (Chris Webb), for High Peak (Jon Pearce), for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas), for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) and for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin). I know that many other Members would have liked to contribute to the debate.

I turn to financial distribution. I want to be clear that a football-led solution is the preferred outcome. The regulator's primary focus will be ensuring that clubs have a suitable custodian and are run sustainably. Distribution should primarily be a matter for leagues themselves, but if a football-led solution cannot be reached, the regulator will be ready to step up if required. As a last resort, it can facilitate a solution. This backstop mechanism will only be used if football needs it, and it will be underpinned by the "State of the game" report, which will inform the regulator's work for a comprehensive review of the financial health of football.

I turn to some of the other issues raised in the debate. A number of Members rightly paid tribute to their own grassroots clubs, and I have seen the contribution in my

constituency of Barnsley South. Grassroots football is the foundation on which the football pyramid is built. It is not in scope of the Bill, but a few weeks ago we announced further investment. I was of course pleased to visit Basingstoke, and my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) also raised that point specifically. The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) also mentioned it.

A number of Members mentioned concussion. That issue is not covered by the Bill, but the Secretary of State and I will meet families shortly. I have heard the points that they have made.

The Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dineneage), rightly highlighted how some of the changes that we have made reflect the previous Committee's report, whether with regard to fans or foreign policy. She also pointed out that we could ask 10 different people about parachute payments and get 10 different answers, but we believe it is right that they are not ruled out. She also spoke about how the chair of the regulator will need to demonstrate an understanding of the complex football ecosystem. I very much heard her comments about the appointment of the chair. We welcome the scrutiny that her Committee will provide—I know that she will be fair and robust. She asked for a cast-iron guarantee on clubs in trouble. We believe that the regulator would be able to prevent or mitigate similar situations, because regulation can be proactive. Real-time financial monitoring will allow early intervention if a club shows signs of distress. We heard so many examples in the debate, including Derby, Reading, Sheffield Wednesday and Blackpool.

I appreciate the support and contribution of the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), who raised a number of issues. I am happy to meet him to discuss them further. He asked specifically about commercial issues. The regulator will not intervene on commercial matters such as sponsorship. The Government will continue to follow the best available evidence on the impact of gambling sponsorship in sport to inform future decisions.

Let me be very clear: UEFA has confirmed in writing to the Secretary of State, and the FA confirmed directly to Members of the other place, that the Bill as drafted does not breach UEFA statutes. *[Interruption.]* The regulator will be operationally independent of Government and will not exert undue influence on the FA's ability to govern the game. The extent of its statutory powers and duties will simply not allow it to do so. Conservative Members call for private correspondence to be published. How many letters from FIFA and UEFA were published by their Government? None.

Let me address the reasoned amendment. It is disappointing but not surprising that the Conservatives have tabled an amendment to kill the Bill. I will take some of those points in turn during the short time I have left. The Secretary of State has selected David Kogan as her preferred candidate for the role of chair of the independent football regulator. That follows a fair and open recruitment process that was run in line with the Government's code for public appointments. David brings a wealth of expertise from the sport and media industries, making him an outstanding candidate for the role.

Let me make a few things clear on the increased costs and regulatory burden for all English football clubs, particularly in the lower leagues. First, these are exactly the same levy provisions used in the previous Bill, which the Conservatives introduced. As they will know, the Government are not setting the levy charge. Given the requirements in the Bill, we expect any charges to be distributed proportionately. Those with the broadest shoulders will pay the most.

I challenge the suggestion that the proportionate costs of the levy should lead directly to increased ticket prices. Some clubs have spent more on the transfer fee for one player than the regulator is estimated to cost over several years. When the levy is distributed across clubs, no club big or small will be charged more than is fair or affordable, so passing the costs on to fans would not be proportionate. It is quite amazing that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), spoke about own goals. When I was in opposition, I heard him question the then Sports Minister—now the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew)—about how the Bill could go further. Indeed, I have spent hours with the right hon. Member, whom I like and respect. I know that he has had a difficult day.

Each Member here from across the House will have a football club in their constituency, whether in the grassroots or up in the premier league. All of our communities have a stake in this game and in the pyramid. I believe this Bill will protect and promote the sustainability of the game. I thank everyone who has contributed to the Bill, from the clubs and the leagues to the fans, and of course to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport officials.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to ensure that the sport we all love can be enjoyed for years to come by local fans and communities. It is the Labour party that is on the side of football fans. We are making good on our manifesto promise. Tonight we will deliver that change. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 74, Noes 337.

Division No. 178]

[9.59 pm]

AYES

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| Allister, Jim | Dewhirst, Charlie |
| Anderson, Lee | Dowden, rh Sir Oliver |
| Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>) | Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain |
| Andrew, rh Stuart | Fortune, Peter |
| Argar, rh Edward | Fox, Sir Ashley |
| Bacon, Gareth | Francois, rh Mr Mark |
| Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi | French, Mr Louie |
| Bedford, Mr Peter | Fuller, Richard |
| Blackman, Bob | Garnier, Mark |
| Bool, Sarah | Griffith, Andrew |
| Brandreth, Aphra | Griffiths, Alison |
| Burghart, Alex | Harris, Rebecca |
| Cartlidge, James | Hayes, rh Sir John |
| Chope, Sir Christopher | Hinds, rh Damian |
| Cleverly, rh Sir James | Hoare, Simon |
| Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey | Holden, rh Mr Richard |
| Cocking, Lewis | Hollinrake, Kevin |
| Costa, Alberto | Holmes, Paul |
| Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>) | Hudson, Dr Neil |
| Davies, Mims | Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy |
| | Johnson, Dr Caroline |

Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Lam, Katie
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McMurdock, James
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Rankin, Jack

Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Swann, Robin
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:
Rebecca Smith and
Rebecca Paul

Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farron, Tim
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Foody, Emma
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Harding, Monica
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Irons, Natasha
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne

Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Murray, Susan
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Paffey, Darren
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perteghella, Manuela

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Aquarone, Steff
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barron, Lee
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsara (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brewer, Alex
 Brickell, Phil
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia

Burgen, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chadwick, David
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chownes, Ellie
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Downie, Graeme
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum

Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Harding, Monica
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Irons, Natasha
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne

McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Murray, Susan
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Paffey, Darren
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perteghella, Manuela

Phillips, Jess
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sewards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Shannon, Jim
 Simons, Josh
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Jamie

Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Cameron
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote*
cast by Adam Jogee)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Kate Dearden

Babarinde, Josh
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barron, Lee
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote*
cast by Zarah Sultana)
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brewer, Alex
 Brickell, Phil
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chadwick, David
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh

Dickson, Jim
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dixon, Anna
 Dods, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Downie, Graeme
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farron, Tim
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Foody, Emma
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote*
cast by Anna Sabine)
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Harding, Monica
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Irons, Natasha
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
 That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 342, Noes 70.

Division No. 179]

[10.13 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy*
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Aquarone, Steff
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis

Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Murray, Susan
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha

Nichols, Charlotte
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Paffey, Darren
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Shannon, Jim
 Simons, Josh
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren

Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Cameron
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian

Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Kate Dearden

NOES

Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Burghart, Alex
 Cartledge, James
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Davies, Mims
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Hudson, Dr Neil

Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Lam, Katie
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McMurdock, James
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Stafford, Gregory
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James

Tellers for the Noes:
Rebecca Paul and
Rebecca Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

FOOTBALL GOVERNANCE BILL [LORDS]: PROGRAMME

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Football Governance Bill [Lords]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 26 June 2025.

- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

- (4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

- (5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

- (6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Keir Mather.*)

Question agreed to.

FOOTBALL GOVERNANCE BILL [LORDS]: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Football Governance Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State.—(*Keir Mather.*)

Question agreed to.

FOOTBALL GOVERNANCE BILL [LORDS]: WAYS AND MEANS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Football Governance Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

- (1) the charging of a levy by the Independent Football Regulator in connection with the exercise of its functions under the Act; and
- (2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Keir Mather.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

MEDICINES AND MEDICAL DEVICES

That the draft Medical Devices (Amendment) (Great Britain) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 3 March, be approved.—(*Keir Mather.*)

Question agreed to.

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Joe Morris be discharged from the Administration Committee and Kirsteen Sullivan be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Community Health: Manchester Rusholme

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

10.28 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise an issue that is incredibly important to me and increasingly pressing for my constituents. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for being here to respond to the debate.

The Government inherited a dire set of economic circumstances. Years of Tory funding cuts to local authorities and public services have been detrimental to communities, so I am pleased that the Labour Government have committed to handing power back to communities, as well as making commitments to reducing health inequalities. Disparities in community health and access to vital services are causing difficulties across the country, but they have had a disproportionate impact on my constituents.

My constituency of Manchester Rusholme is urban and incredibly diverse. I am proud to represent so many different communities. We also have many students and young people living in the constituency. Although we are discussing health inequalities, the issue goes far beyond health services. We need a wider debate about the many aspects that contribute towards our mental and physical health. As well as accessible and equal healthcare, that includes access to safe and clean local environments, stable work and income and secure and affordable housing. I will discuss the importance of those elements throughout the debate.

As Members know, I am passionate about protecting our local natural environments. We all know how beneficial fresh air and green spaces are to our health and wellbeing, but in Manchester, research shows that many have just 1 square metre of garden space. That means that turning parks and community green spaces into attractive outdoor environments is even more crucial. My constituency celebrates its diversity, and our parks are often where different cultures meet in exercise, play and enjoyment. We are lucky to have beautiful and historic parks such as Alexandra Park and Platt Fields Park.

Parks are also a space for those living in a city to escape high air pollution by acting as a carbon sink, absorbing and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. In Manchester, more than 1,200 people die a year as a direct result of toxic air, with babies, pregnant women, elderly people and people with respiratory illnesses most at risk. More than 54,000 children in Greater Manchester also suffer from asthma. We therefore must improve air quality in cities, including utilising public transport and making it easier and safer to travel by walking, wheeling or cycling. Without that, we risk isolating many people from society.

However, even parks are not safe from air pollution. While community green spaces should be an escape from damaging air pollution, evidence from Asthma and Lung UK suggests that less than 1% of the 43,000 public playgrounds in the UK meet guidelines set by the World Health Organisation. I have heard from young people in Ardwick about the air pollution near their school. In Ardwick Green Park, which is bordered by two main roads, children are at constant risk from the emissions just by playing outside. While we must improve

access to local parks, we also need to improve air quality more broadly to create truly safe and clean natural spaces.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I commend the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate forward? I spoke to him beforehand to get his thoughts. Does he agree that one of the great things that has happened is that the Minister in government has set aside planning for spaces where people can age well and live in an area designed for them to grow old? That is accelerating, including in Manchester Rusholme, to which he is referring, with some £1.5 billion of funding. That is welcome. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings, does he agree that along with the 1.5 million houses that the Government are committed to ensuring will be built, environmental areas must be set aside? Trees are the lungs of the world, and trees have to be part of this, and they need to be planted for the future.

Afzal Khan: I could not agree more with the hon. Member. We need to do more to ensure that there is clean air for everyone, because it is essential for each of us to survive.

Another significant obstruction to community health is extensive waste, fly-tipping and litter. Wards in my constituency are plagued by high levels of fly-tipping and a lack of awareness of how to dispose of waste safely and legally. Fly-tipping and litter are an eyesore for residents and cause problems within communities. Countless constituents have written to me about them.

Let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to the brilliant work done by locally led groups in my constituency to target these issues, including the Friends of Park groups, Moss Side Eco Squad, Upping It, and all those who individually “green” their alleyways and litter-pick. However, while being hugely beneficial to us all, their work should not be necessary. I have also been pleased to support the initiatives that the Government are already taking, such as the drink container deposit scheme, to encourage recycling. I thank my own local authority, Manchester City Council, for putting even more funds into dealing with fly-tipping this year to get to the root cause. We know that tackling this problem systematically is vital.

As well as being clean, green and tidy, our local environments must be safe, but high levels of knife violence have caused problems in Manchester for many years. Over the last three years, Greater Manchester police has recorded more than 2,000 crimes of possessing an “article with a blade or point”.

Knife crime has also led to the tragic deaths of numerous young people in recent years, sadly including some of my own constituents. We cannot continue to let our young people down by allowing them to fall into violence. I am relieved that the Home Secretary is taking this issue seriously, and has already banned the ownership of certain dangerous knives. I am also grateful for the work of community groups in my constituency such as Mero’s World, the Hideaway Youth Project, Youth on Solid Ground and Moss Side Millennium Powerhouse to raise awareness of the terrible reality of knife violence, make bleed packs more accessible for responsive action, and give young people a safe place to go. We

must work on preventive measures to stop knife violence devastating our communities: that must remain a top priority.

Poor standards of work, poor pay and job insecurity also contribute to low levels of community health. Job stability determines everything from a financial safety net to housing conditions, heating and eating nutritional food, but more than 13,000 people in my constituency are not in employment, which is more than the UK average. Nearly 14% of people rely on out-of-work benefits in Manchester, the eighth highest percentage in the country. As for those who are in work, more than 11% of people in Manchester are in low-paid employment, which is significantly higher than the national average. As we all know, low-paid work can damage both physical and mental health, increasing stress and anxiety levels, which are made worse by external factors such as the cost of living crisis. We also know that people from communities that experience racial inequality often have higher levels of unemployment than others. Those higher levels of unemployment and low-paid work in our area are detrimental to the general wellbeing of the community, and contribute to higher levels of poverty.

Furthermore, it is shocking that more than 47% of children in Manchester are living in poverty. That is the third highest proportion in the country. Growing up in poverty has an impact on childhood development, and plays a significant role in education and early-years experience. For example, children in the most disadvantaged areas are less likely to pass key GCSEs. Health Equals has found that children growing up in poverty are four times more likely than those from wealthier families to struggle with mental health issues by the time they are 11. This creates a worrying future for young people growing up in my constituency, who will be disproportionately affected by poor economic conditions. I am pleased that the Government are committed to breaking down those barriers that exist for young people. Children and young people cannot be forgotten in conversations about our local community, because they form a key group in our community who desperately need support that has previously been lacking.

A further issue that is fundamental to the health of our community is housing. Affordable, warm and safe housing should be a fundamental right, yet so many people are living without this necessity. In Manchester Rusholme, up to 40% of households privately rent—double the national average—yet over one in four privately rented homes across Manchester are non-decent. I am grateful for the Government's efforts to deliver on our promise to transform the rented sector through the Renters' Rights Bill, which will provide much-needed security for renters across the country.

I am proud to have such a diverse community living in my constituency, but no one should suffer due to their identity or background. For example, research shows that mixed-ethnicity households are more likely to live in houses with damp. Exposure to damp and mould can cause serious illnesses or worse, as we saw with the tragic death of Awaab Ishak. Given these inequalities, my constituents are disproportionately impacted by poor housing. Housing is a critical issue for my constituents, and takes up nearly 30% of all casework sent to me.

Housing in our area has become unaffordable and inaccessible, and is in poor condition. Outside the private rented sector, 28.5% of households in Manchester live

in social rented homes—one of the highest rates for authorities outside London. I will continue to work with housing associations to ensure that all my constituents are in good-quality social housing. Being on the waiting list for social housing can take years, denying access to families and individuals in desperate need. I thank Manchester city council for being proactive in investing in even more social housing across my constituency so that everyone can live a healthier life.

I have outlined the disparities in local environments, employment and housing, and their impacts on both individual health and community health. On the back of that, I know my colleagues will agree that where someone lives should not determine how long they live, but in Manchester Rusholme we have the 19th lowest life expectancy of all constituencies, at 77.2 years—seven years lower than the figure for the healthiest communities. This large disparity is unacceptable and truly highlights the problem facing the constituency. It acts as a motivator for me to improve community health in any way possible.

The wider health inequalities seen across the UK are also detrimental for my constituents in Manchester Rusholme. For example, women in my constituency are suffering due to regional inequalities; women in the north-west are less likely to be treated for mental health conditions than those in other regions, as there is a gap in treatment based on where people live. In Manchester, black, Asian and minority ethnic communities were disproportionately impacted by the covid pandemic. We know that many mental and physical health impacts have been proven to be caused by discrimination.

We cannot deny the increasing pressure of the mental health crisis in Manchester. Hospital admissions for mental health conditions have increased among those aged under 18, as have mental health absences from work. Looking at the health of our communities should first involve looking at the health of residents. Addressing health inequalities is crucial to wider community health, and I thank the Caribbean and African Health Network and the neighbourhood health champions for their hard work in this area. As the Darzi review outlined, vital health disparities exist in almost all aspects of care due to the impact of poverty and homelessness, and disparities between ethnicities and for those with learning disabilities. We must act urgently to ensure that no one is left behind, and that our health service and the factors contributing to our health are equitable.

Our local community greatly determines our overall health and wellbeing, as well as that of wider society, but poor standards in health, the environment, work and housing detract from that wellbeing. The impact of these issues on households cannot be overstated, and quality of life cannot remain a postcode lottery. I thank all the charities, organisations and volunteers in my constituency for working to improve our community health, but the weight of improving wellbeing for the constituents of Manchester Rusholme cannot rest solely on their shoulders. I am therefore calling for a cross-governmental community health strategy to tackle the unequal access to a good quality of life through health, local environments, housing and standards of work. I am interested to hear the Labour Government long-term plans to ensure that everyone can live happier and healthier lives. We have an opportunity and a duty to protect our local communities, and to encourage them to prosper and flourish, as they have so much to offer.

10.45 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Rusholme (Afzal Khan) on securing this important debate. Before I begin my remarks, I would like to pay tribute to some of the stellar charities that are working to reduce health inequalities: the Health Foundation, which is leading the way with its Health Equals mission; the People's Health Trust, which is providing funding and support to left-behind communities; and the BHA for Equality, which was founded in 1990 to address the lack of quality information and services for black communities in Manchester.

I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Public Health—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton)—but I am more than happy to take this debate because I recognise many of the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Rusholme mentioned from my own constituency. I am responding not just on behalf of the Government, but as an MP from a constituency with some of the highest levels of deprivation in the United Kingdom.

I agree with my hon. Friend that the levels of inequality between the better-off and worse-off in our country are a national scandal. Fourteen years of austerity measures and stagnant wages have disproportionately affected lower-income households, exacerbating both income and regional disparities. Places such as Manchester and Port Talbot have borne the brunt. The life expectancy for Mancunian men and women is significantly worse compared with their compatriots in the rest of England. A baby boy born in the Manchester royal infirmary can expect to live for just over 75 years, which is four years less than the English average. A baby girl born in Manchester can expect to live to the age of about 79 and a half, which is also four years less than in England as a whole.

My hon. Friend raises some issues that are not within my Department's remit, including housing, knife crime and fly-tipping, but I completely understand why he has done so, because the determinants of ill health are wide and it is much more than a single factor that predicts healthy life expectancy. The Government know that we cannot address the challenges we face in the north-west with each Department in Whitehall siloed one from another, so we are taking a whole-of-Government approach to tackling inequalities through our health mission. That is chaired by the Prime Minister, who is lending his weight and authority from the centre of Government.

We have a laser focus on addressing the social determinants of health in a truly strategic way, and addressing the wider determinants of health to improve healthy life expectancy for all, while halving the gap in healthy life expectancy between different regions of England. We are prioritising prevention, shifting more care into the community and intervening earlier in life to raise the healthiest generation of children in our history. Addressing healthcare inequity is a core focus of our 10-year health plan to ensure that the NHS is there for anyone who needs it whenever they need it. We have established 11 working groups to take forward policy development that will feed into the plan. That includes working groups focused on how care should be designed and delivered to improve healthcare equity, alongside ensuring that access to healthcare services is

effective and responsive. We look forward to updating the House once the plan is published in June.

Proximity to fast food outlets is strongly associated with obesity. Kids living in the most deprived communities are in proximity to twice the number of fast food outlets compared with wealthier areas. Nearly 3,500 schools across the country now have a major food outlet within 400 metres; that is 1,000 more schools than 10 years ago.

We have an outstanding mayor in Andy Burnham. Devolution gives him and other leaders in Greater Manchester the freedom and flexibility to set priorities locally. In December, the Government published the revised national planning policy framework for local authorities, which gave them stronger, clearer powers to block new fast food outlets near schools and where young people gather. This will stop the relentless targeting of children and young people by the fast food industry.

I am delighted that just last week, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill passed its Second Reading in the other place. Smoking is a scourge on deprived communities and contributes to poverty, ill health and a lower life expectancy. Britain is leading the world through landmark legislation to break the cycle of addiction and disadvantage by gradually ending the sale of tobacco products across the country. The Bill contains powers to extend the ban on smoking indoors to certain outdoor settings to reduce the harms of second-hand smoking, particularly around children and vulnerable people.

Over the past 14 years, a two-tier health system has emerged in our country. People who can afford it are increasingly going private to skip the queue, while those who cannot are left behind. We are determined to end two-tier healthcare in this country, so whether someone is the richest or the poorest person in Manchester, they get timely, quality treatment that is free at the point of use. Our elective reform plan will see more NHS patients able to choose to be treated in a private hospital, where there is capacity, paid for by the state. More capacity will be available for people in working-class areas of the country and for women stuck on waiting lists for gynaecological care. Where we can treat working people faster, we will, and we will make no apology for doing so—working-class patients in this country deserve the same choice, control and convenience as the wealthy expect—and I am delighted that waiting lists have been falling now for six months in a row.

The previous Labour Government did so much to reduce inequality: lifting millions of children out of poverty through Sure Start; giving a lifeline to working families through child tax credits; creating the minimum wage; and fixing the NHS after almost two decades of under-investment. It is a matter of profound regret that so much of that legacy has been undone over the past 14 years, but the people of Manchester don't just want us to look back in anger; they want us to get on with the job of building homes, fixing the NHS and putting more money in people's pockets. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister has spoken about the "class ceiling" that prevents children from getting ahead. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Rusholme to shatter the class ceiling that hangs above his constituency and mine.

Question put and agreed to.

10.52 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 28 April 2025

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

Scientific and Regulatory Procedures: Use of Dogs

4.30 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 705384 relating to the use of dogs in scientific and regulatory procedures.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. Let me begin by declaring an interest, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on phasing out animal experiments in medical research—I am keen to ensure that that is achieved sooner rather than later.

The petition, entitled,

“Ban immediately the use of dogs in scientific and regulatory procedures”,

was created by Maria Iriart, and as of today has almost 236,000 signatures, which is an incredible achievement. Maria is here today, and I thank her for coming along. The petition goes on to say:

“As a first step to end animal testing, we want an immediate ban for dogs. They are commercially bred in what we see as bleak and inhumane factory-like conditions. We believe there is evidence suggesting that dogs are left being unattended for extended periods in a Government-licensed establishment.

In 2023, 2,456 dogs were used in 3,749 scientific procedures, 734 were classified as causing severe or moderate harm. There were 2,593 procedures for regulatory purposes even though there is no UK legislation that mandates animal testing. These procedures can include oral gavage, when a tube is inserted into the dog’s throat, up to 3 times a day, to administer liquids to the stomach. There are studies questioning the reliability and human-relevant value of the outcomes of these tests.”

When looking at *Hansard* for other debates on animal testing—particularly testing on dogs—I found an interesting starting point in a debate in 1927 on the Protection of Dogs Bill. In that debate from almost a century ago, Lord Banbury was mentioned as quoting the eminent surgeon Sir Lambert Ormsby, who said:

“Experiments on dogs may now be discontinued. All that can be found out by physiological experiments for application to human beings has long since been discovered, and repetitions are unnecessary and cruel.”—[*Official Report*, 29 April 1927; Vol. 205, c. 1237.]

Yet, here we are, nearly 100 years later, discussing the very same issue.

An opinion poll conducted for the UK Government by Ipsos MORI in 2018 found that only 14% of the UK public feel that it is acceptable to use dogs for medical research to benefit people. This is unsurprising, as we know that dogs have high emotional and intellectual capabilities, and studies have found that they can feel empathy, sense sadness or fear and demonstrate genuine human bonding.

The UK Home Office regulator is intended to conduct assessments of the compliance of all licence holders, including on-site inspections, and enforces standards for the care and accommodation of all animals bred,

supplied or used for scientific purposes. To enforce the regulations, establishments are required to have dedicated individuals, including vets, with legal responsibilities for the care and welfare of animals, as well as an ethical review body.

The Government responded to the petition on 5 March 2025 to clarify that they do not agree to immediately ban the use of dogs for testing and research purposes in the UK. However, hopefully this debate will reignite that discussion and subsequent decisions.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I was visited by my constituent Clara, who brought this issue to my attention, and I was keen to participate in today’s debate. My hon. Friend has made two important points: one of which is that this process has no legislative basis and no public consent. I therefore hope that, when the Government listen to this debate, we can look at how to take action to ensure that man’s best friend is left alone as man’s best friend.

Irene Campbell: I absolutely agree with everything that my hon. Friend said.

It is important to note that the Labour manifesto pledge commits the Government to

“partner with scientists, industry, and civil society”

to phase out animals in medical testing. The Government also state:

“This is a long-term goal, and it will need further scientific and technical advancement and validation to reach this point”.

The group Understanding Animal Research supports the use of animal research currently in the UK. It says:

“In the UK, dogs are primarily used to find out how new drugs act within a whole, living body and whether new medicines are safe enough to test in humans... Their genome has been sequenced and... they are often used in genetic studies... Dogs are primarily used in regulatory research”

and as a secondary species, alongside rodents. The dogs are mostly tested for areas such as Duchenne muscular dystrophy, anti-rabies vaccines, heart research and veterinary medicine. Understanding Animal Research also states:

“Research dogs live in large enclosures together with their pack mates. Lab technicians look after the dogs and play with them every day. The dogs are fed and watered daily, and the environment (lights, temperature etc.) is controlled automatically. The cages are cleaned daily, and the space is big enough to have a toilet area separate from the bed and play area. Dogs are intelligent enough to keep these areas separate, and there’s plenty of space to allow them to do so. Because the dogs live together, their social needs are met by other dogs. Unlike pets, they do not require the constant company of humans.”

However, Animal Free Research UK disputes that quality of care and says:

“Applications for project licences to conduct animal experiments are very rarely refused. Answers to Written Questions”—

submitted in Parliament—

“indicate that over the past seven years, only one licence application has been rejected.”

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for making such a powerful speech. This morning I met Nutmeg, a lovely beagle. Does my hon. Friend recognise that a large proportion of the dogs who undergo medical scientific procedures are beagles—I believe 3,565 out of 3,770? Does she also

[Alice Macdonald]

agree that, if the Government will not commit right now to an immediate ban, we must at least have a clear timeframe for when such a ban may come into place?

Irene Campbell: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend said. Animal Research UK continued:

“Applicants are allowed to adjust and re-submit licence applications to enable them to be granted (for the last four years applications had a mean number of 2.55 iterations before they were granted).”

The Animals in Science Regulation Unit’s 2023 annual report stated that there were 169 cases of non-compliance with the law or licence conditions—only a 3% decrease from 2022. Those cases involved a total of 154,904 animals, representing an overwhelming 864% increase on 2022.

Beagles were used in a study conducted by AstraZeneca to test a new, more eco-friendly propellant for use in inhalers. The tests lasted up to 39 weeks and involved 72 beagles. The dogs were restrained by a tether and forced to inhale the gas for two hours each day through a mask fitted over their nose and mouth, which was held in place by a muzzle. Although the study states that the dogs had freely available access to water, it also states that water was withheld during the tests and for 16 hours overnight. That meant that the dogs went without water for at least 18 hours each day. At the end of the study, all the dogs were killed so that their tissues could be dissected for further study. The authors noted that the inhalers contribute only a small fraction of global hydrofluoroalkane emissions, so was that treatment of the dogs really justified?

In 2017, the Home Office released figures showing the 1.81 million additional animals were bred but not used for scientific procedures in Britain, but we had no additional data since then. Those 1.81 million animals included 97 beagles, but we have no idea what happened to those that were not used.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): We are a nation of dog lovers and animal lovers. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is widespread public support for setting out a road map for ending the use of animal testing, so that the very sad stories that she is describing can be left in the history books, where they belong?

Irene Campbell: I fully agree, and I will speak a little about that later.

Modern, non-animal methods give the best possible chance of securing medical progress, since they are not hampered by translating from one species to another. An estimated 92% of drugs fail in human clinical trials, even though they had passed pre-clinical tests, including animal tests. Just over 30% of those that pass are subsequently re-labelled with warnings of side effects not predicted by animal tests, and almost 10% are completely withdrawn from the market.

New non-animal methods, based directly on human biology, include the use of computer modelling and organ-on-a-chip technology, which can be much more relevant to the human body. I went on lab trip recently with the APPG on phasing out animal experiments in medical research to visit the Animal Replacement Centre of Excellence at Queen Mary University of London,

and I saw in person the pioneering work that is being done to provide medical breakthroughs without the use of animals.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a bit of a disconnect between the scientific possibility of non-animal alternatives and what is happening on the ground? For decades, there have been suggestions of ways that we can use non-animal alternatives, yet we are not using them. Will she also commend the work of Cruelty Free International, which is producing a new list that explains exactly how we could switch from one type of experiment to the other?

Irene Campbell: I fully agree with everything that my hon. Friend said, and I will speak about that in a minute.

A study published in *Communications Medicine* found that the non-animal liver-on-a-chip device was able to correctly identify 87% of drugs that carried a risk of liver toxicity in humans, despite having passed through animal safety tests. Another example is research at Edge Hill University, where scientists are developing a human cell model of the blood-brain barrier to study the link between irregular heartbeat and an increased risk of brain damage, stroke and dementia. Normally, large animals such as dogs would be used to study heart disease. This work will be relevant to patients and will provide a real case for phasing out testing on dogs.

Comprehensive analysis in a paper authored by Dr Jarrod Bailey found that dogs are highly inconsistent predictors of toxic responses in humans and that, when considering whether a compound should proceed to testing on humans, the predictions that dogs can provide are little better than those that could be obtained by chance or tossing a coin. A simple example is that some foods, such as grapes and chocolate, are poisonous to dogs, and some drugs that are safe for humans, such as ibuprofen, are highly toxic to dogs, even in small doses.

Animals are used in research because of their genetic similarity to humans, yet although we share up to 98% of our DNA with some animals, the small yet important differences make us distinct. There are many historical examples of deadly drugs that appeared safe in animal tests: thalidomide was tested safely on animals, but caused severe birth defects in thousands of babies, and the painkiller Vioxx was linked to thousands of heart attacks and deaths, despite cardio-protective results obtained in animal tests, including on dogs.

The current approach to alternatives to animal testing is to fund the development and dissemination of techniques that replace, reduce and refine the use of animals in research—more commonly known as the three Rs. However—in relation to the point made earlier—there is little funding for non-animal methods. The all-party parliamentary group on human-relevant science estimated that human-relevant, non-animal method funding

“represents between 0.2% and 0.6% of total biomedical research funding in the UK and ~0.02% of the total public expenditure...on R&D.”

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): On that point, the previous Government committed to doubling investment in this area. Would my hon. Friend, like me, welcome the current Government matching that, if not improving on it?

Irene Campbell: I fully agree.

Surely, we must consider reversing our priorities. This debate provides us with a prime opportunity to look at how to fund future testing in the UK. In 2023, the Department of Health and Social Care confirmed:

“There is no United Kingdom legislation that mandates animal testing.”

The regulatory guidelines do recommend that new drugs are tested on two species before moving to human trials, but the Department also stated that assessors will accept “data from a suitably validated model that has been demonstrated to be predictive...in lieu of animal data.”

So it is possible. In 2023, almost all regulatory tests on dogs were carried out to satisfy EU requirements, and only 12 were carried out to satisfy UK-only requirements. Cruelty Free International reports that animal tests continue to be commonly used even when validated alternatives exist.

In the USA, the Food and Drug Administration has released a new road map to reduce and replace animal testing in drug development and regulation, following the 2022 decision by the US Congress to pass the FDA Modernisation Act, which facilitates the use of non-animal methods for drug testing. On 10 April this year, the FDA announced that it is beginning to phase out animal testing for monoclonal antibody therapies, which will ultimately be followed by other drugs. Canada, Australia and European Union countries have all come up with road maps for ending animal testing; it really is high time for the UK to join them.

For the Government to stop issuing licences for experiments using dogs there must be a thorough overhaul of the licensing of animal experiments to ensure that the basic legal requirements to use non-animal methods wherever possible are properly enforced. Ending the use of dogs can be the first step in full transition to the cutting-edge human-specific methods that offer the best possible chance of advancing medical progress.

As I close, I want to mention this morning’s Radio 4 “Today” programme, where Understanding Animal Research and Cruelty Free International discussed this debate. A question asked during the interview was about what happens to dogs after the research. It was confirmed that they are euthanised and dissected to look at their lived experience. Strangely, after that hard-hitting discussion on the lives of laboratory dogs in the “Today” interview, just after the 9 am news the announcer advised that the programme coming up at 9.45 am, called “Wheels and woofs”, would look at disabled dogs living their best lives—something that a laboratory dog will never get to do. I look forward to hearing from other Members and to hearing the Minister’s comments.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. I call John Milne.

4.46 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Jardine. I am grateful to speak in this very important debate. Every year, thousands of dogs are subjected to scientific experiments in the UK, often in the name of drug development. For many this raises serious ethical questions about the use of animals for human gain. Is an animal’s suffering

worth the benefits to scientific discovery? For others, science and not the animals are paramount; the end justifies the means, as it were. However, animal testing does not deliver robust and useful scientific data. In fact, drug research on dogs tells us very little about whether a drug will work for humans, so campaigners argue that it is time to end animal research.

Dr Jarrod Bailey, a geneticist, put it plainly: different species react differently to diseases and treatments. In other words, what works in dogs might not work in humans. In fact, drugs that pass animal tests fail in human trials 92% of the time—a staggering and costly statistic. In toxicity testing, even when dogs show no toxic response it barely improves our confidence that the drug will be safe in humans. It improves it from 70% to just 72%, which is barely noticeable. Is that really a sound basis for human medicine?

Fortunately, science offers us a better path forward. Human-specific technologies such as organ chips are revolutionising drug development. Those miniaturised organs mimic how real human organs react to treatments and can be patient-specific. They have shown 87% accuracy in detecting drug-induced liver toxicity, which is a dramatic improvement over animal models. If adopted widely, these tools could create over \$24 billion through research and development in the US. The US Food and Drug Administration has recognised that. Through the FDA Modernisation Act 2.0, the agency has removed the legal requirement for animal testing in drug trials. A third Act is already in the works to accelerate the validation and adoption of human-specific methods such as organ chips.

In the UK we are lagging behind, not because of legal barriers, but perhaps because of entrenched industry habits, financial interests or even cultural resistance in the research community. We can change that—gradually, responsibly and strategically. I am calling for a phased approach to end the use of dogs in UK research. That means increased investment in modern human-relevant alternatives and a national commitment to shifting away from outdated animal models. When the practice of animal testing is scientifically flawed, it is also undeniably ethically indefensible. Animal suffering for unreliable and inapplicable data cannot be justified when we have the tools and knowledge to do better. Let the UK be a leader, not a follower, in creating a more humane and effective future for our scientific research.

4.49 pm

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing this petition and the 478 Exeter residents who have signed it.

I will speak in support of phasing out the use of dogs in medical research, because the scientific case for change is now overwhelming. Members may know that I have a private Member’s Bill—the Animals in Medical Research (Prohibition) Bill—on phasing out the use of animals in medical research, and I very much support the petition. My Bill is the first of its kind to be laid before Parliament, and I am proud to bring it to the House.

I approach this topic from a position of scientific rigour. It is clear that the use of animals in medical research does not necessarily offer the best scientific

[Steve Race]

basis for medicines testing. According to Animal Free Research UK, more than 92% of drugs that pass animal tests, including tests on dogs, go on to fail in human trials. That is an extraordinary figure and means that, far from protecting human health, animal testing is giving us a false sense of security and can slow down medicines development. It is inefficient and it is generating bad science. Animal trials often fail to identify side effects in humans, for example. Although dogs are closer to humans than rodents are, they are still fundamentally different from us in key biological ways. Comprehensive analysis has found that dogs are highly inconsistent predictors of toxic responses in humans; it can be no better than tossing a coin.

Crucially, there is no law saying we must use dogs. As has been said, the Department of Health and Social Care confirmed in 2023 that, while international guidelines suggest testing on two species, including dogs is not a legal requirement. We continue largely out of habit, not necessity; when I asked some of our larger pharma companies whether they have a strategy for reducing the use of animal testing and experimentation overall, some said that there is no strategy, but that they do have some principles. It is clear that the Government need to act in this space.

We have better options. Cutting-edge methods such as organ-on-a-chip technology and 3D human tissue models, supplemented by the use of AI-enabled modelling, are far more accurate in predicting how drugs will behave in people. Investing in such technologies would make drug development faster, safer and ultimately far more effective. I have seen for myself how the techniques can be applied to science. In Exeter, we have an Animal Free Research UK centre of excellence at our research, innovation, learning and development centre, jointly operated by a hospital trust and the University of Exeter. Those researchers excel in using animal-free methods in scientific exploration—specifically on cell ageing, which has already generated several start-up companies out of that centre. That is cutting-edge science; this is exactly where we ought to be as a country. Investing in such areas of science, instead of relying on old methods involving millions of animals every year, will mean that the UK can lead the world in this area of scientific innovation.

Indeed, the UK may already be falling behind internationally, which is a travesty for a nation of animal lovers. In April, as has been said, the US FDA announced it would move away from animal testing in the development of monoclonal antibody therapies and other drugs, which would be replaced

“with more effective, human-relevant methods.”

The FDA went on to state:

“The new approach is designed to improve drug safety and accelerate the evaluation process, while reducing animal experimentation, lowering research and development (R&D) costs, and ultimately, drug prices.”

One reason the FDA gives for that move is to provide global leadership in regulatory science, in which it

“reaffirms its role as a global leader in modern regulatory science, setting new standards for the industry and encouraging the adoption of innovative, humane testing methods.”

There we go: if the US can move in that direction, it is imperative that the UK does so too. Our life sciences sector simply should not be left behind in cutting-edge science.

My private Member's Bill is based on the campaign for Herbie's law, which offers a clear, responsible plan to phase out the use of dogs and other animals over the next decade. It is a measured but vital step towards a future where science serves both human health and humane values. I commend the Science Minister, Lord Vallance, for meeting me and others to set out his work in this area, particularly the ongoing development of a strategy document that, I understand, is set to be published soon and will set out a road map for phasing out animal testing in medical research where possible. That strategy is long overdue and is evidence, I hope, that this Labour Government take this issue seriously. I encourage the Minister and the Government to choose progress. Let us choose science that actually works for patients, for innovation and for compassion.

4.54 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I thank the petitioners for securing this important debate, and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for her excellent opening remarks. I am delighted to see so many Members from her party here to support her; I rise as a Member of an opposition party, but as a member of the APPG I fully support her position. I regret that apart from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), there is no one from the Conservative party in the Chamber. I would not dare suggest that they are not dog lovers—perhaps they are out walking their dogs on this beautiful day.

My wife and I share our home with Lola, our beautiful cockapoo. I say share—I would not dare say that we owned her. We share our home. We just spent Easter ensuring that she did not make off with any of our chocolate Easter eggs; I know they are a guilty pleasure of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran. Along with the 50% of families across these islands who have pets, I can readily see the contradiction in medical experimentation on dogs when so many of us understand the love, intelligence and friendship that our pet dogs bring to our lives—yet we seem content to inflict great suffering on them.

As the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) said, many comprehensive studies demonstrate that experiments on animals, including dogs, cannot accurately and fully predict whether new drugs will be safe for humans. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, statistics for 2023 tell us that 3,749 procedures were conducted on dogs in laboratories, 69% of which were to test the safety of products and devices for human medicine, human dentistry and veterinary medicine. However, as there is a huge question mark over the reliability of the tests and the human relevance of their outcomes, it is understandable that there is massive support for the banning of experimentation on dogs in the UK. In fact, not a month goes by where I so not receive emails on that topic in my inbox.

The Labour Government have confirmed that they aim to phase out animal testing and will publish proposals later this year, I believe, but they have not committed to

an immediate ban on the use of dogs, which is what the petition calls for. I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say. Some exciting—no, amazing—work in this field is happening in the UK, and it needs to be supported and celebrated.

As a member of the APPG on phasing out animal experiments in medical research, I recently visited Animal Free Research UK's animal replacement centre of excellence at the Blizzard institute at Queen Mary University of London to learn more about its groundbreaking work into how cancer spreads using animal-free methods. Doctors showed us how they are revolutionising human skin testing, which is already providing better results for patients without using animals, as well as the development of animal-free next generation 3D tissues and disease models for use in biomedical research. In other words, they grow the tissue in the lab, and they do not need to use dogs.

Other truly transformative animal-free methods are available, for example, using computer modelling, which can provide results directly relevant to humans. Herbie's law, as recommended by Animal Free Research UK, argues for a decade of change, and would mandate the replacement of animals in medical research in the UK by 2035, replacing them with humane, effective alternatives. There is support for that from within the Labour party, largely thanks to the hon. Member for Exeter (Steve Race) and his private Member's Bill.

When the UK Government say that they are partnering with scientists, industry and civic society in working towards phasing out animal testing, I hope they will also consult with animal protection groups on that goal. The Government have also agreed to publish an alternative methods strategy to support phasing out animal testing, so I hope they will read up on Herbie's law in that process, ahead of publication later this year.

If the Government's goal, however, is to be at the forefront of an alternative methods revolution, bringing in a commitment to a ban on experiments on dogs would send a clear signal of intent and be a major milestone in the important phasing out of animal testing. That does not need to happen in 10 years—or even in five. This Government could commit to the full implementation of Herbie's law by the end of this Parliament.

4.59 pm

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank all the petitioners and the people of Swindon North who have signed it, as well as the growing number of citizens across the UK who believe that dogs should not be used in science. We are a country of animal lovers; we love our dogs; and we are going past a point where they should be used for experiments. Some may argue that dogs have a similar biology to humans, but there is still no guarantee of accurate data. Putting it simply, it is not worth the risk. Dogs do not have their own voice, so it is up to us to speak for them.

Personally, I would like to see a future using AI technologies such as organ on a chip, which can mimic the structures and functions of human tissues or organs in the lab, and virtual models that are changing how we do medical research. They are already helping to reduce the need for animals in testing and, in some cases, starting to replace them fully.

AI systems now allow researchers to track animal behaviour more precisely, which is reducing the number of animals required to extract more meaningful data. In the United States, the FDA has already begun to phase out animal testing, replacing it with more human-relevant models such as AI-driven toxicity screening and organoids. I think it is a rule of thumb that, if the United States is starting to do better in animal welfare than us, we probably need to take a hard look in the mirror, because something has gone wrong.

The UK cannot afford to fall behind on this. We have a chance to be a world leader. We have a chance to excel in AI and to boom off its growth. AI technology still requires trials and testing before it can be officially approved. However, when the health and lives of dogs are on the line, is it really fair only to use potential data to make it more accurate? The opportunity for the UK to lead in this field and become a global leader is immense. There is no reason that we as the Government should not push forward and make progress.

Our Government and Labour are keen to accelerate the adoption of non-animal testing methods, and this debate is exactly the mechanism to push that forward. Once again, I thank the people who started this petition and those who have signed it. I hope that the Government listen and start to put an end to and phase out the use of testing on dogs.

5.1 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank everyone who signed this petition—it is a huge achievement to get a debate here in Parliament—and in particular one of my friends, Steph Jones-Giles, who has been a passionate campaigner for animal-free research for years. She has been contacting me for years about this issue specifically.

My partner Emma and I have a dog called Frank. He is quite an unusual-looking dog. He is a pug cross border terrier, and he is 15 years old today—I have had an update of him in Pets at Home, choosing his new toy. Thankfully, in 15 years, he has not worked out that I am a vet, because he hates going to the vet—he has no idea. I should also point out that Jennie, who is present today, the guide dog for my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), had her sixth birthday just last week.

My reason for bringing that up is that no one thinks it is stupid to celebrate a dog's birthday. We know that dogs have the same range of emotions that people do. We also know that they are—well, I was going to say “hugely intelligent”, but hon. Members have not met Frank—relatively intelligent, and we certainly know that they feel pain, need to have social interaction, just like us, and need the freedom to express natural behaviour.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I share a love of dogs with my hon. Friend, and I have a nearly 17-year-old terrier at home—slightly better looking than Frank, I might add. The level of public interest in this petition is vast—many of my constituents have spoken to me strongly about it—and that shows the strength of feeling on this issue. Does my hon. Friend agree that the transposition of the principle of animal sentience into British law is an essential step in ensuring that the UK retains the highest animal welfare standards in the future?

Dr Chambers: My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point, which was going to be my next one. It is completely accurate. The veterinary profession has been extremely concerned by the lack of recognition of animal sentience in law. We urge the Government to change that as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend said that Frank was ugly.

Sarah Dyke: I didn't!

Dr Chambers: He is unique; he is a pug cross border terrier. He has a strange underbite and quite buggy eyes. We were at our friend's house for dinner recently, and one of their children said, "Frank's really ugly." The other child said, "You shouldn't say that because he might've been in an accident."

I would like to introduce the concept of one health, which many people will have heard of. It is the fact that human and animal health are completely interlinked, whether we are talking about antimicrobial resistance, risk of pandemics, food security or climate change. There is also the concept of one medicine, which has been driven forward by the Humanimal Trust, based primarily on the work of academics at the University of Surrey's school of veterinary medicine. We are really pushing not only for animal experimentation to be reduced, refined and replaced by other methods, such as those that hon. Members have mentioned today, but to ensure that when these tests are carried out, humans and animals can benefit from the information gathered.

For example, if a drug passes animal trials and then passes human trials, it still does not have a licence for animals, even when we know that the drug worked in those animal trials. It is often cost-prohibitive for companies to then carry out the further trials to produce the body of evidence needed to get the licence for animals. Equally, if a drug passes animal trials but fails human trials, there should be a quick and easy way to make it available for veterinary use, so that the animals that have had to endure experimentation and suffering can also benefit.

I am very proud that the Liberal Democrats, in the coalition, were involved in stopping the testing of household products on animals. I know that that meant a huge amount not only to the veterinary profession, but to all dog and animal owners. I would appreciate a meeting with the Minister—perhaps with the Humanimal Trust and academics from the University of Surrey's vet school—to talk about how we can improve the benefit to animals from drug testing and the other types of testing, such as medical and joint implants, that are being carried out. We want to ensure that companies and academics can, as easily as possible, get licences for the drugs to be used on animals so that they can benefit from them as well.

5.7 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Ms Jardine, and to follow the excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell). I am honoured to be Bournemouth East's Member of Parliament, representing the issues that matter to my town, and dog welfare is an important one. Bournemouth is a town of dog lovers: we care deeply about the safety

of dogs. As a dog lover, it is upsetting that laboratories across the country experiment on dogs and defend their methods as being in the public interest. It is not in the public interest to harm dogs, nor is it good science. Animal testing is poor science, plain and simple. We must start treating man's best friend better. As the Labour MP for Bournemouth East, I will always stand up for animals because they do not have a voice, and I will always stand up for dog lovers because they rightly use their voice to promote animal welfare. It is time for change, and that means legislation to end the use of dogs in scientific experiments. I support Herbie's law.

In a time of heated debate, I think we can all agree on one fundamental point: dogs are brilliant. With that in mind, we need to do more. I want to thank, in my constituency, Cara and Linda in Muscliff, Jane in Pokesdown, Vanessa in Southbourne and Kate in Charminster for sharing their important views on this issue. As Kate says, every minute, five animals are suffering in experiments in British laboratories, even when non-animal are often cheaper and more reliable.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman could add to his thanks list Lorna Harries, the professor of molecular genetics at the University of Exeter, who has pioneered alternative approaches that can replace some of the experimental techniques that have been used on dogs.

Tom Hayes: I agree; the voices of scientific experts in this area are critical, and I welcome his intervention.

I thank everyone from my constituency who has contacted me about this important issue, including the 336 constituents who signed the petition. I also thank animal welfare charities such as the RSPCA on Richmond Park Road in my constituency, and Every Paw Matters, which I have spent time with.

In fact, we are such a town of dog lovers that the 110th mayor, Councillor George Farquhar, and his wife Alison, have rescued a greyhound called Billy and now have him as the official non-human consort of the mayor. Billy will wear a wrap that says "My human votes Labour" when it is election time, but when he is serving as the non-human consort, he will happily just wear a replica chain. That shows just how much Bournemouth loves dogs—[*Laughter.*] That is the right response.

To anyone who says we need dog testing, they are wrong. Dogs are most commonly used in secondary species testing, where, after a test happens on a mouse or a rat, researchers do a secondary test on another species, which is often a dog. But the industry says that secondary species testing is unnecessary. We know that non-animal methods can be much more accurate than using animal experiments.

I commend other leading voices in this field, including the local business Lush, which is based in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and which shows how we can do better through science. Lush has never tested on animals since its doors opened in 1995, and it has funded over £2.7 million in research and science to end animal testing. It has an annual prize to reward scientists and educators who use non-animal methods and contribute to important scientific breakthroughs. It is truly leading the way.

There are things that the Government could do in the immediate term and the short term. It is wrong that so few inspectors are looking at over 3 million-plus procedures. The industry is marking its own homework. In the immediate term, we need more inspectors. We need a ban on secondary species testing, and exclusive reliance on non-animal research methods. In the short term, we need legislation that fully protects animals.

As a national of animal lovers, we are falling behind. The UK was the first country to create animal protection laws in 1822. We were the first to set up an animal welfare charity—the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The European Union is moving further and faster away from the UK in tackling these cruel experiments on animals and dogs. We must catch up.

No other party has such a strong track record of protecting animals. I am proud to sit in a tradition that includes Keir Hardie, who died in 1915 carrying a pocket watch bitten by a favourite pit pony, having done much to secure better conditions for pit ponies. For our Labour Government, this should be unfinished business. Labour banned the cruel practice of hunting with dogs, and it banned deer hunting and hare coursing. It protected pets, livestock and wild animals, and combated international trade in animal products from any endangered species. It brought in a ban on the use of veal crates in the UK, banned fur farming and created the principle of a duty of care to meet welfare needs. Labour made it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering, mutilation and animal fighting. Labour banned cosmetic product testing on animals.

We passed the most comprehensive reform of animal welfare law in over a century. The last Labour Government stood up for animals. Starting with the provision of a right to have pets inside the rented household, we are back on track. However, back in power after 14 years, this Labour Government could go further. We can truly protect dogs and animals once again.

5.13 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading this important debate. In Newport West and Islwyn, 562 of my constituents have signed this petition. I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate this important issue this afternoon, and to demonstrate, especially to those in the Public Gallery, that Members in this place are really listening and working on their behalf.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to the exceptional animal welfare charities, including, but not limited to, the RSPCA, Naturewatch Foundation, PETA, Animal Free Research UK, Replacing Animal Research and Cruelty Free International. Their vital work to brief MPs about key issues and campaigns, and to provide us with facts and figures, equips us to make representations in this place on behalf of animals. As we know, and as I always say, we must speak up for animals, because they cannot speak up for themselves.

As we have heard, in 2023 there were a total of 3,770 uses of dogs in scientific procedures. I am deeply concerned about the use, and the potential suffering, of any animal in research and testing. I firmly believe that the ultimate goal should be the total replacement of all animal

experiments with humane alternatives, and I would like to see a diversion of existing funding, resources and expertise away from animal experiments.

I hope that this debate will encourage the consideration of all current uses of animals in science and illustrate the support for achieving faster development and uptake of non-animal technologies. However, as the petition illustrates, the strength of public feeling on this issue is particularly apparent when it comes to dogs, who—as we have already heard from hon. Members—are much-loved members of their families, whether they are ugly, pretty or whatever. That is really important.

I am delighted that this Labour Government have committed to working towards phasing out the use of animal testing. Scientific reviews highlight the inability of data from dogs to predict human response accurately and consistently. With the existence of new and developing cutting-edge technology, we do not need whole-body animal systems to assess chemical and drug safety or to advance our scientific knowledge of diseases. The adoption of non-animal technologies would enable rapid development of novel therapeutics and better safety testing data for the protection of human health. Such an approach has the potential to improve efficiency, speed and prediction for humans while cutting costs and reducing animal suffering. Human-specific approaches such as artificial intelligence, organ on a chip and computer modelling produce results that are much more relevant to people—as ably outlined in this debate.

I, like many others who may be more mature, have had the benefit of seeing the demonstration of these technologies at events in Parliament. It is really important that we actually go and see these technologies for ourselves.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I was horrified when I became aware that dogs could still be force-fed pesticides as part of these proposals. Does the hon. Lady agree that what we need from the Government today—I hope we will hear this from the Minister—is clear dates for an end to testing on dogs and all animals?

Ruth Jones: If the hon. Gentleman had read my speech a little bit further, he would have found that I have some specific questions for the Minister—it is always good to ask specifics.

It is vital that the Government produce and execute ambitious road maps for accelerating the development and uptake of advanced non-animal technologies and new approach methodologies. The UK cannot afford to fall behind other countries that are already delivering on that.

I am delighted that my early-day motion 210, on Herbie's law, has 49 signatures from hon. Members across the House—there is still time and space, in case anyone is wondering whether they want to sign it. Beagles make up 95% of the dogs used in the sort of animal testing procedures that we have heard about; Herbie's law, named after a rescued beagle, would provide a practical framework for phasing out animal testing over the next decade and supporting the scientific community with that transition. I also wish my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race) well with his Bill, which is based on Herbie's law, and I congratulate him on his hard work on this campaign.

[*Ruth Jones*]

I look forward to a comprehensive and ambitious plan from the Government for delivering this transition, and I am sure that the Minister is looking forward to outlining that as she winds up. The petition that inspired this debate today shows the strength of public feeling on this issue, so it is also vital that there is complete transparency in the reporting of statistics around the use of animals.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I am advised by Matthew, a West Dunbartonshire constituent, that animals—including dogs—bred for scientific procedures and not used are omitted from Britain's annual statistics on animal testing. If true, that means we have no real idea how many animals are used for science overall in Britain. The Home Office estimated back in 2017 that an additional 1.8 million animals were bred and then not used, which is nearly 50% more than our annual official Government figures would suggest. Sadly, apparently those animals either died or were destroyed. Does my hon. Friend agree that the task of becoming a country or society that does not harm dogs and animals will be more difficult without full transparency?

Ruth Jones: My hon. Friend makes a vital point; it is all about transparency. At the moment, as he rightly said, the Government do not routinely provide information about the number of animals that are bred for use in scientific procedures, but not used. What happens to those animals later in their lives? Although the EU currently collects and publishes that important data every five years, the UK has not done so since 2017. In Britain, we know that at least a third—my hon. Friend said nearly half—of the total number of animals used in science were bred and not used.

Naturewatch Foundation's "Forgotten Lives" campaign seeks to highlight the potentially hundreds of thousands of invisible animals who are undisclosed in UK Government figures. This information is vital to improving transparency and allowing for a more accurate assessment of the current impact of science on animals in the UK. Efforts to reduce, and ultimately to replace, the use of animals in scientific procedures will be difficult to measure and evaluate unless statistical data routinely includes all animals used in science.

In closing, I ask the Minister two key questions. First, when will the Government provide a detailed road map about the transition to human-relevant science as part of their commitment to phasing out animal testing? Secondly, when will the Government review the current publication of statistics to ensure accuracy and transparency? Labour is the party of animal welfare; legislation to improve the lives of animals has formed a vital part of the legacies of past Labour Governments, and I look forward to building on that with this Government. Ending the use of dogs must be a first step in the full transition to the cutting-edge, human-specific methods that offer the best possible chance of advancing medical progress. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

5.21 pm

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for

North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing the topic. This issue resonates deeply with many people across the country, including in my constituency, where the concern for animal welfare is strong and heartfelt. Dogs hold a deeply special place in British life. As someone lucky enough to share my home with one, I know the joy they bring: the quiet comfort, the loyalty and the unconditional love. They are more than pets—they are family.

In 2023, thousands of dogs were used in the UK for experiments. Many were subjected to painful and frightening procedures. In some research labs, dogs have tubes pushed down their throats, sometimes three times a day, to force-feed them chemicals. It is called a procedure—but to dogs, it is just fear and pain. Using dogs in research is not just cruel; it is unreliable. More than 90% of drugs that pass animal tests still fail when they reach human trials. They either do not work or they are unsafe.

In 2006, a trial in the UK for a new drug meant to treat leukaemia and arthritis had already been tested on monkeys and had not revealed any major side effects. When it was given to healthy human volunteers, however, within hours their bodies went into shock. They were left fighting for their lives and nearly died. That is not just a tragedy, but a warning. Those drugs were tested on animals first, but animal suffering does not prevent human suffering. We cannot keep pretending that what happens in a dog's body will predict what happens in ours. Time and again, it does not. We need better science.

A growing number of experts now call for a shift towards modern, human-relevant methods such as organ on a chip, 3D bio-printing and advanced computer modelling. Those are not dreams of the future; they are available now, and Britain should be leading the way. We are a nation known for scientific firsts, from the discovery of penicillin to mapping the human genome. We also pride ourselves on being a country of animal lovers. That combination gives us a unique opportunity and a responsibility to lead the world in building a better kind of research.

This issue is not just a fringe concern; it speaks to public values, ethical urgency and a real chance to build science that is not just cutting-edge, but truly humane. The petitioners are looking for better science, kinder choices and British leadership in shaping a more compassionate future, and I welcome this debate.

5.24 pm

Michelle Scrogg (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. The use of dogs in scientific and regulatory procedures is an issue that rightly draws strong public interest, with over 235,000 people signing the petition that we are debating. It is not just a small outcry, but a clear signal that action is needed. Like so many other dogs, my much-loved working cocker spaniel Charlie is a clear example of how sentient and intelligent dogs truly are—and I am sure that he would want me to put on the record today that he is a very handsome dog. I was also thrilled to see Jennie enter the room today. We can feel the response in the room when a dog enters the Chamber. They bring more to our lives.

Dogs form deep emotional bonds, show remarkable sensitivity and learn with incredible ease. As with most dogs, Charlie is not just a pet; he is a member of my

family, alongside my two cats, Merlot and Jags—I hesitate to add that I did not name the first cat. It is precisely that connection that makes the idea of using dogs like Charlie in laboratory experiments impossible to justify.

However, the case should not be made only on ethical and emotional grounds, but on the grounds of practicality and scientific validity. A growing body of evidence points to the limited translational value of data from dogs, as we have heard, in predicting human responses to drugs and chemicals. It is particularly concerning when we discover the pace of innovation in non-animal methods, including organ-on-a-chip technology, advanced cell cultures and AI-driven modelling systems. Those approaches are not only more humane, but frequently more accurate and cost-effective, begging the question: why have we not moved on this issue already?

Despite advances in biomedical research, dogs continue to be used in procedures that often cause significant suffering. They may be force-fed substances for toxicity tests, restrained for long periods and ultimately euthanised—as almost every Member has mentioned. Those are not minor interventions; they are often serious intrusions on an animal’s welfare, and they occur even as the scientific merit of such tests is increasingly being questioned.

While the Government have stated their commitment to phasing out animal testing where scientifically possible, many would argue that we have already reached that point, at least in the case of dogs. The infrastructure, knowledge and tools exist; what we now need is the determination to act on them. I understand that regulatory change takes time, but we must be clear in our direction of travel. The continued use of dogs in research is increasingly difficult to defend in the light of alternatives, shifting public opinion and our broader responsibilities under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, as well as scientific best practice.

We have the opportunity to show leadership on this issue by supporting innovation, upholding ethical standards and responding to the concerns of hundreds of thousands of our constituents. It is time to set a clear path towards ending the use of dogs in research and to invest in alternatives that will define a more humane and modern scientific future.

5.28 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading this debate, and for her masterful analysis of this issue. I also thank the petitioner who raised this critical issue and the 235,000 people who signed it.

This is an issue I care about deeply. I have a dog called Harry, a fox-red labrador and an integral part of our family. I thank him for essentially being my personal trainer, because he runs far faster than me and keeps me fit. I agree with everything that others have said about the high intelligence and emotional sensitivity of dogs.

Many of my Folkestone and Hythe constituents are dog lovers and dog owners. We have miles of beautiful coastline to walk dogs along, and 316 of my constituents have signed the petition. I receive many emails from local people deeply concerned about dogs and other animals being used in testing.

Nationally, the use of dogs in scientific research is relatively rare, accounting for about 0.2% of all animal procedures in Britain, yet in 2023 almost 2,500 dogs were used in nearly 3,750 scientific procedures, with over 700 classified as causing moderate or severe harm to them. Although regulations are supposed to protect laboratory animals, and advances are being made to reduce and refine the use of those animals, as this debate has shown there is growing evidence and public sentiment questioning the reliability, necessity and ethics of subjecting dogs to such procedures, especially when alternative methods are being developed.

Like my colleagues, I believe that this country should be a world leader in ensuring the highest standards of animal welfare. We are seeing rapid advances in AI—I am pleased to see the AI Minister present to answer the debate—that offer powerful and humane alternatives to animal testing involving dogs. Today, AI-driven methods can analyse vast amounts of biological and chemical data to predict accurately how new drugs and chemicals will behave in the human body. As hon. Members have said, those technologies are already being used to identify potential risks and to filter out unsafe compounds before they ever reach an animal or a human trial. The use of this technology would spare countless animals from unnecessary suffering and would also accelerate the pace of scientific discovery and reduce costs. By investing in and embracing AI, we have the opportunity to lead the way towards a future where UK science and compassion go hand in hand, and where the use of animals in research is a thing of the past.

I look forward to reading and analysing the Government’s strategy for developing alternative methods for animal testing, which I believe will be published later this year. I urge the Government, when drawing up that strategy, to engage meaningfully with animal protection groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and others, as their experts have played a key role in developing effective and science-driven policies so that we may replace experiments on dogs with superior, humane, non-animal testing here in the UK and across the world.

5.31 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a real pleasure to serve under your authority, Ms Jardine. For the avoidance of doubt, I would like to make it clear that, although I am the Chair of the Petitions Committee, I speak in this debate on behalf of my party, and it is a winding-up role.

It has been a very thoughtful and impassioned debate. If you ever wonder, “Do dogs have feelings? Do they have memories? Are they sentient beings?”, you only have to go to Edinburgh to find out—you know what I am talking about, Ms Jardine. If you go to the corner of Candlemaker Row and George IV Bridge, there is a statue of Greyfriars Bobby, who was either a Skye Terrier or a Dandie Dinmont; I am not quite sure which. For 14 whole years, wee Bobby the dog sat by his master’s grave, because Bobby was mourning. Dogs do have feelings.

I too congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) on her really thoughtful and compassionate leading of this debate. I also congratulate all the other Members who contributed so

[*Jamie Stone*]

wisely, constructively and with such care and conviction. And I pay tribute to the petitioners who have brought this vital issue to Parliament's attention.

It is clear that there is consensus across the House. The use of dogs in scientific testing raises profound ethical, scientific and societal questions, and public concern about the welfare of animals used in experiments is growing, and rightly so. As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) referred to, those in our party are proud and staunch supporters of high animal welfare standards. Throughout our history, we have championed the rights and wellbeing of animals, and this debate is a contribution to that commitment. As he pointed out, let us not forget that, during the coalition Government we introduced a ban on animal testing of household products—a significant step that reflected the public's desire for greater compassion in our laws. In passing, I must say that we were strongly opposed to the unnecessary deaths of animals caused by what they call “duplicated testing” following this country's departure from the European Union. That was a tragic consequence that could and should have been avoided. Most recently, at my party's conference this year, we reaffirmed our commitment by passing a substantial new policy motion calling on the Government to introduce a comprehensive animal health and welfare Bill as part of a proper national strategy to secure Britain's place as a world leader in animal welfare.

This is not just about policy, though. It is essential that we recognise in British law that animals are sentient beings. That is not just a symbolic gesture; it places a binding duty on Governments now and in the future to uphold our country's high welfare standards. Let us be clear: testing on dogs must be minimised wherever possible, rigorously justified, tightly regulated and, above all, actively reduced day by day, week by week and month by month. That is why my party is calling for significant and sustained funding for research into alternative methods that are both more humane and scientifically advanced. We have heard some interesting ideas on how that can be taken forward, and I thank Members from across the House for their thoughtful and constructive contributions.

I want to close by referring to an old friend of mine. I was a scrawny wee boy. I was an only kid until I was 10, living on a small dairy farm in the north of Scotland, and my best friend was Gus, an African lion hound. That sounds like a very grand name, and Gus was an enormous dog. I was just a lonely wee boy on a farm and Gus was my best chum. We did everything together, Gus and me. I called him Gug because I could not pronounce Gus—mostly because, my mum said, I had a cold most of the time, as it was a very cold place. Believe it or not, Gus—this vast dog—used to let me share his dog biscuits. I can remember quite enjoying dog biscuits—I had better not go further lest my late mother be accused of bad parenting or rural deprivation. I was delighted to join this debate to remember an old friend who was part of my earliest years and is still remembered by me as a sweet and lovely dog.

5.36 pm

Ben Obese-Jeety (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank the almost 235,000 signatories to this petition, including

670 from my constituency of Huntingdon, and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. The number of signatories to the petition and the speed at which they were collected demonstrate the strength of feeling on the issue. It is just over a year since the previous debates on this topic. At the start of my speech, I must declare an interest as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on phasing out animal experiments in medical research—and, since we are all pitching for our various hounds, as the owner of the best-looking dog. She is the winner of several “best rescue” rosettes—I think that puts that discussion to bed.

The use of dogs and other animals in scientific and regulatory procedures has long been a controversial and emotive topic. It is a topic in which I have a closer interest than I may like, and more of an interest than most Members of this House need to. My constituency of Huntingdon has long been ground zero for much of the conversation around this practice. It has two sites involved in pharmaceutical research and animal testing: Labcorp's pharmaceutical testing facility and Marshal BioResources's beagle breeding facility, which is known as MBR Acres. As such, I speak on this subject with some first-hand experience of its sensitivity.

Only this weekend, there was a large demonstration of several hundred people outside the MBR Acres beagle breeding facility. I visited LabCorp last summer, so I have seen at first hand the lab conditions, the dogs in their pens and how they are looked after. It is very sanitised, as one might expect. I did not witness any of the experiments taking place, but it is a difficult thing to see the dogs held in those areas, knowing what awaits them in the testing process.

While this debate is about dogs, they sit within a hierarchy. Pigs are at the bottom, then come dogs, and above them sit primates. It is notable that no one has spoken about the use of primates in testing, but it is worth mentioning because, having visited that facility, I have seen the macaques that are used for testing above dogs in rarer circumstances, and the way that they come over, climb on the fences and look one in the eyes. The similarity between humans and primates makes it even more difficult to look at them than at the dogs.

I would like to make clear that I do not support animal testing for human medication—hence my APPG membership—but recognise that it is, at present, still a crucial milestone that regrettably will have a place in the pre-clinical testing process until there has been sufficient advancement in non-animal methods that such practices are no longer required across the board. I am sure that I echo the sentiments of all Members when I say that we would like to see a world in which animal testing for human medication is no longer needed. That is also the view of many that we have spoken to who are involved in the testing.

Animal research in the UK is regulated by the Home Office under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. Under that legislation, the use of animals in research is prohibited if there is a non-animal method available that could be used instead. Animals can therefore be used in research only when no alternative methods are available. The Opposition fully support the Act and its full enforcement.

The previous Government invested heavily funding for the three Rs: replacement of the use of animals in research where that is not necessary, reduction in the use of animals, and refinement to eliminate or reduce distress to the animals involved. Via the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research, or NC3Rs, the previous Government invested £90 million in research and a further £27 million in contracts through its CRACK IT Challenges innovation scheme for UK and EU-based institutions. Furthermore, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Council supports research that aims to develop and apply innovative methods for studying human and animal physiology, including in-silica approaches, organ on a chip, and organoid and other advanced cell culture systems.

Last year, the then Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), announced a doubling of annual funding to £20 million. He also announced that the then Government had a plan to accelerate the development, validation and uptake of technologies and methods to reduce reliance on the use of animals in science. I wrote to the Secretary of State last year and asked him whether he would publish this plan. I am keen to hear from the Minister what happened to the plan and when the Government's version can be expected.

As we are all well aware, in its election manifesto last year, the Labour party pledged to phase out animal testing. The Government's starting position is that it is

"not yet possible to replace all animal use due to the complexity of biological systems and regulatory requirements for their use."

We share the Government's ambition to phase out the use of animals in the testing process, but it is simply not realistic to do so with the immediacy that is often clamoured for by those protesting against the process. The medical industry desperately needs further investment to realise new alternatives. Currently, it does not have the resources to stop animal testing with immediate effect in a way that would ensure the sufficient safety of certain medicines, or that would be compliant with many foreign market standards and regulatory frameworks. Global medicines regulators such as the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the US Food and Drug Administration require stringent research standards regarding the safety of a potential new medicine to be met before it is used in human clinical trials.

In February, I asked the Government what discussions they had had with the Food and Drug Administration, the European Medicines Agency and Swissmedic regarding the regulatory approval of non-animal methods. They responded:

"The Government is working to understand the international drivers and challenges to integrating non-animal methods into regulatory safety testing. This includes engaging with government scientists and regulators, including the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, Food Standards Agency and Environment Agency, as well as international medicines and chemicals regulators".

Separately, the Minister has informed me that these methods will need to be incorporated into the international regulatory guidelines that the MHRA adheres to. That is it. That is the Government's entire approach to crossing the enormous hurdle of international recognition. Regardless of how much money we pour into research,

without international recognition of specific non-animal methods for each pharmaceutical product tested via those means, international licensing of those products is simply not feasible, so any talk from the Government about phasing out animal testing is just lip service.

In September, I asked the Government what steps they were taking to change the policy of the International Council for Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use to allow results from non-animal methods of pharmaceutical testing to be used to support drug safety through pre-clinical trials. They responded:

"We are engaging with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) who represent the UK at the International Council for Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use on how to accelerate the acceptance of data generated in non-animal methods for drug safety decision making."

I am aware that MHRA representatives attended a ministerial roundtable on accelerating the adoption of alternatives to using animals for drug development last year. Given that that was more than six months ago, I am keen to hear from the Minister what progress has been made.

We need action from the Government in a number of areas if they are to meet their ambition of animal-free testing. We would welcome clarification from the Minister about what has been done and what will be done through conversations with other regulatory bodies and Governments about phasing out animal testing as a priority, when alternatives are available, in a way that does not hinder trade possibilities. As the Government work on trade deals, it is crucial, where medicines are concerned, that this area is looked at closely. The UK can lead the way.

Working with partners on this issue is key for our scientific and medical industry, because even where there may be alternatives to testing on animals, some products would not fit the criteria to sell elsewhere under the current rules. In February, I asked the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms if the Government would publish a timeline for the phasing out of tests via the work of the NC3Rs. He responded:

"We are working at pace trying to put together a practicable policy and a strategy which, as I said, we will publish by the end of the year."—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 244.]

I am aware that the Government have already made clear that they will publish a strategy to support the development, validation and uptake of alternative methods later this year. I do not anticipate that the situation has changed significantly in the 10 weeks since that exchange, but now that we are a third of the way through the year, I would like to hear from the Minister whether any progress has been made. Is a strategy now in place? Furthermore, will the Minister expand on what exact engagement the Department and the Government at large are having with the pharmaceutical industry and regulatory authorities on how to take their commitment forward?

The issue of licences for animal testing should also be addressed, although I appreciate that it is not within this Department's brief. Marshall BioResources in my constituency last received an unannounced inspection from the Animals in Science Regulation Unit in April 2024. Since receiving its establishment licence in October 2017, it has received eight announced and seven

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

unannounced inspections. The outcome of the most recent inspection was that no critical, major or minor findings and no low-level concerns were identified. With that in mind, the Minister has previously informed me that the Government are preparing to conduct an internal review into the duration of project licences for animal research under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. The original schedule was for the review's report to be published by the end of 2025. Could the Minister tell me whether the review has started and whether the report will still be published by year end?

To conclude, we want to see clear, pragmatic plans that support the Government's manifesto pledges, and that must include viable alternative testing methods that are safe and that can sell on the international stage.

5.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening this important debate. I also thank the thousands of petitioners—some of whom are in the Public Gallery, which indicates the strength of public views on this matter—and all hon. Members here today, who have made powerful contributions.

I do not have a dog, so I will not enter the competition about whose dog is the cutest, but I do have two little children who try to touch every single dog we come across when we go around parks; they at least now know that they have to ask permission before they do that. I feel that I am not too far from having one of those cute dogs, or one like Frank, in our household.

The Government fully appreciate that the use of dogs for scientific and regulatory procedures stirs strong emotional feelings for many people across the UK, including myself as a dog lover. In my previous role in local government, I was responsible for environment, including stray dogs, as part of a service for many authorities around us. In a bid to avoid having to put healthy dogs down, we set up London's first dog hotel, which Peter Egan opened. We had a system where staff could come and take dogs out for walks. Every role I have had has involved looking after dogs, and I must say that I found the preparation for this debate very difficult.

Along with other Members present, I long for the day when we can finally bring an end to animal testing and the use of dogs in scientific research; it cannot come soon enough, but sadly it is not yet here. The UK is world leading in the development of non-animal methods, and the Government are keen to ensure that those are utilised wherever possible. That is why our manifesto commits us to partner with scientists, industry and civil society as we work towards phasing out animal testing. Colleagues mentioned the changes that the FDA has brought forward. To be clear, those bring it in line with us regarding the protection of animals, but where there is new learning to be done, we will absolutely look at that.

As part of our commitment to phasing out the use of animals in science, we will publish a strategy to support the development, validation and uptake of alternative

methods. It will set out how we can build on our support by creating a research and innovation system that replaces animal testing with alternative methods wherever possible. However, for now, the carefully regulated use of animals, including dogs, in scientific research remains necessary to protect humans and the wider environment.

I will now expand on why, given the current state of science, we are unfortunately not yet ready to ban the use of dogs for testing and research purposes in the UK. The use of animals in science lies in the intersection of two vital public goods: the benefits to humans, animals and the environment, and the UK's proud history of support for the highest possible standards of animal welfare.

The balance between these two public goods is reflected in the UK's robust regulation of the use of animals in science through the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, known as ASPA. The Act specifies that animals can be used in science only for specific limited purposes where there are no alternatives, where the number of animals used is the minimum needed to achieve the scientific benefit and where the potential harm to animals is limited to the absolute minimum. As has been mentioned, this is known as the three Rs: replacement, reduction and refinement.

The use of animals in science is therefore highly regulated, including through a three-tier system of licensing, which licenses each establishment, project and individual involved in performing regulated procedures involving animals. All establishments are required to have dedicated individuals, including veterinary surgeons with legal responsibilities for the care and welfare of animals, and an ethical review body that reviews any proposals for the use of animals and promotes the three Rs of animal use.

Our manifesto commitment stands in recognition of the fact that the phasing out of animal testing has to be in lockstep with the development of alternatives. As yet, the reality is that the technology is not advanced enough for alternative methods to completely replace the use of animals. For now, animal testing and research play an important role in supporting the development of new medicines and cutting-edge medical technologies for humans and animals, and it supports the safety and sustainability of our environment.

Animal research has helped us to make life-changing discoveries, from new vaccines and medicines to transplant procedures, anaesthetics and blood transfusions. The development of the covid-19 vaccine, as with all vaccines, was made possible only because of the use of animals in research. Animals are used to assess how potential new medicines affect biological systems, ensuring that drugs are safe and effective before human trials. Many products that would be unsafe or ineffective, or that could cause harm to humans, are detected through animal testing, ensuring the safety of the healthy volunteers who take part in clinical trials, as well as of future patients.

Seamus Logan: We have heard from a number of Members today—some of them very learned Members of Parliament who have professional backgrounds in this area—about the serious doubts regarding the efficacy of some of the tests the Minister is referring to. Would she be willing after the debate to share with me the sources she is using to support her claims regarding the value of this testing?

Feryal Clark: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, and I am happy to share the research and reasons behind my arguments.

For the reasons I have given, animal testing is required by the international agreements followed by all global medicines regulators, including the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Although the MHRA does not require all medicines to be tested on two species, safety testing in a second species is required for most drugs, with dogs being one of the species that can be used.

The key proposal in the petition is for an immediate ban on the use of dogs in scientific and regulatory procedures. None of us wants dogs to be used in research, despite how carefully animal welfare is regulated. However, I regret to say that forbidding the use of dogs in medical research—without alternatives at the moment—would likely have catastrophic effects on the UK's medical research system. We would be unable to meet international regulatory requirements for drug safety testing, preventing virtually all first-in-human trials in the UK and vastly reducing the number of subsequent clinical trials. A significant proportion of basic research would cease, preventing new insight into disease and treatments that save lives and improve people's health. Forbidding the use of animals in medical research would also likely have a negative impact on animal welfare. Animal testing would move overseas, to countries where the regulations on the use of animals in science are less stringent than they are here.

I am proud to say that the UK is world leading in the development of alternative methods, and we are keen to utilise that technology as much as possible. As much as we can, we are striving to partner with regulators to see how advances in technology can phase out animal use where we are able to do that.

Ruth Jones: The Minister is making an interesting speech, because the Labour party manifesto commitment is very clear: we are looking to ban animal testing. We have talked about a road map, which Labour has committed to, so when will that be published and when will the strategy be published? I ask because those are vital things that people in the Public Gallery want to know today.

Feryal Clark: My hon. Friend intervenes at the right time, as I was about to say that in publishing our road map, we will be setting out how we can go even further in supporting alternative methods and working towards a world where the use of animals in science is eliminated in all but exceptional circumstances. That will be achieved by creating a research and innovation system that replaces animals with alternatives wherever possible.

Currently, through UKRI, the Government support the development and dissemination of the three Rs. That is achieved primarily through funding for the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research, which works nationally and internationally to drive the uptake of alternative technologies and to ensure that advances are reflected in policy, practice and regulations on animal research.

Steve Race: I failed to catch the Minister's eye on her previous mention of the three Rs. Does she agree that the number of procedures using specially protected

species—cats, dogs, horses and non-human primates—has actually increased over recent years, to about 17,000 from about 15,000 in 2022 and that that was driven by a 38.9% rise in procedures using horses? Does she also agree that our hon. Friend the Minister for Security confirmed that in the period from 1 January 2023 to 30 September 2024, no applications for a project licence under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 were refused? Does she see reductions in the number of animals being used in testing or are they actually increasing as part of the strategy?

Feryal Clark: The stats that I have say that in 2023 the use of dogs in procedures reduced by 9%. On overall animal testing, I will have to get back to my hon. Friend. I am sure that my colleagues from the Home Office will be able to explain the stringent licensing process—the procedure that everyone has to go through to be able to obtain a licence.

We want to replace the use of animals in scientific procedures with alternatives where we can. That is why our current approach is to support and fund the development and dissemination of techniques that replace, reduce and refine the use of animals in research, and to ensure that the UK has a robust regulatory system for licensing animal studies and enforcing legal standards, which will drive their uptake. We have a commitment in our manifesto to do all we can to phase out the use of animals—including dogs—in science, and we will be publishing a road map before the end of the year to lay out how we can give increased impetus to the support and validation of alternative methods.

Colleagues asked about ensuring that we are consulting animal welfare organisations, and there is a roundtable meeting with the Office for Life Sciences and animal welfare organisations to do precisely that. The hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) requested a meeting to discuss issues around the benefits of testing on animals. I am happy to agree to that and will be in contact with his office to arrange one.

I conclude by again thanking Members for their insightful contributions to today's debate, and I look forward to working together as we go forward.

5.59 pm

Irene Campbell: I first thank Maria Iriart for creating the petition and for her work in growing it to more than 230,000 signatures. I thank its supporters who have attended the debate—it is much appreciated. I also thank Animal Free Research UK, Cruelty Free International, Dr Jarrod Bailey and Understanding Animal Research for their helpful briefings. As ever, I give huge thanks to the staff of the Petitions Committee for their invaluable hard work and organisation in preparing meetings and briefings, and for their support in preparing for this debate.

As we have heard, Britain is without doubt a nation of animal lovers. As a Scottish MP, I have some Scottish data to hand: 79% of Scottish adults believe that it is unacceptable for experiments on animals to continue when other testing methods are available, and 62% are in favour of the Government setting deadlines for the phasing out of animal testing. In my constituency, 248 people signed the petition. I, too, think that the

[Irene Campbell]

timeline is crucial: when we get the road map, we need a realistic timeline with it; if we have no timeline, it would be hugely problematic.

I have to be honest: the debate has brought attention to an issue that many people do not want to face or discuss. The many contributions today have highlighted the depth of feeling on this matter. We have the scientific evidence, with many scientists advising and supporting the view that it is time to remove dogs from medical testing. It is important to remember that, although we have mentioned animal testing in the wider sense, this debate is about removing dogs immediately from medical testing. We should not lose sight of that—Jennie the dog is here today, so we even have a dog in the Chamber.

I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate, including the Minister, although I have to say that her response was disappointing. I look forward to the day when we achieve this aim, but I really do think that we must have a timeline; otherwise, the road map will not be robust.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 705384 relating to the use of dogs in scientific and regulatory procedures.

6.2 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 28 April 2025

TREASURY

Tax Simplification, Administration and Reform

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):

At the autumn Budget 2024 and the spring statement 2025, the Government committed to bringing forward a package of measures in spring 2025 aimed at simplifying the tax and customs system to help deliver the plan for change. Today, the Government deliver that commitment with a package of 26 measures.

In addition, the Government are setting out two further administrative measures designed to strengthen the integrity of the tax and customs system, as well as a package of 11 measures that reform the tax system, ensuring that it continues to be fit for the modern world.

This includes new plans to reduce bureaucracy and increase efficiency at His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to deliver the Government's ambition to become a more productive, agile and effective state.

Simplification

Measures announced today will support economic growth by reducing burdens on employers and small businesses, modernising HMRC systems and processes to simplify the experience for individuals and traders, and simplifying HMRC guidance and communications.

The Government have engaged widely with stakeholders, including representative bodies, business organisations, the border industry and small businesses, and are implementing five ideas submitted by the Administrative Burdens Advisory Board as their priorities for simplification.

The Government will continue to work with stakeholders to identify further measures and priorities for simplifying the tax and customs administration system.

These measures will collectively reduce administrative burdens so that businesses and individual taxpayers spend less time on tax and customs administration and more time adding value to the economy.

Measures being announced today that reduce burdens on businesses, employers, and employees include:

Capital goods scheme simplification: To support small businesses, secondary legislation will be laid at a later date to remove computers from the assets covered by the scheme, and increase the capital expenditure value of land, buildings and civil engineering work, currently set at £250,000—exclusive of VAT—to £600,000.

Spirit drinks verification scheme simplification: At the autumn Budget, the Government announced their commitment to support the UK spirits industry by, among other measures, investing up to £5 million into HMRC's spirit drinks verification scheme. The Government have decided to use this funding to modernise HMRC's IT system and introduce a simpler flat fee model, significantly reducing the fees paid by operators to £250 per facility.

Mandating the payroll of benefits in kind: As recommended by the Administrative Burdens Advisory Board, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales, and the Employment and Payroll Group, the Government have announced a delay to the introduction of mandatory reporting and paying of income tax and class 1A national insurance contributions (NICs) on benefits in kind via payroll software—"Mandatory Payrolling."

Mandatory Payrolling will be introduced from April 2027 instead of April 2026, to reduce the burden on businesses by giving them more time to prepare for changes. HMRC will continue to engage on design and delivery issues to ensure minimum disruption to employers.

These steps to reduce burdens on employers build on the 28 January 2025 announcement that the Government will not be taking forward the draft Income Tax (Pay As You Earn) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, initiated by the previous Government. This means employers will no longer have to provide more detailed employee hours data to HMRC from April 2026.

Additionally, today the Government have set out further measures to modernise HMRC systems and processes to simplify the customer experience, including:

Cultural gift scheme: The Government are announcing their intention to introduce legislation at the next Finance Bill to reform the scheme by removing the restriction on jointly owned objects and allowing tax credits to be used more flexibly. This will simplify the scheme by making it more accessible and improve take-up and will come into effect from April 2026.

Income Tax Self-Assessment (ITSA) criteria review: the Government confirmed their intention to raise the ITSA reporting threshold for trading income and align it with new ITSA reporting thresholds for property and "other taxable" income, at £3,000 gross each. This will remove the requirement for up to 300,000 taxpayers to file a self-assessment return. These changes will be implemented within this Parliament.

Reviewing National Insurance Contributions (NICs) Annual Maximum refunds process: A review of the process for refunding national insurance contributions under the annual maximum rules, to make it easier and faster for customers to access the refunds they are entitled to.

Voluntary NICs: enhancing "Check Your State Pension" forecast service: The Government also intend to further enhance the "Check Your State Pension" forecast service, which supports people who want to pay voluntary national insurance contributions to fill gaps in their national insurance record.

These measures build on the Government's announcement at the spring statement 2025 that, from summer 2025, employed individuals who become liable to the high-income child benefit charge will be able to opt to pay HICBC directly through PAYE, without the need to register for self-assessment.

Simplifying HMRC guidance and communications is crucial to helping taxpayers get their tax right first time and reducing the worry and stress of managing their tax affairs. Therefore, the Government are announcing five measures to improve HMRC guidance and communications, including:

Clarifying self-assessment registration obligations: As recommended by tax professionals, HMRC will simplify guidance on self-assessment registration obligations to ensure clarity on when individuals must register for self-assessment.

Simpler communication and AI solutions: HMRC is working with external stakeholders to simplify HMRC guidance and communications by:

Working with the Administrative Burdens Advisory Board and others to simplify the language used in HMRC letters, making them more accessible and easier to read.

Collaborating with third parties and the Government Digital Service to investigate how businesses could leverage HMRC's gov.uk guidance in their own AI-powered products and services. This could make it easier for taxpayers to get the information they need with the help of the latest AI solutions, reducing the need to contact HMRC, and access a more personalised experience to meet their needs.

The Government are also announcing a package of measures that simplify customs processes, reduce burdens and improve customer experience, while ensuring that we place targeted and appropriate control on movements. This includes:

Improvements to temporary admission: A package of simplifications and improvements to temporary admission, which relieves import duties on temporary imports.

Customs digitalisation: Announcing the details of Government pilots progressing trade and customs digitalisation, including a technical pilot with US Customs and Border Protection to test methods to speed up processes for trade for UK and US businesses.

Transit improvements: An informal stakeholder engagement exercise on potential improvements to modernise the transit process.

Authorisation by Declaration: Increasing how often AbD—authorisation by declaration—can be used from three times to 10 times per 12 months. AbD allows importers to use certain special procedures to suspend or relieve duties without getting an authorisation from HMRC beforehand.

Post and parcel exports consultation: A summary of responses to the customs treatment of post and parcel exports consultation. This includes a new authorisation scheme for ETOE—extraterritorial office of exchange—operators and sites to ensure that they operate with appropriate security standards. It also announces plans to conduct a further review of the export and transshipment memoranda of understanding, with the aim of clarifying existing rules and ensuring consistency and alignment with other comparable facilitations.

These measures are part of our ambition to embed innovation in customs processes and systems to support digitalised trade and supply chains. The Government are committed to continuing to work closely with industry to deliver on our ambitions and further improve our customs system.

Tax Administration

The Government are introducing administrative measures as part of this package of tax and customs policies.

This includes legislative amendments to ensure that all border locations are responsible for funding and operating their own customs infrastructure.

Reform

The Government have announced a package of measures that help to reform the tax system, ensuring that it continues to be fit for the modern world.

New proposals are being published for consultation, including on a single remote gambling duty, as committed to at the autumn Budget 2024, and on the VAT treatment of business donations of goods to charity. The Government are also consulting on proposals to reform the soft drinks industry levy in order to strengthen incentives to reduce sugar in soft drinks, proposals to reform landfill tax, and are exploring the merits of reform to online marketplace liability for VAT.

In addition, the Government will outline next steps on reform work already under way, including on the modernisation of the stamp taxes on shares framework and the response to the technical consultation on vaping duty.

The Government are committed to modernising HMRC to become a digital-first organisation. The Government are announcing today that HMRC will reduce paper post sent, saving £50 million per year by 2028-29, while maintaining paper post provision for critical correspondence and for the digitally excluded. The Government will do

this by investing in digital services to send and receive taxpayer information and will bring forward legislation to support a digital-first approach.

The Government are committed to improving value for money in the system of tax administration, and so will be reducing the HMRC estate in central London by 25%. HMRC is already a national organisation and by 2030, 85% of HMRC staff will be based outside of London. Moving roles out of London, in line with the Government's wider "Places for Growth" initiative will ensure that the civil service is closer to the communities it serves.

Ahead of their review of all arm's length bodies, the Government are confirming that they will bring the functions of the Valuation Office Agency, an executive agency of HMRC, within HMRC by the end of this financial year. Moving the VOA's functions into HMRC will strengthen direct accountability to Ministers, helping to improve the experience of taxpayers and businesses and support the delivery of the Government's commitments to reform business rates and modernise the tax system. This move will support the Government to deliver change more quickly and effectively, by combining the expertise and experience of both organisations in policy, valuations and programme delivery. It will also drive efficiencies in the administration of the tax system, resulting in between 5% and 10% in additional savings in VOA administrative costs by 2028-29.

The full list of publications and announcements can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/tax-update-spring-2025-simplification-administration-and-reform>

[HCWS607]

DEFENCE

King's Gurkha Artillery

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I am pleased to announce the creation of the King's Gurkha Artillery, within the Royal Regiment of Artillery. The King's Gurkha Artillery will be based in Larkhill garrison, the Royal Artillery's regimental headquarters.

Creating this new employment opportunity in the Royal Artillery gives existing and new Gurkhas more choice on where they serve and greater opportunities for career development. The formation of the 400-strong King's Gurkha Artillery will be completed over the next four years, with the first transfers of existing Gurkhas taking place this spring.

The Royal Artillery are a major part of the Army's offer to NATO, and the King's Gurkha Artillery will play a part in supporting key modernisation programmes as part of this offer.

[HCWS605]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Security Summit

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): On 24 and 25 April 2025, at Lancaster House, the UK Government partnered with the International Energy Agency to convene the first global summit on the future of energy security.

The Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission addressed the summit, delivering the message that energy security is national security and depends on co-operation with others, acting together to seize the opportunity of the clean energy transition. The summit was represented by almost 60 countries, more than 50 global businesses as well as non-governmental organisations and civil society groups from around the world.

Our starting point for this summit is that in an unstable and uncertain world, there can be no national or international security without energy security. In the years since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we have been reminded in the UK, and indeed across Europe and the world, of a simple truth: that as long as energy can be weaponised against us, our countries and our citizens are vulnerable and exposed.

This summit marked an important moment for countries to come together and discuss what the shifting global landscape means for how we deliver energy security in this era. Many participants emphasised the importance of the energy transition and how this can enable a more secure and affordable system, noting our vulnerability to price shocks from fossil fuel markets.

Political and industry leaders from around the world discussed the diverse energy security challenges faced by different countries, and how energy in all its forms is the basis of human and economic development. Achieving secure, affordable, and sustainable energy for all remains a fundamental priority in the years to come. Many stressed that multilateral co-operation between countries, as well as with international organisations, industry and civil society, is key to tackling shared challenges and ensuring a secure energy system.

The Prime Minister announced an initial £300 million investment, ahead of the spending review, through Great British Energy, in order to win global offshore wind investment in the UK and create thousands of jobs, and a major carbon capture and storage network is ready for construction—boosting energy security and the Government's plan for change.

At the summit, the Government also established a new mission focused on strengthening global supply chains through the UK-led global clean power alliance. The GCPA will bring together the global north and south, and will draw on and share the UK's world-leading experience of pursuing clean power by 2030 to speed up the global clean energy transition.

Our decision to co-host this summit reflects the UK's determination to go the extra mile as a convenor on the world stage—because it is in our national interest. Clean energy is the economic opportunity of the 21st century, and the leadership we are showing is about seizing the jobs and growth for Britain, and making the UK a clean energy superpower.

[HCWS606]

TRANSPORT

Sustainable Aviation Fuel Revenue Certainty Mechanism

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Sustainable aviation fuel is integral to reaching net zero aviation by 2050. It reduces greenhouse gas emissions by around 70% on average over the lifecycle of its production and use when replacing fossil kerosene. It is also an enabler of growth, and can provide good, skilled jobs across the UK.

That is why this Government has taken rapid action to support SAF. Just weeks into office, we reiterated our commitment to the SAF mandate. In November, we signed it into law, and it has been in place since January.

The SAF mandate is the UK's key policy mechanism to secure demand for SAF. It delivers GHG emission savings by encouraging the use of SAF within the aviation industry. It does this by setting a legal obligation on fuel suppliers in the UK to supply an increasing proportion of SAF over time. Suppliers receive certificates for the SAF they supply. Certificates are issued in proportion to the level of GHG emission reductions that the fuel delivers—that is, the greater the savings, the greater the number of certificates they receive. The SAF mandate started at 2% of total UK jet fuel demand in 2025 and increases linearly to 10% in 2030 and then to 22% in 2040. It could deliver up to 6.3 million tonnes of carbon savings per year by 2040.

We are also committed to developing the UK SAF industry to secure a UK supply of SAF, attract investment and create good green jobs across the UK.

In January, we announced an additional £63 million of funding for the advanced fuels fund, our grant funding programme for UK SAF production, extending the programme for another year.

We are also introducing a revenue certainty mechanism to help attract investment into UK SAF production. Under the SAF revenue certainty mechanism, SAF producers will enter into a private law contract with a Government-backed counterparty. These contracts will set a strike price for SAF. If producers sell their SAF for below the strike price, the counterparty makes payments of the difference; if the SAF is sold for above the strike price, the producer makes payments of the difference to the counterparty. This addresses the most significant constraint on investment in SAF production and sends a clear signal to investors: that this is a serious UK investment opportunity.

This Government have made significant progress towards delivering the revenue certainty mechanism. We announced in the King's speech that we will be introducing a revenue certainty mechanism Bill in the first Session of this Parliament and will have the legislation in place by the end of 2026 at the very latest.

In 2050, up to 15,000 jobs and £5 billion gross value added in the UK could be supported with future low-carbon fuel production for the domestic and international markets. The revenue certainty mechanism, along with the Government's modern industrial strategy, will provide a launchpad for this sector to drive growth and investment.

[HCWS608]

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 28 April 2025

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|--|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| EDUCATION | 1 | EDUCATION—continued | |
| Apprenticeship Funding | 5 | School Students: Mental Health and Wellbeing | 6 |
| Construction Skills Training..... | 12 | SEND Funding..... | 3 |
| Freedom of Speech: Universities | 14 | SEND Provision | 1 |
| Higher Education Funding | 16 | SEND Support | 13 |
| Pupil Referral Units..... | 15 | SEND Teachers | 10 |
| School Costs and Employer's National Insurance Contributions | 7 | Topical Questions | 17 |

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 28 April 2025

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| DEFENCE | 4WS | TRANSPORT | 6WS |
| King's Gurkha Artillery..... | 4WS | Sustainable Aviation Fuel Revenue Certainty Mechanism | 6WS |
| ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO | 4WS | TREASURY | 1WS |
| Energy Security Summit | 4WS | Tax Simplification, Administration and Reform ... | 1WS |

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CONTENTS

Monday 28 April 2025

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Education

Headingley Incident [Col. 26]
Answer to urgent question—(Dame Diana Johnson)

Child Rape Gangs [Col. 33]
Answer to urgent question—(Jess Phillips)

Points of Order [Col. 46]

Football Governance Bill [Lords] [Col. 48]
Motion for Second Reading—(Lisa Nandy)
Amendment—(Stuart Andrew)—on a Division, negatived
Motion, on a Division, agreed to
Read a Second time

Community Health: Manchester Rusholme [Col. 143]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Scientific and Regulatory Procedures: Use of Dogs [Col. 1WH]
E-petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]
