

**Tuesday
29 April 2025**

**Volume 766
No. 129**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 29 April 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

LORDS

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Tuesday 6 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

The Secretary of State was asked—

Electricity Bills: Standing Charges

1. **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his Department's policies of recent trends in levels of standing charges for electricity bills. [903840]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): We know that consumers are frustrated by standing charges, which is why we are committed to lowering them. Ofgem has been consulting on introducing a zero standing charge tariff that would shift the costs on to unit rates. The consultation has now closed, and we will be working with Ofgem to take this forward.

Mr Reynolds: Has the Department assessed whether the rising standing charges are discouraging residents in our constituencies from switching to heat pumps and electric vehicles because they are concerned about the fixed costs that will come with them?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: There are fixed costs within standing charges relating to, for instance, the cost of maintaining and upgrading networks, which we have to cover, but we recognise the imbalance between the price that people are paying for electricity and the price that they are paying for gas. We are committed to dealing with that imbalance, because we think it right that consumers can transition to clean heat. That is the way in which we reduce the amount of energy we use and, critically, that is the way in which we reduce bills.

Renewable Energy Sector: Job Creation

2. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps he is taking to support job creation in the renewable energy sector. [903841]

13. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps he is taking to support job creation in the renewable energy sector. [903853]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): Since the last oral questions in March, the Government have consented to the Rampion 2 offshore wind farm, creating 4,000 jobs; reached the final investment decision on the HyNet carbon capture, utilisation and storage cluster, creating 2,000 jobs; invested £300 million, through Great British Energy, in UK clean energy supply chains; shortlisted 27 hydrogen companies for hydrogen allocation round 2; and created a new £100 million fusion investment fund. This Government are building the clean energy future in Britain.

Jamie Stone: The reason I was here on that Saturday when Parliament was recalled is because some of the mightiest structures in the North sea were made from British steel at the Nigg yard. On the question of renewables, may I ask the Secretary of State what we are doing about getting out the skills to fabricate floating offshore wind structures in the United Kingdom?

Ed Miliband: That is very much part of our plans. As the hon. Gentleman will know, in March we announced the provision of more than £55 million for the expansion of Port of Cromarty Firth to create offshore wind supply chains in this country, and last week, along with GB Energy, we announced that investment of £300 million in supply chains. We are determined not just to generate offshore wind in Britain, but to take advantage of the huge economic opportunity that it represents.

Christine Jardine: I hear what the Secretary of State is saying, but Scotland's declining oil and gas industries have lost 40% of their jobs in the past decade, and today Grangemouth has warned that it may have to pause important projects involving a switch to greener and more sustainable forms of energy because of what it describes as soaring energy bills and the pressures of income tax. We know that Grangemouth needs investment, but it also needs more than the Government are doing at the moment. What intervention are they planning to protect jobs and the communities that could be hollowed out if Grangemouth is not saved?

Ed Miliband: As the hon. Lady will know, we inherited this situation from the last Government, but we set aside £200 million to build the future in Grangemouth and we are working closely with the Scottish Government on precisely that, in a Government-to-Government collaboration. As for the hon. Lady's wider question about industrial energy prices, we should obviously look at what different sectors are saying.

A lot of nonsense is being talked about steel. UK Steel has said categorically that the difference between our prices and those of continental Europe is a result of our reliance on natural gas power generation. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members say "Rubbish", but that is what UK Steel has said, and that is why our clean power mission is right for families and right for business.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Today marks the end of more than a century of refining at Grangemouth. Scotland is once again a victim of

industrial vandalism and devastation—and I do not want anyone in this Chamber to dare mention a “just transition”, because we all know that the Conservatives when they were in power, and the Scottish National party currently in Holyrood, have done nothing to avert this catastrophic decision. I put it to the Secretary of State that during the general election campaign the Labour leadership said that they would step in and save the jobs at the refinery. What has changed, and why have we not done the sensible thing for Scotland’s energy security?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is talking about a very important issue, and Grangemouth has a very important role in Scotland. What I will say to him and to others is that as soon as this Government saw the situation that they had inherited, they put money in to help the workers, and they have made that huge investment commitment of £200 million, working hand in hand with the Scottish Government, so that we can build the future in Grangemouth. We are absolutely committed to building the future for Grangemouth communities, and we look forward to working with my hon. Friend and other Members on both sides of the House to do that.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Yesterday was International Workers’ Memorial Day. At a service this weekend in Falkirk, a Grangemouth refinery worker rightly called for oil and gas workers’ skills not to be considered obsolete, but utterly essential for the just transition. What consideration have Ministers given to the urgent policy recommendations in Project Willow to provide accelerated investment in clean energy infrastructure and the jobs it promises for Grangemouth?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend, who is also a really powerful advocate for his constituents, is absolutely right. Project Willow was left on the shelf by the previous Government. We put the money in to take Project Willow forward and we are now going to implement it. Absolutely crucial to that is ensuring the skills of oil and gas workers are properly used in the future, including with the skills passport which also lay dormant under the previous Government and which we are powering ahead with.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Through my work on the Select Committee, I have heard repeated concerns from industry leaders that existing workers in their 50s and 60s see no point in retraining because they believe they will see out their careers supporting old technologies. That has a knock-on impact on young entrants to the workforce, who have traditionally learnt their skills from more experienced workers. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps he is taking to incentivise retraining to support growth in the renewable energy sector?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady raises a really important point. That is why we are working with the Department for Education to make sure we do not just have a clean power plan that will help to create hundreds of thousands of jobs across the country and invest in supply chains, which I talked about earlier, but crucially offer opportunities

for younger workers and inspire them about the possibilities that are available, and create opportunities for older workers, too. All that work is ongoing in Government.

UN Climate Change Conference 2025

3. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the UK’s priorities for the UN Climate Change Conference 2025. [903842]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): We are working closely with the Brazilian presidency to support a high-ambition outcome at COP30 in Belém which reflects the scale of the challenge and our shared 1.5° goal. That includes ambitious new nationally determined contributions and the effective implementation of the global stocktake commitments, as well as action on issues such as tackling deforestation and methane emissions.

Mohammad Yasin: It was encouraging to see the Prime Minister’s commitment to going further and faster towards net zero at the international energy summit last week, because not taking action on climate change will cost us much more. Does the Minister agree that clean energy is not only good for the planet, but can give my constituents in Bedford and Kempston energy security and lower bills?

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend is right. Other countries are looking to us. The conference last week was a good example of us being back in the business of global leadership. Whether it is through the Global Clean Power Alliance or our national mission to be a clean energy superpower, we are spearheading the transition because it is cheaper, cleaner and more secure. His constituents will benefit from that too.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I welcome the announcement made only a few days ago that the Government will adopt the amendment to the Great British Energy Bill to prevent slave-made goods, meaning that they will not be balancing their environmental consciences on the backs of some of the world’s most endangered and troubled individuals in the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. Will the Government extend that to the private sector to make sure no slave-made goods are coming into the UK? In New Ash Green and Ridley in my constituency, a solar panel farm is being put in that not only threatens the environment, but threatens to bring in slave-made goods into the United Kingdom.

Kerry McCarthy: I would dispute that it is threatening the environment, but we will be looking at the wider issue the right hon. Gentleman raises through the solar industry taskforce.

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

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The overwhelming majority of those at the international energy summit last week said that the transition to low-carbon energy is crucial to energy security. Does my hon. Friend agree that those in this Chamber and beyond who do not support the transition to low-carbon energy are playing fast and loose with this country’s energy security?

Kerry McCarthy: That is absolutely the case. It was heartening to see so many countries and so many representatives from business come together at the conference last week. We are showing global leadership on this issue. We know it is the way forward in terms of our energy security, and not putting us at the mercy of dictators and petrostates. I thank my hon. Friend for his support.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Given the sheer scale of the outages in Portugal and Spain over the past few days, is it likely that the conference will consider and possibly conclude that there is some correlation between the obsession with net zero and what happened in Portugal and Spain?

Kerry McCarthy: First of all, I am sure the whole House will want to send support to Spain and Portugal following the incidents yesterday. There were no effects in the UK, but we will continue to closely monitor the situation and any lessons learned from this event. I am not going to speculate as to its causes, but we do need to ensure that our own systems are as resilient as possible.

Climate Change: International Leadership

4. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to establish international leadership on climate change. [903843]

11. **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to establish international leadership on climate change. [903851]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): International leadership on climate change is critical for this Government, which is why we announced a world-leading nationally determined contribution at COP29 and were at the heart of negotiations during the summit. I have been working extensively with international counterparts to ensure maximum ambition from countries around the world at COP30, and look forward to further engagement.

Warinder Juss: I recently received letters from year 4 children at SS Peter and Paul primary school expressing concern over the impact of climate change on their futures, mentioning the extreme weather and the destruction of our natural habitats for our wildlife. The UK's 10 warmest years on record have all occurred since 2002, and 2022 was the UK's hottest year, with temperatures exceeding 40° for the first time. Despite being eight to nine years old, they gave suggestions for how the Government could help by providing cleaner sources of energy, such as making solar panels more affordable. Will the Secretary of State reassure me and those pupils that we are doing everything we can to be a world leader in tackling climate change and to sustain the future for our children?

Kerry McCarthy: I am glad to hear that the children at SS Peter and Paul primary school are taking such an interest in this issue. I can assure them that we are doing all we can to make Britain a clean energy superpower, such as lifting the onshore wind ban and setting up Great British Energy, and we are protecting nature too.

We are also committed to engaging more with young people, and I will make sure my hon. Friend is kept informed of our plans.

Richard Burgon: It is welcome indeed to see the Government now playing a leading role internationally on climate action through the global clean power alliance, especially after a decade of failure that left us exposed to soaring gas prices. It is also great to see the Secretary of State standing up to climate deniers in this House, whose hostility to net zero would keep bills high and cost areas like mine the jobs and investment that they need.

One area where we need strong leadership is on funding climate action fairly. In the coming days, I will be introducing a Bill to make the biggest polluters pay for the action we need both at home and abroad. I do not expect the Minister or the Secretary of State to comment on a Bill they have not seen, but will the Secretary of State commit to a meeting between his Department and a broad group of charities and non-governmental organisations working to ensure fair and just climate financing?

Kerry McCarthy: I welcome my hon. Friend's support for the Government's climate leadership. We are doing all we can to mobilise climate financing in support of the new collective goal agreed at COP29. I would be more than happy to meet him and campaigners to discuss his Bill when he is ready to do so.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): One area where we could show significant leadership is in the sphere of floating solar, which comes with huge benefits. My constituency has 2,000 acres of raised reservoirs where we keep half of London's drinking water—you cannot see the top of them, Mr Speaker. Floating solar is twice as efficient as land-based systems and comes with none of the opportunity costs of putting solar panels on grade A agricultural land; in fact, floating solar panels actually improve the water quality underneath, so that Thames Water would have to use less filtration downstream. I hear, however, that the Government's solar road map has disappointingly little about floating solar. Would the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss this further, prior to publication?

Kerry McCarthy: As I understand it, the solar road map has not yet been published, so watch this space. I have been having conversations in the past couple of weeks with international counterparts who are interested in floating solar, and I would be happy to get the hon. Gentleman a more detailed response on our plans on that front.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): As the Minister knows, global leadership is about adaptation and mitigation. Does she expect the Climate Change Committee's report on adaptation, which is due out tomorrow, to say that the Government are doing enough in this regard? Furthermore, will she show real leadership by requiring local authorities and major infrastructure providers to carry out climate risk assessments, so that, statutorily, they will have to ensure that climate resilience and preparedness form a part of their plans?

Kerry McCarthy: I cannot pre-empt what is in the report. We will wait for it to come out, and then respond in due course. On local leadership, the hon. Lady and I share a local authority, and I would be very happy to discuss with it what more we can do to set an example—as Bristol has done so many times in the past—on how things can be done at a local level.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): As we have seen in Portugal and Spain, renewable energy can sometimes be unreliable. Given the dominant role that China plays in our renewable energy infrastructure, will the Minister set out for the House the full details of the deal that the Secretary of State signed in secret with the Chinese Government?

Kerry McCarthy: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, assures me that the deal was not signed. He will keep the House informed as and when it is appropriate to do so.

Domestic Energy Bills: Transparency

5. **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the transparency of domestic energy bill costings. [903844]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): Under Ofgem's current rules, suppliers must provide complete and accurate billing information. Critically, bills are required to be displayed in plain and accessible language. We will work with the regulator to ensure that suppliers abide by that. However, it is worth saying that we recognise that many consumers feel let down by a broken energy system that is not working on their behalf. That is why we are reviewing the role of Ofgem, to ensure that it has the powers necessary to be an effective consumer champion.

Dr Evans: When it comes to bills, the public understand what unit costs are, but not what standing charges are. When I raised this with the previous Government and Ofcom, they said that it was a complex matter, but what I am asking for is transparency, so that people understand how the charge is made up, and can then make a judgment on what it looks like. Will the Government commit to asking Ofgem to ensure that that information is included in the billing, so that we can see the breakdown of costs—how much is going on human resources and how much is going on the actual infrastructure and wires—so we know exactly what is going on in the energy market?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We support transparency. Ofgem publishes the breakdown of all costs within bills, but there is more that we need to do to ensure that consumers understand what is going on. Critically for us, we know that consumers are very frustrated about the standing charges, which is why we are committed to lowering them. As I have said, a consultation is under way around what we do with standing charges, which includes introducing a zero-standing-charge tariff. Within that, we will be considering options to increase transparency.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Many households in rural and coastal areas, including in South East Cornwall, are not connected to the gas grid and rely on alternative fuels, which often cost them more. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that, unlike under the previous Government, these residents are not left behind in future support schemes?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are very clear that every part of the country must benefit from this transition, so whether it is through our warm home scheme or the work that we are doing locally through Great British Energy, we are making sure that there is a solution for every single part of the country. In my Department, I am doing a lot of work to make sure that we have a set of propositions for households in rural areas, so that they can upgrade their homes and have bills that are cheaper and homes that are warmer, which is the central plank of our warm home scheme.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Several times now, I have asked Ministers to rule out aligning the British carbon price with the European one and each time they have refused to do so. They have already abandoned their promise to cut energy bills by £300 a year, but alignment would increase wholesale costs and therefore increase bills for every family in the country. Can the Minister, at last, be straight with the public and tell us whether the Government plan to match the European carbon price—yes, or no?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are engaging with industry on this matter. The Confederation of British Industry and Energy UK are clear that they should support alignment, but we are looking at that. Ultimately, we are doing everything that we can to bear down on energy costs in this country. That is why we are sprinting to clean power. We inherited an absolutely atrocious legacy from the Conservative party, which allowed businesses and consumers to bear the price of a broken system. We will not make the same mistakes, which is why we are cracking on with the job.

Nick Timothy: I think we are getting closer to the Government admitting their secret plan. As soon as the local elections are done, Labour is going to sell out to Europe, and the result will be higher bills for British families. But there is more: the EU is expanding carbon pricing to include transport and heating emissions, so alignment with the expanded scheme would mean extra taxes on every British family for driving their cars and heating their homes. Will the Minister rule out aligning at least with the expanded scheme and say no to new taxes on everyday life—yes or no?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I am absolutely disappointed by the Conservatives. I should expect more, but maybe I need to get used to being disappointed. We saw the press release a week ago, and it has had no publicity because it is a Conservative party scare story. It is absolute nonsense. The Government are serious about bearing down on the cost of energy for businesses, and we are getting on with the serious work of doing that. I suggest that the Conservatives get a grip and join us in that task.

Clean Energy Transition

6. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the clean energy transition on workers. [903845]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): We firmly believe that the clean energy transition is the economic opportunity of the 21st century. In recent weeks, we have secured thousands of new jobs in carbon capture, offshore wind and British supply chains. As we transform the way we power our country, we are determined to ensure that communities across our country benefit from good jobs and good wages. That is what our clean energy mission is all about.

Martin Rhodes: I thank the Minister for her response, but could she go further in setting out the Government's assessment of how in the clean energy transition new jobs can be created here in the UK in the manufacturing of components for offshore wind and other green energy projects?

Sarah Jones: I was delighted that last week the Government were able to announce an initial £300 million through Great British Energy to invest in supply chains for domestic offshore wind. The fund will boost domestic jobs, mobilise additional private investment and secure manufacturing facilities for critical clean energy supply chains. We are publishing our industrial strategy in the spring, which will set out our approach to the highest growth-driving sectors, including clean energy industries.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): There was more good news last week for carbon capture, usage and storage workers in England, with £200 million in supply chain contracts for the Liverpool Bay HyNet project, which will even benefit north Wales now. That is on top of the £22 billion that benefits Teesside and Merseyside. I have checked, and those places were not the centre of the UK's energy industry for the last five years. Why have the Government not allocated a single penny to the Acorn project in Scotland, where the clock is ticking and where investors are very concerned that this Government are not serious about it?

Sarah Jones: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for Government policy and for our investment in CCUS. As he knows, Acorn is a matter for the spending review. I talk to many industries in Scotland, and everyone is supportive of the scheme. We support the scheme and are working closely with industry, but it is a matter for the spending review.

Household Energy Efficiency

7. **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What steps he is taking to help improve the energy efficiency of homes. [903847]

14. **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): What steps he is taking to help improve the energy efficiency of homes. [903854]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): In 2025-26 alone we will upgrade up to 300,000 homes through the warm homes plan and

other measures. That is more than double the number of homes upgraded last year. Later this year we will set out more detail of our warm homes plan to upgrade up to 5 million homes with energy-efficient technologies such as heat pumps, solar and insulation in order to deliver warmer homes and lower bills.

Tessa Munt: I recognise that there are very good schemes for those on lower incomes and that heating homes is really important. For many older properties and properties in conservation areas, as fast as we heat the homes, the heat just goes out the windows. In my area, where there are lots of older homes and homes in conservation areas, it is near impossible to get permission to apply double or triple glazing. Can the Secretary of State sort out this tension between having warm homes and older homes, particularly when he is trying so hard to ensure that homes meet the C grade rating for energy performance certificates by 2030? This needs to be sorted out with planning departments.

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady raises a really important point. I am constantly on the look-out for small measures and large in the planning system that can obstruct the sensible energy efficiency measures, such as solar panels, that will make all the difference. I say to her and other Members of the House that if they have specific examples of barriers or interpretations of guidelines that are getting in the way—sometimes is not about the rules but about local councils' interpretations of them—please bring them to our attention, because we are constantly trying to make it easier to make such upgrades happen.

Sarah Dyke: Earl, a social housing tenant from Glastonbury, is disabled and has faced multiple barriers that have prevented him from self-funding improvements to the sustainability and energy efficiency of his home, in order to help him reduce his energy poverty and improve his health. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that social housing tenants receive energy upgrades in their homes, and in particular those living in older housing stock, where upgrades might be more complex to achieve?

Ed Miliband: It sounds as though the hon. Lady is raising an individual case, and if she wants to draw it to our attention, she can do so. On the more general point, I believe that her local authority has received £6 million as part of the warm homes local grant, so it would be worth talking to it about this. Again—I am sure that I speak for the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), on this—where there are specific issues about how particular schemes are working, please do draw them to our attention and we will seek to act on them.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Royal Shrewsbury hospital in my constituency was delighted to receive a £450,000 investment for solar panels, which will see our local trust save more than £1 million by reducing its energy bills in the lifetime of the project. Will the Secretary of State join me in celebrating this excellent start to our nationalised Great British Energy company and update the House on the next steps to get us towards that mission?

Ed Miliband: I do join my hon. Friend in that. I say to all Opposition Members who voted against GB Energy that many of them will now be getting solar panels on schools and hospitals in their constituencies. Let all their constituents know that those are local MPs who opposed cutting bills for schools and hospitals in their own constituencies.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the £17 million of Government funding for Norwich's Labour-led city council to improve energy efficiency in homes, which will help tackle fuel poverty and provide much more comfort. Will the Secretary of State welcome Norwich Labour's leadership on this issue and set out how we will provide more funding to local councils so that they can go further, faster?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend raises a really important point about the crucial role of local authorities in relation to these issues. One of the things that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has done is devolve more funding to combined authorities on this. We want to go further, including in relation to local authorities, because it is local authorities—including my hon. Friend's, which I congratulate—who know best the particular needs of their own localities, and they are a key part of the answer to the energy efficiency upgrade that we need.

Great British Energy

8. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Great British Energy on job creation in industrial communities. [903848]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Great British Energy will support the creation of thousands of high-quality, well-paid jobs right across the country and help rebuild the UK's industrial heartlands. Just last week, the Prime Minister announced £300 million for Great British Energy to kick-start supply chains here in the UK. Once the Great British Energy Bill finishes its final stages in Parliament, we will come forward with more exciting plans for our domestic clean energy champion.

Chris Vince: I welcome the £300 million of investment for GB Energy announced last week. I think we all recognise the opportunities of the green energy transition, but what opportunities are there for my Harlow constituents to be part of that publicly owned energy company?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that, with Great British Energy and our clean power mission, we are trying to create the jobs that will deliver that transition here in the UK, which is something that the Conservatives failed on for many years. We expect that funding, and much more that will come from Great British Energy, to mobilise more than £1 billion in private investment in domestic supply chains, driving forward manufacturing and industry here in the UK and the good jobs that go with it.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the number of jobs that Great British Energy will create in the People's Republic of China?

Michael Shanks: I think the right hon. Gentleman gives the game away there. Although the Conservative party did not particularly care where the supply chains were, we in the Labour party are committed to delivering good, well-paid jobs in this country. If he was so concerned about investing in British supply chains, he might have bothered to vote for Great British Energy in the first place.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): When GB Energy was first proposed, we were told it would employ 1,000 people and create 650,000 jobs. Fast-forward to February this year and that number has been revised down to 200 to 300, with a vague commitment to 1,000 at some point in the next 20 years. As the general secretary of the GMB said yesterday,

"they are going to open a shiny new office...on a high street full of charity shops because they are closing"

the city of Aberdeen down. GB Energy is a white elephant. If the GMB can see it, why cannot the Minister? Surely he agrees that the way to deliver jobs, growth and energy security and to protect communities such as Aberdeen is to lift the ban on licences, replace the energy profits levy as soon as possible and declare the North sea open for business.

Michael Shanks: I am not quite sure which one of the variety of parts in that speech the hon. Gentleman would like me to respond to. As usual, he steamrolls through his question faster than he ran the marathon—I congratulate him on that. He happens to be the only person in Aberdeenshire who is against investment in his community. When Labour Members voted to deliver investment through Great British Energy—not through jobs in the headquarters but through the investment it makes in supply chains and innovation in his city—he voted against it, and he will have to answer to his constituents for that.

Nuclear Power Sector

9. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the nuclear power sector. [903849]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Nuclear power is a critical part of our clean power ambitions. We are making strong progress on Sizewell C and Great British Nuclear is driving forward its small modular reactor competition. We have also seen the nuclear regulatory taskforce set up by the Prime Minister, and we are ending the legacy of no new nuclear being completed in the 14 long years when the Conservatives were in power.

Douglas McAllister: The transition to net zero is a chance to create decent, high-skilled jobs for the future. That includes the next generation of small nuclear reactors, which could revolutionise our energy market and deliver cleaner affordable energy. The SNP has vetoed nuclear energy projects in Scotland for almost 20 years, determined to leave Scotland behind. Is Scotland missing out on the economic opportunities that nuclear offers?

Michael Shanks: Planning matters, including the siting of new nuclear, are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so it is rightly for it to decide. However, I agree that Scotland is missing out on the huge potential of new nuclear. If the ideological block introduced by the SNP were lifted, billions of pounds could be invested in Scotland, with the countless skilled jobs that go with that. That could well be delivered next year if a Scottish Government are elected that take the industry and opportunity of Scotland seriously and deliver those well-paid skilled jobs—that would come by electing a Scottish Labour Government.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Data from the last year showed that Ynys Môn saw a drop of 57% in jobs linked to the nuclear industry; the worst figure for a UK constituency. Despite Wylfa being recognised as the best site for new nuclear in Europe, we saw no development from the last Government. Will the Secretary of State and the Minister give us the recognition and acknowledgment that Wylfa needs new nuclear and that that will be seen in the near future?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady has raised with me that point and the wider question of energy jobs in her constituency a number of times, and I thank her for that and for the way she has done so. Wylfa is an important site and continues to be one that the Government are considering. We will take forward those decisions in due course. As I have said to her on a number of previous occasions, we are committed to delivering the jobs that go with that and Wylfa remains an important site.

Reducing Industrial Electricity Prices

10. **James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to help reduce industrial electricity prices. [903850]

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones): Industrial energy prices doubled under the previous Government and industry suffered, as did consumers, when wholesale prices rocketed at the start of the Ukraine war. The best way to secure bills for the long term—for industry, as well as for consumers—is to deliver clean power by 2030. The truth is that the Tories ran down our energy infrastructure, just as they ran down our road and rail infrastructure and our public services. We are rebuilding that infrastructure, making it more secure for the long term and less reliant on foreign dictators, thus giving us energy independence, good jobs and cheaper bills.

James Wild: Growing the economy will need cheaper energy, but INEOS's chief executive has warned that Labour's crippling carbon taxes and other levies threaten UK manufacturing and make us more reliant on imports. When will Ministers start listening and realise that their dogma-driven energy policy is costing jobs and investment, and when will they actually act to make our electricity prices more competitive?

Sarah Jones: As UK Steel said recently, the main driver of the price disparity is the wholesale electricity cost, which is driven by the UK's reliance on natural gas. The best way to secure bills for the long term is to deliver clean power by 2030, and that is what we are doing.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Green jobs are great jobs, and I welcome the £43 billion of private investment in clean energy since the election of this Labour Government. In order to bring down our industrial energy prices further, what steps will the Government take to get us on to clean energy that we control and off the fossil fuels that are in the control of dictators?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is right to point out the huge amount of private sector investment that is coming in with clean energy. This is why, in the industrial strategy, clean energy is one of the growth-driving sectors where we have seen 10% growth in the economy. We are also seeing hundreds of thousands of jobs, which the Conservatives now seem determined to oppose. We will introduce the clean energy of the future, and that is why we are pushing for clean energy by 2030. That will bring down bills, give us energy security and create really good quality jobs.

National Grid Resilience

12. **Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the resilience of the national grid against the potential disruption of offshore energy infrastructure. [903852]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Before I answer the hon. Lady's substantive question, I want to offer her my huge congratulations on smashing to smithereens on Sunday the previous record held by a female MP in the London marathon.

Great Britain has a highly resilient energy network with diverse sources of supply. The national energy system operator can balance the system in a wide range of scenarios, including potential disruptions to offshore infrastructure.

Harriet Cross: The UK currently has about 15 GW of offshore wind capacity, which supplies about 17% of our energy. In order to reach the Government's 2030 targets, this will have to increase by three times to 40 to 50 GW in just five years, and to achieve that we will have to rely on Chinese wind infrastructure and technology. What specific risk assessment have the Government carried out into the impact of this exposed vulnerability and reliance on China for what will be a significant amount of our energy supplies?

Michael Shanks: I will not comment on individual investment cases, but in every single case the Government make an assessment and we look at the national security implications seriously, just as the Conservatives did when they were in government. I would just gently say that the reason the supply chains in this country are as weak as they are is that they were underfunded and under-invested for years by the Conservatives. There could have been a decision, at the point when they took ambitious steps to move towards clean power, to build the supply chains here, but they chose not to do so; they chose to tow things into our waters instead. We are reversing that, but it cannot happen overnight.

**Energy Efficiency:
Council Leaseholders and Social Homes**

15. Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that local authorities have adequate resources for energy efficiency upgrades for council leaseholders and social homes. [903855]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): At the 2024 autumn Budget, £1.8 billion was allocated to local authorities and social housing providers, supporting them to deliver warmer and more energy-efficient homes across the country, targeting low-income households in particular. This goes alongside our plans to raise standards in rented properties to ensure that no social or private renter has to live in a cold, draughty home.

Tulip Siddiq: I am pleased to see the Government's commitment to provide thousands of low-income households with energy-efficient upgrades. This could not have come too soon for my vulnerable constituents who are living on housing estates with outdated energy systems that sometimes leave them without hot water and heating for months on end. Camden Council, which I know the Minister knows well, has plans to upgrade the energy efficiency of those estates, but in many cases it just does not have the resources to replace the heating systems with heat pumps, which would lower bills and carbon emissions even further. What assurances can the Minister give me that local authorities will be given the support necessary to deliver the energy upgrades to the highest possible level?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Local authorities will have a critical role to play in our warm homes plan. Under our warm homes schemes, we are offering substantial support to enable low-income households to transition to clean heat. For example, our warm homes social housing fund allows grant recipients to receive an additional £7,500 clean heat upgrade, and under our warm homes local grant, £15,000 is being provided on top of the baseline to enable all households, particularly low-income households, to benefit from clean heat.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I know how on top of her brief the Minister is, so will she confirm that fewer than a third of council homes had an energy performance certificate C rating in 2010 compared with over 70% by last year? Less than 12% of homes in the UK had decent insulation in 2010 when Labour last left office and when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband), who is chuntering from a sedentary position, was in power, and more than 50% did by the time we left office. Will she commit to a faster rate of improvement under this Government than we ever saw under the previous Labour Government?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I welcome the right hon. Member's commitment to our plans to upgrade homes. However, he is trying to rewrite history, because when we look at the record of the previous Government, we see many failures, but the most abject and egregious was the failure to insulate enough homes to ensure that households were protected from price rises. That is the Conservatives'

legacy, and it is one we are determined to turn around. That is why we are committed to upgrading millions of homes across the country.

National Wealth Fund: Opportunities for Industry

16. Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the opportunities for industry through the National Wealth Fund. [903856]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The National Wealth Fund has a critical role to play alongside Great British Energy in driving investment and jobs into clean energy industries. The fund is already making great progress, including participating in the latest round by GeoPura, a UK-based green hydrogen pioneer, as well as supporting critical minerals in Cornwall, as part of our mission for clean power by 2030.

Rachel Hopkins: Our Labour Government are driving economic growth in Luton and Bedfordshire through our support for the sustainable expansion of Luton airport and the exciting new Universal Studios. Does the Minister agree that we need to match those positive developments with incentivising investment in renewable energy to ensure that the pursuit of growth contributes to meeting our climate commitments?

Sarah Jones: The Government welcome the plans to invest in and around Luton, including the expansion of Luton airport and the incredibly exciting Universal theme park, which is on the "perfect site", as its president said. It also has perfect MPs. These projects, along with the mass clean power investments we are delivering, will grow the economy and deliver direct benefits to the communities that host this vital clean power infrastructure which will take all of us off the fossil fuel market rollercoaster.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): The domestic user of electricity pays 24p per kilowatt; the domestic user of mains gas pays 6p. People who live in urban Britain buy their energy for a quarter of the price paid by people in rural Britain. This is a massive problem, and I wonder whether the Minister could explain how the Government will address it.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, though it was not quite about the National Wealth Fund. He is right to highlight electricity prices. This is a challenge for industry and one we inherited from the previous Government. The best way to bring those bills down is to secure clean power by 2030, but he is right to highlight the challenges, and that is what we are trying to fix.

Topical Questions

T1. [903865] **Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): Last week, 60 Governments and more than 50 global businesses gathered in London for the first global summit on the future of energy security with the International Energy Agency. I heard from country after country the hard-headed case for clean energy's role in delivering energy security to free us from

the global fossil fuel markets controlled by petrostates and dictators. I also heard from many clean energy businesses that Britain was the place where they wanted to invest because of the clarity and speed of this Government's mission.

Markus Campbell-Savours: Homes in rural areas experience some of the highest rates of fuel poverty in the UK. Rural properties are less energy efficient than the national average and many are simply harder to insulate. Will the Minister confirm that my constituents in Penrith and Solway will see the additional challenge of rurality reflected in the Government's ambitious warm homes plan?

Ed Miliband: One hundred per cent—my hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. The Minister for Energy Consumers and I often discuss how we have to ensure that our warm homes plan takes account of the particular needs and challenges facing rural areas.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Voters

"feel they're being asked to make financial sacrifices...when they know that their impact on global emissions is minimal... Present policy solutions are inadequate and...therefore unworkable... The current approach isn't working... Any strategy based on either 'phasing out' fossil fuels in the short term or limiting consumption is a strategy doomed to fail."

Does the Secretary of State agree with his former boss Tony Blair?

Ed Miliband: The shadow Minister talks about the Tony Blair Institute report. I agree with a lot of what it says. It says that we should move ahead on carbon capture and storage, which the Government are doing. It says that we should move ahead on the role of artificial intelligence, which the Government are doing. It says that we should move ahead on nuclear, which the Government are doing. The shadow Minister said only three weeks ago, after his party dropped its net zero policy—this will surprise people, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Order. No, Secretary of State. This is topical questions; I do not need a full statement.

Andrew Bowie: To be honest, I was looking forward to hearing what I said a few weeks ago, Mr Speaker. It is okay for the Secretary of State to admit when he is wrong. As Tony Blair said yesterday, this strategy is "doomed to fail." Why can the Secretary of State not see what the GMB and Tony Blair see, which is that clean power 2030 is doomed to fail and it is time for a change of approach?

Ed Miliband: That is not what the report says. The shadow Minister is talking absolute nonsense. The point I was going to make was that he said:

"Look, nobody's saying that net zero was a mistake. Net zero in the round was the eminently sensible thing to do."

Those are not my words but his. Some people say that the Tory party has only one policy. Actually, it has two: it is against net zero and, through the shadow Minister, it is for net zero.

T2. [903866] **Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): North West Leicestershire has been at the forefront of industry for generations. Now, leading global companies such as ABB are investing locally, and our focus on energy efficiency is leading the way to net zero. Apprenticeships are a core part of that. How will our Government encourage apprenticeships in that sector in order to meet our net zero targets and support young people into the good-quality jobs of the future?

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The Office for Clean Energy Jobs is focused on developing a skilled workforce in core energy and net zero sectors that are critical to meeting our mission to make the UK a clean energy superpower. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are working with Skills England to assess skill needs and engaging with the Department for Education on apprenticeships and the wider growth and skills offer.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Following the publication of the Severn estuary commission report on tidal power, will the Government produce a national policy statement to support tidal range energy, and will they publish a review of the available opportunities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I have had a number of meetings on this issue since coming into post. Clearly, tidal could play an important part in an energy mix. We have been clear that we are supportive of it in principle, but questions about its cost benefit and value for money must be answered. We are happy to continue looking at it in future, as projects develop and more detail comes forward.

T4. [903868] **Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the Government's view that nuclear power is essential to our clean power goals. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that new nuclear can be built wherever that is possible across the country, including in my constituency?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend asks an important question. New nuclear is absolutely part of the energy mix. That is why we announced important reforms to the national policy statement. The previous such substantive reform was based on the one I published as Energy Secretary in 2009. We have updated the statement in order to enable new nuclear to be built right across the country, including in his constituency.

T3. [903867] **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): The power outages across Spain, Portugal and the south of France are a stark reminder of how energy security is key to national security. It is vital that any Government are alive to the risks to our national resilience. What steps have the Government taken to ensure that robust plans are in place in the event of power outages?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady asks an important question. I was in touch with the National Energy System Operator yesterday following the events in Spain and Portugal—the UK was not affected. NESO and my Department take this incredibly seriously. I would also add, given that

there has been some comment on this, that we should not jump to conclusions about what happened. Let us see what happened and the reasons for it, and then learn the lessons.

T6. [903870] Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Last month was a fantastic opportunity to welcome the Secretary of State to the Vaillant factory in Derby and to learn about Great British Nuclear's incredible investment of £1.8 million in solar panels. We know that, done right, the clean energy transition will support communities across the UK and thousands of new jobs. What step is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that Derby is at the heart of that opportunity?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right: this clean energy transition is about creating jobs. I was delighted to open the factory, which is creating 200 jobs and is a £40 million investment, manufacturing cylinders for heat pumps. This is an opportunity that this Government are going to seize for Britain.

T5. [903869] Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): This Secretary of State thinks it is a good idea to fill our fields with solar panels, at a cost of billions of pounds to the British taxpayer. I hate to break it to him, but solar panels rely on sunshine, so why is he now supporting a project to block out the sunshine?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman never ceases to amaze me, and not in a good way. Reform has made its decision; I am not sure what the Conservatives' position is. Cheap, clean, home-grown power is the answer for Britain, because it gives us energy security and frees us from the petrostates and dictators. We are in favour of it; Reform is against it. Goodness knows where the Conservative party is.

T7. [903871] Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Electric vehicle sales growth is at risk of slowing down. Many private car and fleet owners would transition to EVs, but patchy provision of public charging for those unable to charge at home and inadequate power capacity for rapid charging on our strategic road network for long-distance drivers are two key reasons for reluctance to buy EVs. What discussions are DESNZ Ministers having with power networks, charging providers and the Department for Transport to address this?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have a lot of Members I need to get in. These are topical questions—they are meant to be short and punchy.

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is right to point out that public charging points are critical. That is why the regulator, Ofgem, allocated £22 billion over the next five years to maintain and upgrade the infrastructure. I have had a number of meetings with network operators about this question, and I work closely with my colleagues in the Department for Transport to ensure we are rolling out more points.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): My constituents continue to face higher electricity bills—among the highest in the country at approximately £961 per year. One of my local hairdressers tells me that their electricity has gone up from £150 to £450 a month. Will

the Government commit to bolder policies by easing restrictions on solar and wind power and driving investment in renewables to help struggling businesses?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady is 100% right—clean, home-grown power is the answer—so that is an unequivocal yes.

T8. [903872] Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Industrial communities such as St Austell and the clay country have been stifled in recent years by soaring energy costs. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that industries such as the proud china clay industry are internationally competitive?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right: there is a long-standing issue around industrial energy prices. The key is getting off the rollercoaster of fossil fuel markets, because just as family finances were ruined in the cost of living crisis, it is the same in relation to business finances and public finances. It is an essential part of the answer.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): In my constituency, many elderly and disabled people face very high energy bills due to essential medical equipment and heating needs. What support are the Government providing to ensure that these households are protected from the high cost of electricity?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): We know that consumers are under pressure with energy bills. That is why last winter, £1 billion of support was provided to help vulnerable customers through our warm home discount and through industry. That is why we are extending the warm home discount from 3 million households to 6 million households and doing ongoing work to ensure we are supporting the most vulnerable households with bills.

T9. [903873] Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): Next week I will be visiting the site of a proposed project in my constituency that will create the only new interconnector between Great Britain and France, which can be built and operational by 2030, to help deliver the Government's clean power mission. Ahead of the proposed UK-France summit this summer, will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how to expedite conversations with our French counterparts, so that we can move forward with this important project?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue about interconnectors. It is something I have been talking to the regulator about, particularly in relation to France, and indeed to my French counterpart, Marc Ferracci, who was in London for our international energy summit. I am happy for the Department to engage with her and tell her about the work we are doing on that issue.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): During the general election, the Secretary of State repeatedly promised my constituents that if they voted Labour, their energy prices would be reduced by £300—not by “up to” £300. Will the Secretary of State repeat that promise at the Dispatch Box?

Ed Miliband: We said we would cut bills by up to £300, and that is absolutely what we are determined to do.

Jerome Mayhew: They have gone up.

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman says that bills have gone up, but let me give him a little basic lesson: they have gone up because we are exposed to fossil fuel prices. The only way to bring them down is by having sources of clean, home-grown power that we control.

T10. [903874] **Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): The Pimlico district heating undertaking was built in 1950, the first ever district heating network in the UK. It used to be cutting edge, but it is in desperate need of replacement, so that my constituents can have heating and hot water. Will the Government work with local authorities such as Labour Westminster city council to make sure that all the costs of replacement do not necessarily fall just on residents?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Westminster city council owns the network, and we know that it is considering options for refurbishing and potentially decarbonising it. In the round, we are committed to working with district networks to do two things: to increase technical standards, so that they are more efficient; and, critically, to properly regulate them, so that we protect consumers from unfair prices.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): When will the Government decide whether to support the UK-Morocco power project?

Ed Miliband: I know the right hon. Gentleman has an important interest in this project. We continue to have discussions with Xlinks and obviously we are happy to brief him on those discussions.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Unlike Conservative Members, I really welcomed the £200 million investment last week. It will be integral to creating the good jobs of the future in constituencies that are developing key technologies for offshore wind, like my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages. With that in mind, will the Minister and the Secretary of State visit my constituency to see GE Vernova and the hard work that it is doing there?

Ed Miliband: Yes is the answer; I look forward to it. My hon. Friend is 100% right: this is about the jobs of the future. Conservative Members might want to turn their back on them; we will not.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As we need some oil and gas while on the road to a clean energy economy, does it not make sense to produce our own, rather than importing it from other countries and thus increasing the global carbon footprint?

Michael Shanks: A consultation has just closed on the future of North sea energy. We have been very clear that our manifesto commitment was to not issue new licences for exploring new fields, but we will manage existing fields for the entirety of their lifespan.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): MPs across the Humber region are united in support for the Viking carbon capture, usage and storage project. Can the Government give an update on any progress with track 2 programmes?

Ed Miliband: As with Acorn, we think Viking is a really important project. I am very proud of the progress we made on track 1, and we are obviously looking at both Viking and Acorn in the spending review.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the Secretary of State ensure that GB Energy has a focused plan to deliver, and to help the 1,500 farmers in my constituency to tap the latent energy in their becks and rivers, so that we can support farming as well as the battle against climate change?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about the role that local community energy can play; I think that is what he is alluding to. We are committed to ensuring that. Great British Energy local has already made some announcements in this space, including on local energy funding in England. We will have much more to say in due course, but we want to ensure a partnership, so if the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will make sure that what he says gets to GB Energy.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): The Scottish National party celebrated the closure and demolition of Longannet coal power station in my constituency without having a plan for its future. The former First Minister pressed the button on the charges herself. What conversations do Ministers plan to have with the site owner, Scottish Power, about the future of the site, and what role might there be for the UK Government in bringing investment and jobs to my constituency?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is right to make the point about Longannet. We have conversations with Scottish Power on a number of issues, including this. He again emphasises the important role that nuclear could play in Scotland in the future. It could obviously be an important site for a range of uses, but if the ideological ban on nuclear by the SNP were lifted, we could look at other opportunities for such sites.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): When I was at the Scotland Office, I was regularly lobbied by retired senior executives from the electricity industry who wanted to state their concerns about how long it would take to reboot the network in Scotland if there was a major outage. Obviously, I sought the necessary assurances from those running the network, but in the light of what has happened in Spain and Portugal, I would be reassured if Ministers sought those assurances again.

Ed Miliband: My Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), and I regularly discuss this issue, which relates to one of the first duties of Government. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that not only is this a focus for Government, but we will look at what happened in Spain and Portugal to see if there are any lessons to be learned about our resilience.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fusion energy, I know that fusion technology not only has the potential to create thousands of jobs, but could also be the answer to our long-term clean energy security needs. Does the Minister agree with me that supporting fusion is a good example of the Government's crowding in private sector investment, creating jobs and winning investment for places like the east midlands?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): My hon. Friend is a real champion for his constituency, and for the benefits that the development of fusion will bring. We continue to invest and to have discussions with international counterparts. There is a very bright future for fusion, and for his constituents as a result.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The Minister will be aware of the switch-on of Moray West offshore wind farm at Buckie, in my constituency, last week, creating jobs, delivering clean energy and helping our nation to achieve net zero. Does the Minister accept that the current transmission charging regime poses significant and immediate threats to investment in offshore wind in Scotland? Will he meet me and industry representatives to explore that matter further?

Michael Shanks: We were delighted to switch on the wind farm; the Secretary of State for Scotland was there to push the button last week. It is a fantastic example of the potential of offshore wind. Of course, I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. I have already met him, and had a very enjoyable conversation, and I am very happy to talk about the issue. The review of the electricity market arrangements that we are going through will look at the issue of transmission charges. It is an important conversation to have, and I am happy to speak to him on the subject.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The United Kingdom was particularly susceptible to changes in international gas prices during the energy crisis, and bills and prices soared as a result. Under this Government, GB Energy is installing solar panels in hospitals in my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency, but will the Minister remind us which party presided over the worst cost of living crisis in memory—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Moon, please. You will not get called again if you carry on like that. I am sure the Minister will know the answer.

Ed Miliband: I am delighted to remind the House that it was the Conservative party that left us with energy insecurity, and we are never going to leave this country vulnerable in the way that it did.

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) said, the Government seem to have a three-point plan. Point one is to cover farmland in solar panels, and point two is to block out the sun. What is point three?

Ed Miliband: What is the point of the hon. Gentleman's party?

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I have been contacted by several constituents who have experienced failed ECO4 scheme installations. What support is there for constituents when installations go wrong? Are rogue installers getting paid for work that is not completed properly? What steps are being taken to address such failures?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are aware of issues that we have had with ECO4 and the Great British insulation scheme. If constituents have been affected, they should have received a letter from Ofgem. They should be able to contact their installer, who is obliged to fix the work, and there is a clear redress mechanism. There is a wider point: we know that the system for quality assurance and consumer redress is not fit for purpose and we are determined to overhaul it.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): In the 1970s, global warmists wanted to put black dust on the Arctic to block the sun. Now the Minister wants to put black dust on clouds to block the sun again. Is his plan not bonkers? £50 million of taxpayer's money has been spent, which will only put up energy prices even further.

Ed Miliband: This is like conspiracy theories gone mad. I feel like we have entered a whacky world. Let us keep our eyes on the prize. As a country, we are vulnerable because of our exposure to fossil fuels. This Government have one mission alone: to get clean, home-grown power, so that we take back control.

Kashmir: Increasing Tension

12.39 pm

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): Will the Minister make a statement on the killing of 26 people in Pahalgam in Kashmir and the increasing tension between India and Pakistan?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): The horrific terrorist attack in Pahalgam in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir on 22 April was devastating. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must sit down, because the Minister is on his feet replying.

Mr Falconer: Our thoughts are with those affected, their loved ones and, of course, the people of India. This attack left 26 people dead, most of whom, we understand, were tourists travelling to the region. Following the attack, India has announced a number of diplomatic measures against Pakistan, and Pakistan has reciprocated. The official UK travel advice for Indian-administered Kashmir continues to advise against all travel to Jammu and Kashmir, except for travel by air to the city of Jammu, travel within the city, and travel within the union territory of Ladakh.

This is a very sensitive situation, with real risks to regional and wider stability. Understandably, there has been huge interest within UK communities. Kashmir has been a flashpoint for conflict between India and Pakistan many times over previous decades. The Prime Minister spoke to Prime Minister Modi on 25 April to express his condolences on behalf of the British people. The UK condemns all forms of terrorism and the extremism that sustains it, wherever it occurs. The Foreign Secretary spoke to India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar on 27 April to pass on the UK's condolences and to express the UK Government's support to the Indian people at this difficult time. The Foreign Secretary has also spoken over the weekend to Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar.

Heightened tensions between India and Pakistan inevitably raise concerns about escalation. Effective channels of engagement to safeguard stability in the region are essential. The UK supported the UN Security Council press statement on 25 April, which condemned the attack and reaffirmed that acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable. The long-standing position of the UK is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution. We will continue to monitor the situation closely through our high commissioners in New Delhi and Islamabad.

Gurinder Singh Josan: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this question, and I thank the Minister for his statement. I have three further points.

First, this is a terrorist attack of the utmost barbarity, and it deserves to be condemned by all. My thoughts are with the families of those killed. The killing took place in a popular tourist location, and most victims were tourists. Among the victims was a man married only the week before, who was honeymooning with his

wife. The manner of the selection of the victims was particularly horrific, with the killers actively seeking out non-Muslims before killing them in cold blood. The Minister will be aware that the Kashmir region has been the scene of previous terrorist attacks that have claimed many innocent lives, including in Chittisinghpura, where 35 Sikhs were killed in 2000. What support can the UK provide to ensure that the terrorists are found and brought to justice, and to ensure that their networks of support are dismantled?

Secondly, there has been a significant escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan, including the measures that the Minister has outlined. India and Pakistan have engaged in large-scale military hostilities in the past in the region, and there is a real risk that the nations could revert to a military conflict again. What can the UK do to encourage a de-escalation of tensions, while ensuring the eradication of the terrorist organisations and their support networks wherever they exist?

Finally, the Minister will be aware that there have been protests in the UK outside India and Pakistan's high commissions. Those protests have been characterised by provocative language and gestures, including what appears to be a throat-slitting motion by an alleged Pakistan official. Windows have been smashed at Pakistan's high commission in London, and an individual has been arrested and charged. Does the Minister recognise the importance of proactive work with communities across the UK to ensure that we do not see a downturn in community relations here?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement on these questions. I am sure that the whole House shares his horror at the details of this incident—the targeting of the victims and the way in which it was carried out.

First, I will address the scenes on UK streets. We are aware of reports of the video that my hon. Friend refers to; the Metropolitan police are investigating, so I will not provide any further commentary on that particular incident, but it is obviously concerning. We take seriously our responsibility for the security of all embassies and high commissions under the Vienna convention, so both the Pakistani and Indian high commissions will receive all the support of the UK state to ensure that they stay safe. As my hon. Friend has said, and as I know many in this House feel, these issues have long been discussed with passion on British streets. We call on all sides, all community leaders and all involved to call for calm at a time of tension in the region.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Smethwick (Gurinder Singh Josan) for securing the question and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who also requested a question on this topic today, for the support he has given to India.

My condolences, thoughts and prayers are with all those affected by the murderous violent terrorism that has taken place in Pahalgam. I recognise that for India and the diaspora communities—those in the UK in particular—this has been a really difficult week. This was an act of terrorism, and we should call it out for exactly what it is. It is part of a long-standing pattern of

[Priti Patel]

attacks on civilians, visitors to the region and minority communities, and the UK must always stand with our friends during times of this nature.

We have a series of long-standing security and counter-terrorism partnerships with India, going back to the New Delhi declaration in 2002 and including the India-UK strategic partnership in 2016, the comprehensive strategic partnership announced in 2022, and the UK-India 2030 road map agreed under the last Government. Under those partnerships, security issues have been absolutely watertight, which is why we must always be in lockstep with our friends in India.

Can the Minister tell us what information the UK Government have on those responsible for carrying out these terrorist attacks? Do the Government believe that Lashkar-e-Taiba, the terrorist group proscribed in the UK, bear responsibility? Are the Government aware of any cross-border links to Pakistan among the perpetrators of this terrorist act? Given that attacks seem to take place at the same time as high-profile US politicians visit India—this is not the first time—do the Government have a view on whether this is a coincidence, or whether it demonstrates a pattern of targeted and deliberately timed attacks?

We know that the Prime Minister spoke to Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week, but has the UK provided any specific support in response to this terror attack or taken any practical steps to assist our friends in India? Have the Government undertaken an assessment of the security implications of this attack for the UK? If Lashkar-e-Taiba or a front linked to them are responsible, it should be noted that disturbing reports are emerging that this terrorist group may have had engagement with Hamas. Have the Government made an assessment of the relationship between groups causing terror and destabilisation in Kashmir and those pursuing violence and terrorism that threaten our interests and global peace and security?

Finally, can the Minister give an update on the actions being taken to prevent tensions from escalating among communities in the UK—including protections for the high commissions, which have already been mentioned—and will the UK leverage its influence to ease tensions between India and Pakistan?

Mr Falconer: I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions. India is a friend to the UK, and we have been clear about the depth of our friendship in our response to this incident. She would not expect me to comment in detail on intelligence and security matters in relation to this attack, but I assure her that we are looking at it very closely. She is right that wherever terrorism is found, it is a threat to global peace and security, including in the UK. I will not comment further from this Dispatch Box on links between some of the groups that the right hon. Lady has mentioned, but I assure her that our security agencies take these matters very seriously, as she would expect.

The right hon. Lady asks important questions about the Indian high commission. As I said in my earlier answer, we will offer our full support. There is 24/7 enhanced protection outside the high commission, and it will be a top priority for the Government to ensure that no harm comes to any Indian diplomats or, indeed, any other diplomats here in the UK.

We are playing our role to try to ensure that tensions do not escalate. Many of us in this House are familiar with the tense and storied history between the two countries. We are friends to them both, and we do not want to see an uncontrolled escalation in tensions.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): May I pay my respects to those who have lost loved ones in the horrific terrorist attack in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir? My thoughts are with them at this devastating time. Many of my constituents have written to me about the escalation of hostilities here in the UK. Can the Minister say what conversations he is having with Indian and Pakistani counterparts to address this situation?

Mr Falconer: This escalation is unsettling for communities within the UK. British Pakistanis and British Indians are valued parts of our community, but we look to all community and faith leaders to spread the message that now is the time for coming together across religious and ethnic differences, not to play out the tensions between two states on the streets of the UK, and we will continue to send that message.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I associate myself with the comments that have already made, reflecting on the grief of the communities torn apart last week. Tuesday's horrific murders were utterly devastating, and those responsible must face the full weight of the law. The escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan is alarming, as are reports of incidents of fire being exchanged by soldiers at the border, and it threatens to destabilise the entire region. It is vital that leaders in both countries commit to an open dialogue and wider efforts to de-escalate. We hope that that includes India committing to reinstate the Indus waters treaty, the suspension of which threatens water access for Pakistanis, and Pakistan reopening its airspace to Indian-owned airlines.

The UK must engage with both Governments and encourage a return to dialogue and a retreat from retaliatory action to ensure that decisions taken in the wake of Tuesday's horrific attack do not endanger more lives. Can the Minister confirm what conversations he has had with officials in New Delhi on reinstating the Indus waters treaty and with officials in Islamabad on reopening its airspace?

Mr Falconer: It is vital that effective channels of engagement to safeguard stability in the region exist, and we are encouraging both parties to that effect. There has been a lot of speculation about the diplomatic measures that have been announced so far. As we understand it, international agreements have been put in abeyance, rather than being rescinded. In the long term, the proper functioning of water management in the Indus water catchment area is vital for both sides of the line.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The whole House is united in its condemnation of the horrific attack that killed 26 people in Pahalgam, Kashmir. It has rightly been condemned by all in the region, and we must now see a full and independent investigation where

those responsible are brought to justice. The response from the Indian Government has been somewhat concerning, with unilateral action taken to revoke the Indus waters treaty, risking the lives and livelihoods of millions in Pakistan. We are now hearing reports of crackdowns in Kashmir, with 1,500 people rounded up by the police and bulldozer tactics used on households. Hard-line groups have issued statements promising reprisal attacks, death threats and action against every Muslim in India. Kashmir continues to be a flashpoint between the two nuclear neighbours, so does the Minister agree that the international community must now seriously focus on de-escalation and long-term peace in the region? Can he also set out what the Government are doing to ensure that Kashmiris do not face further persecution or oppression?

Mr Falconer: This is clearly a time of heightened tensions, which inevitably invites concern both in the region and here in the UK. We are, as I said, engaged with both states to try to find the most effective way to prevent these terrible incidents from ever being repeated, but also to ensure continued stability in the region.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I asked at business questions last week for a statement on this issue this week, so I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for making sure that we have that statement through this urgent question.

The reality of this terrorist attack, which was well organised and well co-ordinated, is that, despite the Minister's words, these 26 men who were murdered systematically by being shot in the head were either Hindu or Christian. This was a deliberate Islamist attack on those tourists who were just going about their business in a peaceful manner. These terrorists were well equipped, and they were well co-ordinated.

The sad reality is that while the Government may offer expressions of condolence and support to the people of India, the terrorist bases that exist along the line of control in the part of Kashmir illegally occupied by Pakistan continue to operate across that line of control. Will the Government commit to full support for India in apprehending the terrorists responsible and bringing the backers of those terrorists to justice? Will the Government take all steps to support the erosion and elimination of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman has come to have an argument, but I am not sure which part of the statement he did not like. Until the investigation is concluded, we should not speculate on the nature of the attack. I say to him that will do everything we can to ensure that those who committed this horrific attack are brought to justice, and India will have our support in that.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I share in the comments made in this House. We are horrified by this terrorist attack, and my thoughts are with the families, the victims and those in India. We have seen worrying scenes play out in London, as my hon. Friend the Member for Smethwick (Gurinder Singh Josan) mentioned. We cannot let the situation escalate on to UK shores. We all bear a responsibility to help de-escalate tensions. What steps is the UK taking to support international bodies, especially the United Nations, in their calls for a de-escalation in tensions?

Mr Falconer: As I have said, we have spoken at the senior level to both states, and we have made clear the importance of maintaining stability in the region at this time.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): I echo the words of condemnation over the horrific terror attacks in Pahalgam, which took the lives of 26 innocent tourists. I express my heartfelt condolences to all those who have been affected. The rapid escalation of events following this tragedy has been deeply worrying. India's unfounded claims against Pakistan are a dangerous and irresponsible reaction to the tragedy suffered in Kashmir. The unilateral and illegal decision to suspend the Indus waters treaty threatens to cut the lifeline of 200 million people in Pakistan, and it cannot stand. Will the Minister join me in expressing concern over the knife-edge position that these two nations are in and call for adherence to the guidance set under international bodies of law? Will he make a plea to calm the situation? If it is exacerbated, it will have severe consequences that spread much further than that region alone.

Mr Falconer: I think I have set out our views on the importance of stability in the region already this afternoon. I agree with the hon. Member that it is critical for all actors and international partners to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Indus river system.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I welcome the statement from the Minister today. In light of the awful terror attack in Indian-administered Kashmir, what work are the Government undertaking to consult the Kashmiri diaspora here in the UK and identify their concerns?

Mr Falconer: Both the Foreign Office and other UK Government Departments engage regularly with the British Kashmiri community—who are an important part of so many communities across the United Kingdom—and will continue to do so.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am sure the Government recognise that the strategic aim of this sort of terrorist atrocity is to provoke indiscriminate retaliation and undermine peaceful relations between neighbouring countries between which there may be some history of hostility. Will the Minister impress on the Indian Government the necessity of focusing on the actual perpetrators and not on the wider community, and will he impress on the Pakistani Government the importance, in good faith, of tracking down those responsible?

Mr Falconer: Too often in the region for which I am responsible, and indeed in this country, we have seen terrorist attacks designed to have exactly the effect that the right hon. Gentleman has described, namely to provoke tension, intercommunal hostility and a breakdown of law and order. As he says, a proper, law-enforcement-led response based on a focus on the actual perpetrators is important in this area, as it is throughout the world.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): May I first send my condolences, thoughts and prayers to all the victims of this heinous terrorist attack in occupied Kashmir?

[Naz Shah]

There is a large Kashmiri diaspora in my constituency, and many of my constituents have reached out to me expressing deep concerns. A number of them have mentioned the Indus waters treaty. Pakistan has already been suffering from the effects of floods in past years, from which it has not recovered. At times of escalation and troubles such as this it seems to be communities at large, be they in India or Pakistan, who suffer. What message can the Minister give my constituents to reassure them that the UK is doing all it can to de-escalate, bring things back to normal and hold the perpetrators to account?

Mr Falconer: We are focused on holding the perpetrators to account. I am familiar with the issues facing Pakistan in relation to acute natural disaster: I was there during the disastrous floods in 2010, and I recognise the importance of the Indus river system in both India and Pakistan and of co-operation between the two states to manage that vital system. There is a great deal of speculation about what has been decided and what has been agreed, but we understand that diplomatic treaties are being held in abeyance and that there is still space for a long-term answer to some of these questions.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on British Hindus, and with a constituency that contains a considerable Indian and Pakistani community, I was especially shocked and saddened by the news of the horrific murder of 26 people last Tuesday, and I have received many emails from constituents raising their own concerns. Of particular concern are reports of the targeting of Hindus and Christians: such race-based terror is unacceptable anywhere in the world. What steps are the Government taking to encourage both India and Pakistan to investigate these terrible crimes, and to ensure that lines of communication are kept open to avoid a further escalation of the conflict?

Mr Falconer: We are encouraging direct lines of communication, and we are of course encouraging Pakistan to provide all possible assistance with the investigation of these horrific crimes.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): May I associate myself with the comments of the Minister and other Members who have condemned the killing of 26 innocent people?

Given that tensions between India and Pakistan are running high and resulting in arrests, does the Minister agree with me, and with others who have raised the point, that we must not let this issue boil over into our streets? If anything, we should be working to convey a message of peace and hope to that part of the world. In the light of the tit-for-tat actions being undertaken by Pakistan and India, does the Minister also agree that we need to encourage the holding of an open, independent inquiry to establish the facts, ensure accountability and help to restore calm? That would be far better for the world than India and Pakistan—nuclear powers—going to war.

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is, of course right: peace and calm are vital for communities here and across the world. The two states are talking to each

other, which is welcome. India's concerns for its own security are understandable in the light of such a horrific incident. It is clearly taking steps to try to establish the facts as best it can, and it will have British support to do so.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): At a time of such tragedy, language is incredibly important. All of us, in all parts of the House, condemn this terrorist incident, but a number of my constituents have been particularly concerned about the BBC's describing it as "militance" rather than as what it is—a terrorist attack. Will the Minister use his position to make representations to the BBC to ensure that it understands the importance of the language it uses?

Mr Falconer: I resist calls for Ministers to police the BBC's language too much, but let me be clear: this was a horrific terrorist attack, and that is the view of the British Government.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): We have seen the Kargil incursion, the Chittisinghpura attack, the hijacking of Air India Flight 814, the attack on Gandhinagar, the attack on the Lok Sabha itself, the attack on the Taj Hotel in Mumbai and the suicide bomb attack at Pulwama that killed 44 people, and now 26 tourists have been murdered at Pahalgam. That is just a short list of the activities of Pakistan-based terror organisations such as Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba and its derivatives, including The Resistance Front, that have taken place since you and I were first elected to the House, Mr Speaker. They destabilise international security between two nuclear states, and cause unwarranted tension in community relations here. Is it not time to make the support that we give to Pakistan conditional on its finally dealing with and closing down the terrorist training camps that it harbours?

Mr Falconer: We expect all our friends to work closely on the shared international scourge of terrorism. Pakistan itself has faced a series of deeply damaging terrorist attacks in recent months and years, and we press Pakistan, as we press all our allies in the region, to take the steps that are necessary to investigate not only the terrorist threats that face it, but those that face its neighbours.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I share the sentiments that have rightly been expressed by all other Members. It is crucial to condemn unequivocally all forms of violence irrespective of their source, and our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.

The recent incident is a stark reminder of the fragile peace that hangs by a thread in a region that has suffered for too long from recurring cycles of violence. The intricate history of Kashmir requires a diplomatic approach underpinned by international co-operation. Does the Minister agree that the role of the UK, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, must be to encourage and support efforts that prioritise dialogue and reconciliation between India and Pakistan? Does he also agree that the law-abiding people of Kashmir deserve to live in peace and security without the shadow of perpetual conflict, and that will be achieved only if they have the right of self-determination?

Mr Falconer: Of course the people of Kashmir, both Indian-administered and Pakistani-administered, have the right to live in safety, and we want to see that right exercised; and of course there must be dialogue between India and Pakistan at this time of heightened tensions. Let me add, however, that in the face of such a horrific attack, India also has the right to investigate, to find the perpetrators and to bring them to justice for these terrible crimes.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): A number of my constituents have expressed deep concern about the developments in Kashmir, and we all condemn the attacks and growing tensions in the strongest possible terms. Does the Minister agree that advocating for a peaceful resolution in Kashmir is also part of maintaining community cohesion in the UK, given that so many of us have constituents with family members and friends in the region?

Mr Falconer: I do, of course. The UK supports a peaceful resolution of the long-standing issues in Kashmir between India and Pakistan. It is a matter for the two countries and we will support them in those endeavours.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I join Members across the House in condemning this act of terrorism. The hon. Gentleman will know that his party's manifesto pledged to pursue a new strategic partnership with India. I welcome that, but could he explain to the House what steps are being made in regard to that pledge? It will be by concerted diplomatic efforts, but it will also be by leadership from the Dispatch Box around re-characterising our commitment to India, that people will gain strength from this Government's response.

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to cast away any doubt there might be. We stand with India in the face of this horrific attack. We have, at the very highest levels, been in direct contact with the Indian Government. This is an absolutely atrocious incident and they have our support in trying to bring the perpetrators to justice. If he will forgive me, I will leave it to the Minister responsible for India to provide an update in the House in slower time on the state of our relationship. It continues to grow from strength to strength.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): In light of the recent tragic attack on civilians in Kashmir, which we all condemn, what steps are the Government taking to de-escalate tensions, and to urge the Governments of India and Pakistan to engage in a transparent and impartial investigation to establish the facts, while also pushing forward a new diplomatic engagement to address all outstanding issues, including the core dispute of Kashmir, through meaningful dialogue and a commitment to peace that prioritises the lives and rights of all Kashmiris?

Mr Falconer: As I said earlier, we have been engaged with both Governments. The long-standing position of the UK is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir. It must take into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people and it is not for us to prescribe a solution. We will continue in those efforts.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The Minister outlined that the Government have been in communication with both India and Pakistan, and the risk of escalation. Given that risk, has the Foreign Secretary been in communication with any other regional powers, such as China?

Mr Falconer: Honestly, I have not spoken to the Foreign Secretary in the past 24 hours so I am not totally sure, but I will write to the hon. Member and let him know.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, associate myself with the condolences for the innocent families who have become victims of this appalling attack. It is important that there is an evidence-based investigation and I hope that, from what the Minister has said, Pakistan is assisting India in identifying the perpetrators and ensuring they are brought to justice. Tensions are certainly high, both within India and Pakistan. I appreciate the Minister's remarks on the assistance being provided at the moment, but can this be used as an opportunity to also look at the longer-term issues that Kashmir has faced for decades?

Mr Falconer: I set out the Government's position on the core dispute in Kashmir in the previous answer. I repeat that we encourage the Pakistanis to co-operate fully with the Indian Government in their efforts to investigate and we hope that they will provide assistance. This obviously remains a time of great heightened tensions, so direct dialogue on these issues is particularly important.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I join the Minister and other Members in my unequivocal condemnation of this heinous and cowardly act of terrorist violence. My heart goes out to the families and the victims. We stand in full solidarity with them, as well as with the civilian populations of India, Kashmir and wider Pakistan. As has been highlighted, the killings have heightened tensions in the subcontinent. At present, both nuclear-armed countries, India and Pakistan, are on a war footing. The escalation in military action will have ramifications globally, especially in the UK where reactionary bigots and far-right politicians are sowing division among British Kashmiris, Indians and Pakistanis. My Kashmiri diaspora and my Indian family and friends and I would like to know what specific steps the UK Government are taking to help de-escalate the heightened tensions in the region and the increased tensions within our borders.

Mr Falconer: As I said, we are seeking to play our full diplomatic role to help manage the heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, and the concerns of the region. It is vital that all of us in positions of influence at a community level here in the UK do everything we can to ensure that those tensions do not play out on British streets.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Many of my constituents have contacted me in the past few days to register their horror at the appalling terror attack in Kashmir. I join the Minister in condemning it unequivocally. Will he confirm that the UK stands firm against terror in any form? Will he further confirm what steps the Government are taking to support our long history of community cohesion in the diverse constituencies of this country, such as Ealing Southall?

Mr Falconer: I can confirm that we stand against terrorism in all its manifestations. We will be working closely with all communities, including through colleagues in this House, to try to address the concerns that are being raised.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): One of the consequences of mass immigration and radical diversity at home is that we see foreign conflicts play out among diaspora communities in Britain. We should all do everything possible to stop this domestic disintegration, including drastically curtailing immigration, but will the Minister take this opportunity to tell Members of this House who have played the politics of communalism to stop playing with fire?

Mr Falconer: I think the hon. Gentleman's question is: will I condemn the existence of British Indian and British Pakistani communities? No, I won't. There is tension between those communities and I have called for calm. If he is asking me whether I think there has been too much immigration over the last 14 years, yes indeed—[*Interruption.*] I am very happy to take guidance from Mr Speaker on what the question was.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I would also like to associate myself with the condemnation of this horrific and cowardly attack on innocent people. Ilford South is home to a large diaspora of Indian and Pakistani descent. Following the horrific murder of the 26 tourists, whose only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time when the terrorists orchestrated their heinous attack, India points the finger at Pakistan and Pakistan denies any involvement. Both are nuclear powers. What steps are the Government taking to de-escalate this particular situation?

Mr Falconer: As I have said, we have been engaged with both states extensively over the past few days. We are taking all the steps we can to ensure that heightened tensions do not lead to the risk of uncontrolled escalation.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Many of my constituents have been hit hard by the recent massacre in Kashmir. The perpetrators of the massacre must face the full force of the law. An open dialogue between India and Pakistan is now vital to avoid an escalation of tensions over Kashmir. How are the Government working to support efforts to de-escalate and to prevent cross-border exchanges escalating into a full-blown conflict?

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his important question. We will continue to work with both states on the issues he outlines in the way I have described over the course of the afternoon.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is our common humanity that unites many of us in this House in our condemnation of a terrorist act and our condolences to the families affected, whether they have community links to this country or not. I hear what the Minister says, and I support entirely his call for an investigation, as many Members do. What is troubling my British constituents who have family in the Kashmir region are the words of the Indian Defence Minister, who has said there will be a "strong response" in the

coming days. In previous crisis moments, we have had missile strikes, airstrikes and special forces action from the Indian Government, and we have seen an explosion in anti-Muslim attacks in India in the past couple of days. What words of reassurance can the Minister offer my British constituents, who are concerned about human rights around the world and concerned about family members, that this Government will always speak up for innocent civilians, wherever they may live and wherever they may find friends?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We do, of course, stand up for human rights around the world, and we will continue our work to try to address heightened tensions between India and Pakistan. We want to avoid a dangerous spiral of escalation in the region.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): It is incumbent on us as an international community to engage with leaders on both sides. What have the Minister and the UK Government done so far to promote an open dialogue specifically and to ensure it stays open?

Mr Falconer: As I say, we have spoken at a senior level to both Governments and we are encouraging direct contact, which we understand is in place.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents, particularly those from the Kashmiri and Pakistani communities, strongly condemn this terrorist atrocity in Pahalgam. They are also worried about India's response, in particular its suspension of the Indus waters treaty, but also the bulldozing of homes of those not connected to this attack in any way. Does the Minister agree that the Kashmiri people should not be subjected to collective punishment, as the people of Palestine have been in Israel?

Mr Falconer: As I hope has been clear in all my answers, a terrible terrorist attack has been perpetrated, and India has our full support in going after the perpetrators of that attack. We do, of course, expect all our partners to do that in accordance with their domestic standards and laws.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to the questions and for the calm way he has responded, which is appreciated in this House. I travelled to the region in question some four or five years ago as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief; there was tension then, and there is greater tension now, in every sense of the word. The slaughter of tourists in that idyllic meadow in Kashmir can never be seen as anything other than pure, unadulterated evil: people were killed simply because they were Hindus or Christians. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families who mourn their loved ones today. What steps can the Minister take to provide support for the Government to deal with terrorism, and how can we get the message to British citizens that they should under no circumstances whatsoever travel to that region?

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I will reiterate our travel advice: we advise against all travel to Jammu and Kashmir except for

travel by air to the city of Jammu, travel within the city of Jammu and travel within the union territory of Ladakh.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): People in India and around the world were horrified last week by the news of the terror attack in which 26 innocent tourists were killed in Jammu and Kashmir. My thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones. This was an appalling attack, aimed clearly at destabilising the situation in Kashmir. In my constituency, I have large Pakistani, Indian and Kashmiri communities, and many of my constituents are now very concerned about an escalation of tensions in the region. How are the British Government working with the Indian Government to provide support in the wake of this terror attack, and what more can the Minister say about the constructive role Britain must play in finding a diplomatic resolution?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend reflects the strength of feeling in her constituency, as in so many of the constituencies represented in this House. We will continue to play our full diplomatic role, and we welcome the efforts of my hon. Friend and many colleagues across this House in engaging right across the spectrum of their constituencies.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Kashmiri community in Stoke-on-Trent will have condemned the appalling atrocities taking place last Tuesday, but that condemnation will have quickly turned to fear and anxiety about what it means for their friends and loved ones in both the India and Pakistan-administered sides of Kashmir.

I have listened carefully to the Minister's answers on the Government's position that this is now an issue for India and Kashmir to resolve alone, and I welcome the actions the Government are taking to reduce tensions. However, in the long term, a peaceful settlement for this community will need help and need international facilitation, per UN resolutions 39 and 47. Self-determination for the people of Kashmir is going to take more than warm words from Ministers. Can the Minister therefore set out what actions he will take through the UN and his counterparts in other countries to ensure that we start to move down the path of peace quickly?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is a doughty advocate for his constituents in voicing their concerns. The long-standing position of the United Kingdom is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for us to prescribe a solution.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Like many colleagues in this House, I was appalled by the terrorist attack in Kashmir, and my heart goes out to the victims and their loved ones. What really worries me now is the hatred, threats and incitement we have seen online since the attack, which I know are deeply unsettling for many of my constituents. Does the Minister agree that the incitement of hatred online is completely unacceptable, and can he share what measures the Government are taking to monitor and act against it?

Mr Falconer: We are aware of hatred being incited online in relation to events in the region, and we condemn it utterly. Where the threshold is met for police action, it should be taken.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I share the horror at this despicable act of terrorism inflicted on 26 innocent people, many of whom were on holiday—one young man was on his honeymoon. My condolences are with all those affected. The ripples are widespread and felt by the global Indian community, including my constituents in Winchburgh. They have raised their concerns with me about this incident, but they are also really fearful of what happens next. Can the Minister give my constituents assurances that the Government will work with international partners to support peace and stability in the region, and that community cohesion will remain a top priority for this Government?

Mr Falconer: India and Pakistan are our friends. We have historical connections to both states and to communities right across the region, and we will continue to be committed to regional stability. Of course, we also call for calm on our own streets.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Smethwick (Gurinder Singh Josan) on securing this urgent question, but I do say to the Minister that this really should have been a statement. We are all horrified by the act of terror that we saw just days ago and condemn it without equivocation. I have heard from many of my constituents from both diasporas in recent days, and it is important to note that many people are feeling this act of terror deeply in my community, and up and down the United Kingdom. India and Pakistan are two very important members of the Commonwealth. Can the Minister specifically outline what engagement the British Government have had with the Commonwealth to help to reduce tensions?

Mr Falconer: If my hon. Friend would like a statement, he can stay for 45 minutes and he will get another one from me. We have been in direct contact with both India and Pakistan, and we will continue to do so.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his condolences and for his strong condemnation of this horrific terror attack. In recent days, I have been contacted by hundreds of families in my constituency who have been horrified by these events. It is clear that the awful terror attack in Kashmir has sent shockwaves through the British Indian community and the global Hindu community more broadly. My constituents have spoken overwhelmingly of justice, and understandably so. We all want to see peace and de-escalation, but understanding that people will be held to account for these horrific crimes is vital to getting there.

I would just like to press the Minister a little more to be clear that the UK Government, when they stand with India, are doing all they can to identify the parties responsible for these events and those who support and fund them, so that they can be held to account and justice can be found.

Mr Falconer: Of course, we want to see the perpetrators held to justice properly, and we will be supporting India to do so.

Nick Timothy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier, I asked the Minister to tell Members of the House who were playing the politics of communalism to stop playing with fire. He not only failed to do so, but attacked me for observing the undoubted tensions and sometimes even violence that take place here as foreign conflicts are played out in this country. Can you advise me on whether the Minister can withdraw this attack? If he simply misheard my question, can he be allowed to answer it now? This is a very serious issue.

Mr Speaker: Minister, would you like to respond?

Mr Falconer: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As I understood the question, the hon. Gentleman was suggesting that there had been too much immigration from, presumably, both India and Pakistan over the last period, and that that was leading to communalism within constituencies across the country. This Government —[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) is not going to carry on speaking from a sedentary position.

Mr Falconer: I have been absolutely clear from this Dispatch Box that I do not want to see any communal tensions in the UK. I have repeatedly called for calm. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that he believes that too much immigration has led to these—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Obviously, we are not going to get anywhere like this. Sit down, Minister. I am not responsible for the answers that the Minister makes. I am sure that this matter will not rest there, but it will have to rest for now because we are moving on to the next urgent question.

Irish Republican Alleged Incitement

1.31 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the alleged incitement to murder Members of Parliament by the Irish republican group Kneecap.

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his urgent question. Let us never forget that we lost two Members of this House, Jo Cox and Sir David Amess, in tragic circumstances. Both Jo and Sir David were passionate advocates for their constituents, and they cared deeply about a range of issues and embodied the finest democratic qualities, traditions and values of this House. I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with their families today and every day.

I want to reiterate the Home Secretary's words and fully condemn the comments that have been made. Such remarks are dangerous and irresponsible, and this Government utterly reject the views expressed by this group. Let me be crystal clear: political intimidation and abuse have no place in our society.

I know that the House will want immediate answers on this issue, but as the Minister of State for Policing and Crime Prevention said yesterday, in relation to the urgent question on the Hedingley case, the desire for immediate answers is often constrained by the obligation that we have, as Ministers and as Members of this House, not to do or say anything that would interfere in what is a live police investigation.

As Members know, the investigation and prosecution of criminal offences are matters for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to determine, and they are operationally independent of the Government. It is important that the police are allowed to carry out their ongoing investigations free from political interference.

However, for the benefit of the House, let me recap what the Metropolitan police have themselves said about these reports. They said:

"We have been made aware of the video and it has been referred to the counter-terrorism internet referral unit for assessment and to determine whether any further police investigation may be required."

Although I will not comment further on this specific case, the safety and security of Members of this House, and all those who serve in elected office, is an issue to which I attach the utmost seriousness, as does the Home Secretary and as do you, Mr Speaker.

Elected representatives at all levels and across all parties must be able to perform their duties safely and without fear, and, through the defending democracy taskforce, we are driving a whole-of-government effort to ensure that that is the case. The taskforce has recently agreed a programme of work to tackle the harassment and intimidation of elected Members. The taskforce is also supporting the Speaker's Conference that is addressing these issues.

Those of us who attend this place are all too aware of the devastating consequences of violence against our colleagues and friends. We may not always agree, but if there is one universal truth to which we would all subscribe it is surely that our politics is better when it is

conducted respectfully and safely. I hope and trust that that will have the support of Members right across the House.

The Home Secretary and I condemn the comments that have been made and we will work tirelessly to ensure the safety and security of all those who step forward to serve in public office.

Mr Francois: Two MPs—Jo Cox and Sir David Amess—have been murdered within the past decade, in the line of duty while meeting their constituents. Frankly, that could have been any of us. I should like to ask the Home Secretary, albeit in absentia, four specific questions.

First, how long is this counter-terrorist police inquiry likely to take? The video plainly speaks for itself. How could the words “Kill your local MP” possibly have been taken out of context?

Secondly, we now know that Kneecap applied for a £14,000 Government grant, during the previous Parliament, which was vetoed, quite rightly, by my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch). Kneecap then appealed against this decision as “discriminatory”. The incoming Labour Government concluded that fighting the appeal would be “not in the public interest.”

Can the Home Secretary tell the House which Government Minister approved that absurd decision to effectively surrender to Kneecap over this, and why?

Thirdly, Kneecap are still booked to appear at Glastonbury—the organisers of which, incidentally, received some £1.5 million of taxpayer subsidy during the covid pandemic. Does the Home Secretary agree that it would be unconscionable for Kneecap to appear, at least while the police inquiry is under way? Kneecap should surely be barred today. To be crystal clear, do the Government agree with that—yes or no?

Finally, Kneecap have now offered a “crocodile tears” apology to Katie Amess. Have that family not been through enough already? So, as it is within her gift, will the Home Secretary now seriously reconsider their request to examine potential failures by Prevent that may have contributed to David’s death, via the auspices of the Southport inquiry? Is that not the least we can do? Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Dan Jarvis: I am genuinely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this matter, because it provides us with an opportunity to discuss these issues, which is something I have been keen to do for some time. Let me gently say to him that he mentioned the name of the band on a number of occasions. I deliberately did not do so, and I will not do so. It is for right hon. and hon. Members to choose what language they use, but my advice is not to give the band or its members any further publicity by naming them. I will not be doing so and I suggest that other Members do not either.

The right hon. Member spoke about the Home Secretary. Let me tell him what she said about this. She said that this is a “total disgrace”. She said:

“It’s dangerous and irresponsible to say these sorts of things, and I hope that everybody involved—not just the band but also those involved surrounding them and those involved in events—also take some responsibility on this and looks very seriously at the consequences of these kinds of remarks, not just what’s been said.”

Let me also say to the right hon. Gentleman that I chair the defending democracy taskforce. Clearly, the Home Secretary has overall responsibility, but the judgment was that I would be here as the person who chairs the taskforce, but we both, of course, take the matter incredibly seriously. He asked about the length of the investigation. As I know he will understand, that is a matter not for Ministers but for the Metropolitan police. He also asked about the funding of the group.

Let me say again, gently and respectfully, that I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s characterisation of the case relating to the group’s funding. I did not raise this point proactively; I refer to it now only in response to his specific question. The truth of the matter is that we inherited this situation from the previous Government. We inherited the scheme and we inherited this situation. After approving the grant, the previous Government then U-turned on it being given. They did not take proper legal advice and ended up in a costly legal battle that they lost. This Government have a duty to bring that situation to an end and protect taxpayers’ money. We are deeply concerned about all the things that made up this case. As the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said yesterday, that is precisely why we are rightly taking the opportunity to review the scheme now.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about Glastonbury. It is for the organisers of the festival to decide who appears.

Mr Francois: Cop out!

Dan Jarvis: If the right hon. Gentleman can be patient, he will hear the entirety of my response. It is not for Government Ministers to say who is going to appear at Glastonbury; it is for the organisers of the festival. As I have said, there is a live police investigation ongoing, so the Government urge the organisers of Glastonbury to think very carefully about who is invited to perform there later this year.

For reasons that I completely understand and appreciate, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Amess family. Our thoughts and prayers continue to be with the Amess family, as they are with the family of Jo Cox. The House will be aware, because I have spoken about it previously, that we have published the Prevent learning review to ensure that there is public scrutiny and transparency over the perpetrator’s dealings with Prevent. We will also publish the findings from Lord Anderson’s review.

The Home Secretary and I want to ensure that every avenue has been explored. That is why we will appoint a senior figure to scrutinise all of the previous reviews that have taken place, to see whether any questions still need to be answered or any issues still need to be addressed. We will act as necessary if any such gaps are identified as a result of that process.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his answer to the urgent question. Nobody but those in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) know what it is actually like when somebody kills your MP. The reverberations are still being felt in Southend West and Leigh three and a half years later by the constituents, never mind the family of Sir David Amess, who will never recover from the loss.

[David Burton-Sampson]

Does my hon. Friend agree that those in the public eye—anyone, in fact, but especially those in the public eye—should be careful with their words, because words have power and can be incredibly dangerous. We should condemn with all force the type of incitement we have seen from this particular group.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the remarks he has made, and not just today but previously. I totally agree; he is absolutely right that words have consequences. All of us, both in and outside this House, should treat others with respect and dignity. I join my hon. Friend in condemning the words that have been used, and I give him and the House my categorical assurance that we will do everything we possibly can to ensure the safety and security of all who serve in elected office.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Our thoughts today are with our dear friends Sir David Amess and Jo Cox. They were brutally murdered on a surgery Friday doing their job on behalf of their constituents. Tragically, they were not the first MPs to be murdered; the crest of Airey Neave is up there above the door, with those of Sir David and Jo behind me. Those who incite the murder of MPs are attacking democracy itself. Will the Minister join me in condemning unreservedly the despicable evil that Kneecap represent in the appalling comments they made?

I would like to ask about the funding. In November 2024, the Department for Business and Trade decided to end its support for the legal challenge—a decision that resulted in the band winning and becoming entitled to the money. Why did the Government make that decision? In the light of what we now know, will they appeal against that decision? Critically, will the Minister give categorical assurance from the Dispatch Box that this band will never, under any circumstances, receive public money again from any source, including the National Lottery and Northern Ireland Screen?

This organisation has also expressed support for Hamas and Hezbollah, which are proscribed terrorist groups. The Minister said that he did not want to comment on the police investigation. However, the Government commented quite extensively on the investigations after Southport, so I would like him to make clear, as the Government did last summer, that they consider it in the public interest that the police investigate and, if there is evidence, prosecute these offences or potential offences. If he is not willing to do that now, he risks the perception of two-tier justice.

Finally, I had a meeting very recently with Sir David's widow Julia and his daughter Katie, who bear an enormous burden of grief. They want to make sure that the lessons are learned from Sir David's murder. As the Minister knows, the perpetrator had been in the Prevent programme previously, like the perpetrators in Reading and Southport. Julia and Katie Amess would like Sir David's murderer and the failings of Prevent to be looked at alongside the Southport case, which is being investigated, and the Reading case. Will the Minister honour his memory by agreeing to that today?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for his remarks. He is right that when a threat is made to a Member of this House or anyone who serves in elected office it is an attack not just on that individual but on our democracy. That is precisely why this Government have placed, as the last Government did, so much emphasis and importance on the work of the defending democracy taskforce.

The right hon. Member will know from his time in government that the taskforce is the fulcrum on which all the different bits of Government join together, ensuring that our response to the threats we face is properly organised and that the resources are marshalled correctly and appropriately. It is how we enable all those who wish to serve in public life to do so without fear of the completely unacceptable attacks we have seen in recent years. I agree with him on that, and I hope it is a matter on which we can all agree. I also agree with his points about the remarks themselves. I will not name the band, but I reiterate that the Government unreservedly condemn the remarks that have been made.

The shadow Home Secretary asked specifically about funding. In my earlier response I gave detail about the sequencing of the funding that was agreed under the previous Government. He asked about future funding, so let me be clear with the House: we do not think that individuals expressing the views we have heard should be receiving taxpayer funding. That is a non-controversial thing to say. As the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said yesterday, officials are reviewing the music export growth scheme in the light of the comments that have emerged. I would add—the right hon. Member will probably agree—that it seems strange to me, and I am sure to other Members of the House, that a republican group who are seemingly opposed to the British Government would want to receive funding from them. I find that baffling.

The right hon. Member mentioned proscription and Hamas and Hezbollah; he knows well that those are proscribed organisations. It is a criminal offence to belong to, invite support for, recklessly express support for or arrange a meeting in support of a proscribed organisation. It is also an offence to wear clothing, carry articles in public or publish an image of clothing or any article in a way that arouses reasonable suspicion that an individual is a member or a supporter of a proscribed organisation. The Government are crystal clear: support for proscribed organisations is wholly unacceptable, and where an offence has been committed, the Government trust that the police will use the full extent of the offences available to them.

The right hon. Member's final point was about Lady Amess and Katie Amess. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will take comfort from the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) about the seriousness with which we address these issues. I am acutely conscious that we have with us in the Chamber a member of Jo Cox's family, and it is right that we conduct ourselves in a way—as we are—that remembers the loss that the families have suffered, and that this House has suffered. The Government will do everything we possibly can to ensure that those families are supported and those terrible events never occur again.

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is disappointing to see how Conservative Members have approached this question. I would have hoped that this was an issue on which the whole House could remain united. The way in which it has been approached is to be regretted.

I have no desire to pour cold water on the daft political posturings of adolescents given voice in pop music—that has been going on for decades and is somewhat of a rite of passage—but the comments of this band go far beyond what is remotely acceptable in a civilised country. Will the Minister therefore please use his good offices to look to minimise the number of mainstream platforms—not just Glastonbury—across the board on which this band appear?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right about the comments that have been made; we unreservedly condemn them. He makes a point that I want to raise about the importance of the way in which we work co-operatively and collaboratively across the House. I chair the defending democracy taskforce on behalf of the Government, but I also chair it on behalf of all Members of this House and the other House and on behalf of those who serve in local government. My approach has always been, and will always be, to work co-operatively with every political party. I am happy at any point to meet any Member or any political party to discuss these matters. My door is always open.

On the point my hon. Friend made about the profile of the band, he will have heard my words with regard to Glastonbury. That is specifically why I am not naming them—I do not want to give them any further publicity—but I agree with the sentiment of his point.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The remarks by members of the band are completely unacceptable, and it is right that they have apologised to the families of Sir David Amess and Jo Cox, but clearly those comments should never have been made in the first place. Incitement to violence against Members of Parliament cuts to the very heart of our democracy. The reality is that two MPs have been murdered in the last decade. It is absolutely right that the authorities are looking into other comments relating to encouraging support for proscribed terror organisations.

I want to look at what more the Government can do. What criteria does the Home Office apply when assessing whether artists or performers are promoting harmful or extremist rhetoric, particularly where there is a clear attempt to provoke public outrage? What assessment has the Minister made of the impact that comments like these may have on community cohesion?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member, as I always am, for the sensible and reasonable way in which she framed her remarks. She is absolutely right. Incitement to violence is utterly unacceptable in any context, and it is completely unacceptable in the context of Members of this House and other elected politicians. That is why the Prime Minister recently refreshed the mandate of the defending democracy taskforce, and that is why, as chair of that taskforce, I am working closely with law enforcement, all Government Departments,

the Electoral Commission and a range of different organisations, including the police, to ensure that right around the country we have the most coherent, joined-up and properly resourced response.

Back at the general election last year, I am sure all of us saw things that we consider completely unacceptable. It is my ambition as the chair, and that of the Government, to ensure that electoral events—I am conscious that we are working through one at the moment—are fought in a way that enables and encourages reasonable and robust debate. It is absolutely right that in the cut and thrust of politics there should be the rough and tumble of debate, but I think instinctively we all know where the line is drawn, and this incident went miles over where the line should be drawn.

We will continue to look carefully at the circumstances of this case. As I said, it is ultimately for the police to make an operational decision about where they want to go with it, but I give the hon. Member an assurance that through the DDTF we take these matters incredibly seriously. I would be happy to work even more closely with her, her colleagues and all Members of the House in that endeavour.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): May I take a moment to thank the Speaker's Office for the support it gives new MPs to ensure that we all feel safe? I thank the Minister for his response to the urgent question and equally for his commitment to ensuring that Members of the House feel safe and secure in their work. Does he agree that when we think about the security of MPs we must also consider the safety of MPs' staff? I think about the staff who work in my constituency and do their jobs solely because they want to help people in my constituency. They should never feel intimidated or unsafe.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes some really important points. I join him in thanking Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and all the Speaker's Office for the work they do with the Parliamentary Security Department in ensuring that all Members of the House are safe and secure. The Speaker's Conference into these matters is an important process that the Government are supporting. A couple of weeks ago, I gave evidence to Mr Speaker along with the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), who is responsible for elections. We consider the process to be hugely valuable, and we look forward to Mr Speaker's conclusions. We will want to work closely with him on implementing the findings.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to reference MPs' staff. All of us will know that often where the rubber hits the road in our constituencies is the extraordinary, dedicated work being done on our behalf by our office managers, our parliamentary assistants and our parliamentary caseworkers. They are absolutely in my thoughts when I think about these matters. The Bridger network around the country is there for them as well as for Members of the House.

It is worth adding that in addition to Members and their staff, we need to ensure that our family members are properly protected. I have been in recent touch with the police specifically about incidents that have occurred on a couple of occasions at Members' home addresses.

[Dan Jarvis]

That is totally unacceptable. I have written to the police constructively to remind them of the powers they have in that regard.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I know that the Minister will agree that part of the service that my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) has done the House today is that he has given us all the opportunity to make a point that really should not need making, namely that incitement to violence against Members of Parliament is no more acceptable than incitement to violence against any other member of our society. The Minister is entirely right to be cautious about prejudicing an investigation into whether the criminal law has been broken, but does he agree that what we can and should say today is that artistic licence is not a defence to a breach of the criminal law?

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on both counts.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): The concern is not just the glorification of violence against MPs, and the impact that has on the families of MPs who have been murdered in terrorist incidents, including Jo Cox and Sir David Amess; the same band has expressed support for Hamas and Hezbollah, which are proscribed groups, and that has an impact on the feeling of safety and security in the Jewish community. The rhetoric that the band uses represents a return to an ugly rhetoric about communal differences in Northern Ireland—a return that I know will cause fear and pain to hon. Members from Northern Ireland who lost friends and colleagues due to terrorism.

My main concern, however, is about the impact on democracy as a whole. Calls for violence against politicians of any party have a chilling effect on the willingness of any normal citizen to think, “I could run for council,” or “I could run to be an MP.” They think that they will put themselves and their family at threat of violence. Does the Minister agree that it is vital for the future of democracy in this country that people feel that they can engage in public life without putting their life and safety in danger?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend made two really important points. I completely agree with his remarks at the beginning of his question. He is also absolutely right to raise concerns about the chilling effect that there could well be on our democracy. I am sure that all of us in this place know exceptional people who, for reasons that we all understand, have decided not to step forward to serve in public life. This House, local councils and police and crime commissioners are not getting people who could otherwise make a significant contribution to public life.

It is a tragedy for our country that some people might feel that they should not step forward because of the risks, pressures, harassment and intimidation that go with service in public life. That is precisely why we take the defending democracy taskforce so seriously, and are working with colleagues across Government, in local government and in the devolved Administrations to

ensure that people do not feel that politics is too dangerous for them. It would be terrible for our country if we got to that point. I am absolutely determined, as is the Home Secretary, to make sure that the defending democracy taskforce is as successful as possible in ensuring that nobody feels that they do not want to step forward because of the risks.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I thank the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) for making that reference? Although it is natural that we refer to Jo Cox and Sir David Amess, it is important for Members of this House to recognise that there are also four plaques in this Chamber for Ian Gow, Airey Neave, Robert Bradford and Sir Anthony Berry, all of whom were murdered by the Irish republican antecedents to Kneecap. Over the last 24 hours, we have seen crocodile tears and heard confected apologies and whataboutery, but nothing can be said that will mask the naked hatred within those individuals whose balaclavas have slipped.

I have heard the Minister speak about his defending democracy taskforce and his aspiration for coherency across this United Kingdom on the glorification of terrorism. For far too long, a blind eye has been turned to the glorification of terrorism in Northern Ireland. When confined to Northern Ireland, it apparently seems to be quite acceptable, yet it keeps the wounds of our past open and frustrates reconciliation. To my mind, there is no coherency on the application of laws to prevent the glorification of terrorism in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister meet my colleagues and me to ensure that there is?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that, and he is absolutely right to refer to all the plaques in this Chamber. We think about all those who have lost their life serving our country. The right hon. Gentleman may be aware that I was in Northern Ireland recently, where I met the Justice Minister to discuss this and other matters. He may also be aware that in the autumn of last year, I wrote to the leaders of all the Northern Ireland political parties, offering a meeting.

Gavin Robinson indicated dissent.

Dan Jarvis: He says that he did not receive the letter. Let me say therefore that I would, of course, be very happy to meet him, and I am keen to do that as quickly as possible.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): Yesterday, I wrote to Glastonbury festival, urging it to remove this music group from its line-up because they have allegedly called for the murder of Conservative colleagues in this House, and because we have seen footage of them appearing to show support for Hezbollah and Hamas, including by waving a flag of a proscribed organisation. Words, as others have said, have tragic consequences. Beloved colleagues Jo Cox and Sir David Amess were tragically murdered, and 16 June 2016 remains one of the worst days of my life. I know many colleagues in this House feel the same. We all have a duty to prevent that from ever happening again.

I welcome the Minister's comments about Glastonbury. Does he agree that iTunes, Spotify, YouTube and others should strongly consider taking the group's music off

their platforms until the police investigation is over? May I also note the absence of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who is not present and not involved in this discussion? Will the Minister join me in condemning the right hon. Member for Islington North's appearance in a photograph with the group, and in calling for him to apologise for that?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind Members that if they make specific references to a colleague, they ought to give them notice in advance?

Dan Jarvis: I agree with my hon. Friend about words having consequences; he is absolutely right about that. He is also absolutely right that we all have a duty in this House to do everything that we possibly can to conduct our politics in a responsible and reasonable way, as do others. He mentioned Glastonbury; and I am grateful to him for the care and attention with which he has written to the festival's organisers. He heard my earlier comments. I heard his remarks about streaming platforms; my sense was that there was a lot of agreement from Members from right across the House. With respect, I am not aware of the other matter he mentions, and I am keen not to annoy Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will not refer to the right hon. Gentleman who is not in his place on this occasion.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Given the proximity of my constituency to the Glastonbury festival, many local people are concerned to learn that a pop group promoting harmful and extremist rhetoric are scheduled to perform there this summer. What criteria does the Home Office apply when assessing whether artists or performers are promoting harmful or extremist rhetoric, particularly when there is a clear attempt to provoke public outrage? Also, will the Minister work with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) to engage with the Glastonbury festival organisers on finding an appropriate resolution?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, I am happy to do all the things that the hon. Lady asks.

She mentioned funding. I hope that she heard the remarks that I made earlier, not least about the Government thinking that individuals expressing such views should not receive taxpayer funding. I do not think that is a controversial thing to say. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is reviewing the music export growth scheme.

On the hon. Lady's point about the Glastonbury festival organisers, I suspect and hope that, as a neighbouring MP, she will have a good and constructive relationship with them. I also very much hope that they have listened to what she has said.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): The comments made by this group are chilling and disgusting, and they risk dragging our politics and our country to a very dangerous place. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst). When I go to schools in my constituency, the message I take to young people is: "You have a place in politics. You can represent your community. You can make a change." Does my hon. Friend agree that incitement to violence, and violence against MPs, have a chilling

effect, particularly on people from under-represented groups in our country? They push those people not to get involved in politics, which is deeply wrong.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes a really important point, and I agree wholeheartedly with it. He is right about the chilling effect. It would absolutely extend to young people, as well as older people and others; it applies to anyone considering stepping forward to serve in public life. The strength of our democracy and our country depends on people who are prepared to step forward and serve their constituents as Members of this House, and we need to ensure that people feel that they can do that without being subjected to completely unnecessary harassment and intimidation. That is why a key theme of the defending democracy taskforce is incidents of harassment and intimidation, and whether there are gaps in legislation. Where there are gaps, we will fill them.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Every time I come to this House, I stand underneath the plaque for Jo Cox, and I look over at the plaque for David Amess. It seems impossible that within 10 years, two of our colleagues could have been murdered. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for raising this question, because it gives us a moment to reflect. When I read the words:

"The only good Tory is a dead Tory. Kill your local MP", and "Up Hamas! Up Hezbollah!", I cannot see what time interval needs to pass before that is deemed an offence. I entirely recognise what the Minister says about these processes needing to happen independently, but speed of justice contributes to confidence in justice. As a former arts Minister who worked to support masses of creative groups, probably very few of which supported me or my party, I am clear-headed about the use of the music export growth scheme. I hope that the Minister, who I know to be a decent man, will, in his work on the defending democracy taskforce, proactively ensure that no taxpayers' money goes to any organisation or creative group that uses language that has such a negative effect on the way that politics is conducted, and the way that we in this place are seen.

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. He is right to say that the urgent question has provided us with a moment to reflect. The words that he repeated—I completely understand why he chose to repeat them—are utterly vile. They make my blood boil. I also agree with the other points that he made. He knows, as a former senior Minister, about the importance of the operational independence of the police, but he made his point in a very reasonable way, and it will have been heard. Finally, on his comments about funding, he is absolutely right again. That is why the Secretary of State, as a matter of urgency, will now look at these matters.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): It is good to hear that the House is united in its condemnation of the appalling comments by this band, inciting hatred and supporting terrorism, and our thoughts and prayers today are with the families of Jo Cox and Sir David Amess. Does the Minister agree that there can never be any excuse for inciting violence against MPs, or for supporting the vile, antisemitic terrorists of Hamas and Hezbollah, and that a threat to MPs is a threat to democracy itself?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There can never, ever be any excuse for these kinds of words. This is not about free speech or artistic licence; it is about incitement. He is absolutely right to frame his question in the way that he has, and I can give him an assurance of the seriousness with which we take these matters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. Kneecap's so-called apology simply underlines their hatred and refusal to see that they cannot call for murder simply because they do not agree with political beliefs. We know that they glorify IRA terrorist campaigns, and they make no apologies for that. No one can support a group who are proscribed, and this must be dealt with. I look to the Minister in particular, since the responsibility lies on his shoulders, and ask him how he will send the appropriate message from this House that although we may not agree politically, there is a line, and Kneecap have crossed that line. There is right and wrong, and if someone has done wrong they are accountable in law for it, so no half-hearted, grudging, fake apology will suffice. They need to be brought to justice by the police and taken to court. Better still, put them in jail.

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the hon. Member, and I think he framed the appropriate message very effectively himself. He is right to say that it is never acceptable to utter the kinds of words that we have heard today, and this Government take these matters incredibly seriously. He will also have heard the agreement I made earlier to meet the leaders of political parties in Northern Ireland—of course, I am happy to meet the political leaders of any party—to discuss these matters. I am grateful to him for his contribution.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that there is no context at all in which it would be acceptable to utter the remarks attributed to this group? Does he hope, as I do, that the criminal justice system pursues them with the utmost rigour, without any thought to mitigations such as so-called artistic licence? Does he share my disappointment as a south-west MP that, as of this afternoon, Glastonbury is still listing this outfit for a performance on Saturday 28 June?

Dan Jarvis: I certainly agree with the right hon. Gentleman with regard to there being no excuse whatsoever for these remarks. I know that he will understand the limitations placed on me with regard to what is an ongoing live investigation by the police, but the words that he has used are entirely reasonable and appropriate. With regard to Glastonbury, he will have heard the contributions made by other hon. Members and the words that I used earlier with regard to the organisers of that festival considering whether it is appropriate to have in their line-up a group who are currently subject to a live police investigation. I hope very much that they will take that seriously and listen to the concerns that have been expressed by Members right across this House.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The phrase, "Kill your local MP," carries a sincerely sinister connotation right across this House. To my party, which has lost councillors, Members of the Northern Ireland Parliament and Members of this House to republican terrorists,

those words are not clever or smart; they are an incitement to terrorist activity, which this band have glorified in the past. This band present a real danger, through what they call their art, of glorifying the actions that caused the murders and deaths of so many people in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister give a reassurance that the Government will do all in their power to look not just at what has been said in the recent videos that have come to light but at what the band have said in the past? As he looks to Glastonbury and gives the organisers advice, will he also look at a forthcoming event in Belfast and provide Belfast city council with the same advice?

Dan Jarvis: I can give the hon. Member that reassurance. The words we have heard are chilling anywhere, in any corner of this United Kingdom, but I completely understand the point he makes and the particular significance they will have in his constituency and his part of the world, so I can give him the reassurances he seeks.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister has a point about the name. An Irish republican band with a name that must send a shudder down the spine of so many in Northern Ireland, and which the hon. and gallant Minister chooses not to use, ought to have raised alarm bells long before they got their hands on any public money. Is there any prospect of getting that money back?

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the sentiment expressed by the right hon. Gentleman. On the issue of the money, that is something the Secretary of State will be looking closely at.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, the term "kneecap" is related to a violent criminal act. When a grouping take that as their name, express a desire for MPs to be murdered and support proscribed organisations like Hezbollah and Hamas, we have to question why they have been awarded so much UK taxpayers' money. Yesterday, I took the opportunity to write to the US and Canadian authorities asking them to refuse any visa applications from these hatemongers ahead of their publicised tour of North America to prevent them from spreading their violent message across the world. Will the Minister join me in lobbying for that?

Dan Jarvis: As the hon. Member may be aware, I am—not to the same extent as herself—intimately familiar with the connotations of the name from my previous professional experience, so I completely understand why she has made the point in the way that she has. Let me undertake to go away and think more specifically about the points she has raised, but I am happy to discuss them further with her or with any of her colleagues should she wish to do so.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): If this band remain on the bill at Glastonbury this year, will the Minister undertake on behalf of the Government that no Ministers will attend the whole festival?

Dan Jarvis: I was not intending to attend myself. Let me reflect on the question, not least because I am not responsible for other Ministers' diaries. However, as I have said previously, I am sure—I am certainly hopeful—

that the organisers of Glastonbury will be listening to the contributions that have been made and will reflect on the decision that they have previously taken.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I thank the Minister for the tone and manner in which he has answered questions. I am cognisant of the ongoing legal action that may be pursued in this case, so to generalise the point a little, how are the Government ensuring that public funding mechanisms, such as the music export growth scheme, are not inadvertently supporting entities that propagate extremist rhetoric and incitement to violence? This is not just about the money; it is about the official imprimatur that schemes like that offer to the entities involved.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member makes an entirely reasonable and legitimate point about the public funding. I say again that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is reviewing the scheme, and I am sure that she will have more to say about it in the not-too-distant future.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister has responded to the urgent question and given an unequivocal condemnation, which I am sure is shared across the House. Does he understand, though, that many of us have suffered threats down through the years? We have the plaques in the Chamber for those who have suffered and paid the ultimate sacrifice. Does he agree that while that condemnation is universal across the Chamber, our comments amount to diddly squat for the group concerned, but the actions that follow from the Minister's words would matter? Will he come back to the House after he has taken the actions he has undertaken to take to update Members and the general public on them?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for and completely understand the points the hon. Member made, which he made in a fair, reasonable way. I give him that commitment to come back and update the House. I give him my personal assurance of the importance that I attach to these matters. I chair the defending democracy taskforce. I have personally invested a huge amount of time and effort working closely with officials not just in the Home Office but right across government. It is an important mechanism that brings together the collective resource of the UK Government, and it is on me to ensure that those resources are properly marshalled in the right place at the right time, so that we can be ambitious about ensuring that people are not subject to completely unacceptable harassment and intimidation. I give him the assurance that I will do everything I possibly can, working with colleagues across Government, and I would be happy to speak to him and to come back and update the House accordingly.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): An apology to the families of David Amess and Jo Cox was the only slim chance for redemption. The use of inciting language is to be condemned when it becomes apparent, just as violence against elected representatives is always to be condemned. Politics is about being alert to the right to use words powerfully and the risks and responsibilities of doing so. Does the Minister agree, therefore, that it is right and necessary to condemn incendiary language and to ensure freedom of speech right across the political spectrum?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, I agree. I was in Wales recently where I discussed these matters with the First Minister. As I mentioned earlier, it is very much the Government's intention that our approach and response is not just conducted at the UK Government national level, but is wired through local authorities and the devolved Assemblies. I am acutely conscious of the fact that elections will be taking place in Wales next year, and I want to ensure that everybody who participates in those elections can do so in a safe and secure way. I want to work with the First Minister, the right hon. Member and all her colleagues in Wales to ensure that that is the case.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I join in the condemnation from across the political spectrum in this House and from the Minister of the comments from this group, which are abhorrent, evil and twisted. Does the Minister agree that any local government authorities—I think especially of Belfast city council—that are allowing groups such as these to use their property for concerts should rethink that policy? Will he give a further commitment that he will contact Belfast city council to ensure that this group are not allowed to use council property for spewing out sectarian hate and evil comments?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member for the point he has raised. All public bodies have an absolute responsibility to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent in an appropriate way. I will take away the comments he has made and reflect on them, and I am happy to correspond with him further about them.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Is the Minister confident that the existing framework that prevents public funds from being used to platform individuals and groups who seek to stoke division is robust?

Dan Jarvis: As the hon. Member will understand, these public funds have not been allocated via my Department, so I will look carefully at the points he has made. As I said earlier, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is looking carefully and reviewing this scheme. However, as I have just said to the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton), all public bodies and certainly all Departments have an absolute responsibility to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent wisely, and that is the approach that this Government will take.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): With the scale of imprisonment that we have seen in recent months for those who make inappropriate comments on social media, does the Minister agree that confidence in policing and the prosecution services is on the line in this appalling incitement to murder, and that such confidence requires action against this group—a group that have made their hateful career out of advocating and supporting terrorism, be it Hamas, Hezbollah or the IRA? In that regard, will the Minister consider the adequacy of the offence of glorification of terrorism, which has so many let-outs that such groups are adept at exploiting and needs to be tightened up? Will he do that as a consequence of this episode?

Dan Jarvis: The police and the Crown Prosecution Service have a difficult job to do in general terms, and I am determined not to make it more difficult in these

[*Dan Jarvis*]

circumstances. The hon. and learned Gentleman's second point is reasonable; I will reflect on it and come back to him.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Every time Members enter this Chamber, they walk through a door that has plaques in memory of Robert Bradford, Airey Neave and Ian Gow, who were murdered by the IRA simply because they served as MPs. This group have, through their music, glorified that kind of terrorism, just as Sinn Féin has done on a regular basis in Northern Ireland, right up to the level of First Minister. To that extent, the group could be called the musical wing of Sinn Féin. Will the Minister assure us that he will encourage the police to investigate this quickly, that the funding formula will no longer allow such groups to obtain funding, and that he will do his best to deny the group any further platform? I suspect that their panicked apology was more about getting visas for their lucrative tour in Canada and America than it was about being sorry for what they have done.

Dan Jarvis: Incitement to violence is completely unacceptable and there is never an excuse for it. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to mention the former Members of this House who lost their life serving their constituents and our country. I underline again the Government's commitment and determination to ensure that all of us in this place, and all who serve in public life, can do so safely and securely. He spoke about the investigation. As I have said, that is on the

way, but I take and understand his point about speed. He will understand that I have already responded to the point about funding. The Secretary of State will look at that—as will other Departments, I am sure.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to refer to the fact that Members of this House who have served their constituents in good faith have lost their life in so doing. That is utterly vile. We all have a responsibility to ensure that it does not happen again. That is the body of work of the defending democracy taskforce. I will ensure that it means we are best placed to address the threats that we all know about.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My understanding, as a new MP, is that there is a long-standing convention by which a Member who intends to refer to another Member during proceedings—particularly in a critical or contentious manner—should inform that Member in advance. That courtesy gives the Member concerned the opportunity to be present and, if necessary, to respond. Earlier, reference was made to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) without prior notice. I seek your guidance on whether that is in keeping with the expected standards of conduct in the Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for advance notice of his point of order. Had he been in the Chamber at the time, he would have heard me make exactly that point. It is a courtesy of this House that Members referring to others should give advance notice.

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Visit

2.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the inward visit of Prime Minister Mustafa.

Yesterday, at the invitation of the Government, the Palestinian Authority Prime Minister, Dr Mohammad Mustafa, visited the United Kingdom. Prime Minister Mustafa was accompanied by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Varsen Aghabekian and Minister of Health Dr Maged Abu Ramadan. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary both held meetings with Prime Minister Mustafa yesterday, and I was delighted to meet him again this morning. This visit reflects the UK's steadfast support for the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people at this critical juncture in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

During the visit, we reaffirmed our unwavering commitment to advancing a two-state solution as the only pathway to achieving just and lasting peace in the middle east, where Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side in peace, dignity and security. We are clear that the Palestinian people have an inalienable right of self-determination, including to independent statehood. The Government are committed to strengthening our bilateral relations with the Palestinian Authority. The PA are the only legitimate governing entity in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and it is important that Gaza and the west bank are reunified under their authority. The UK is clear that the PA must have a central role in the next phase in Gaza. There can be no role for Hamas in the future of Gaza. We have been clear: Hamas must immediately release the hostages and relinquish control of Gaza. Israelis must be able to live in security next to their Palestinian neighbours, and 7 October must never be repeated.

The Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister Mustafa signed a landmark memorandum of understanding to enhance the bilateral partnership between our two Governments. The memorandum of understanding established a new framework to guide and enhance the strategic partnership, and high-level dialogue across areas of mutual interest and benefit, including economic development and institutional reform. As part of our meetings with Prime Minister Mustafa, we discussed the gravity of the situation in Gaza, the west bank and East Jerusalem. We condemned the appalling suffering of civilians in Gaza and agreed on the urgent need for a return to a ceasefire in Gaza with the release of hostages and unblocking of aid. Aid workers need protection. Only diplomacy, not more bloodshed, will achieve long-term peace.

We also shared our alarm at the heightened tension in the west bank. We reiterated our clear condemnation of Israeli settlements, which are illegal under international law and harm the prospect of a future Palestinian state. We called for an end to settlement expansion and settler violence. We are also clear that Israel must release frozen Palestinian Authority funds.

Prime Minister Mustafa outlined the essential reforms that the Palestinian Authority are currently undertaking. We fully support the implementation of those much-needed

reforms, including through providing technical assistance. The reforms will strengthen financial sustainability and economic development, enhance the transparency and efficiency of governance and service delivery, and promote peaceful co-existence with neighbouring countries. As part of our MOU, the Palestinian Authority underlined their commitment to delivering their reform agenda in full as a matter of priority. As part of the visit, we also announced a £101 million package of support for the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It will be directed at humanitarian relief, support for Palestinian economic development and strengthening Palestinian Authority governance and reform.

As the Foreign Secretary made clear, we will not give up on the two-state solution, with a Palestinian state and Israel living side by side in peace, dignity and security. The visit is a significant step in strengthening our relationship with the Palestinian Authority—a key partner for peace in the middle east—at this critical moment. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

2.38 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The Government's MOU fails to stand up to credible scrutiny, as it fails to outline in any way how it will help to achieve a meaningful end to the conflict. The MOU says that the PA are the "only legitimate governing entity" across the west bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza and that the UK Government want to see the PA running all three. There clearly cannot be any future for Hamas—we completely agree with that—but how will the Minister and the Government bring this about without a strategy for the removal of the terrorist Hamas regime in Gaza? I have asked this question many times from the Dispatch Box, but the Government simply have no answers.

There is a commitment in the MOU that the Palestinian Authority will hold presidential and parliamentary elections in "the shortest feasible timeframe". What is that timeframe? Who is dictating that timetable? What mechanisms are being put in place for elections, and has this been supported by Arab partners and neighbours who are signatories to the Cairo plan to rebuild Gaza? Does the Minister believe that the Palestinian Authority, in their current form, are capable of holding free and fair elections? If not, is it the Government's intention to provide election assistance? How would the Government rule out Hamas being able to run in those elections? There is nothing explicit in the MOU about a plan to ensure that terrorist infrastructure in Gaza is dismantled once and for all, which is inexplicable. What dialogue has taken place with key middle eastern allies since the Cairo plan for Gaza was published?

On the question of recognition of a Palestinian state, the Government's approach is incoherent, and the MOU provides no clarity on the long-term intentions, conditions or timing of this happening. Does the Minister agree that we are not at the point of recognition, and that recognition cannot be the start of the process?

There is no mention anywhere in the MOU of efforts to build upon the Abraham accords as a way of achieving regional stability, despite the accords providing the framework to support and finance a new future for

[Priti Patel]

Palestine and support a two-state solution. Were efforts to expand the accords discussed with the Palestinian Authority leadership yesterday?

On the economic front, the MOU talks about boosting trade, but what kind of increases are we looking at in value terms, given all the instability in the region? In which sectors are the Government now pursuing trade, and will this involve the UK Government spending money on trade promotion measures?

Why is there no mention of welfare reform in PA-controlled territory, which we know is in dire need of urgent attention? Meanwhile, the reference to education is extremely vague and unsatisfactory. It needs to be much clearer and set proper parameters, so that there are clear plans for educating and upskilling a whole generation who have been poorly served by their political leaders for too long. Can the Minister confirm whether he held discussions with the PA about the urgent need for them to do everything in their powers to banish antisemitism from Palestinian school textbooks? Can he provide any detail on the opaque commitment to

“education, scientific and cultural exchanges”?

What form will those take?

Can the Minister clarify what exactly the £101 million he announced yesterday will go towards? Which organisations will be entrusted with the money and whether UNRWA—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency—will receive any of it? What specific programmes will it fund? The entire document contains only a brief mention of the need to tackle corruption, which is inadequate. What is his assessment of the current corruption levels and the PA leadership’s efforts to deal with it? What is his definition of progress?

The section on security co-operation also needs unpacking and more accountability. Exactly how will security co-operation be enhanced, and which “global challenges and threats” does the Minister envisage jointly countering with the Palestinian Authority?

The MOU also states:

“The Participants commit to action to uphold the rights of women and minority groups and prevent the targeting of individuals in these categories.”

Does the Minister believe that these rights are being sufficiently upheld in the west bank at present? Indeed, the question of full civil liberties, including freedom of expression and media freedom, needs serious attention. The PA have their work cut out to prove their credibility.

There is a section on climate change in the MOU. Can the Minister tell us exactly what is the best practice he is seeking to learn from the Palestinian Authority when it comes to tackling climate change? On the current conflict, what have this Government done since the House last met on this issue to support international efforts to secure the release of those poor hostages who remain in such cruel captivity in Gaza?

Finally, I turn to Iran. If we are serious about sustainable peace, we must address the root causes of this terrible suffering. We still have no clarity from the Government about how they see the UK working with the US Administration, so I will give the Minister another opportunity to answer that question. Will he furnish us

with the Government’s official response on the legal attempt here in the UK to challenge the proscription of Hamas?

Mr Falconer: The shadow Foreign Secretary asked many questions. Let me be clear: the British Government see the Palestinian Authority as a vital partner, and they are a vital partner that must go through reform. The new Prime Minister has shown leadership on that reform agenda and has made progress on a range of issues. The right hon. Lady raises a number of important issues. One is the content of textbooks, an issue on which we have discussions with the Palestinian Authority and which I have discussed with other parties who have strong views, understandably, on the importance of ensuring that both communities are raised with a belief in co-existence rather than hatred.

There are a range of other very important reform questions that are at issue. One of them, on which the Prime Minister has shown real leadership, is the so-called “pay to slay” arrangements. Progress has been made on that, and we must encourage the Palestinian Authority in those reform efforts. The memorandum of understanding is intended to provide a framework to upgrade that co-operation, because the Palestinian Authority are the vital partner for peace.

The right hon. Lady rightly asked what we will do to ensure that Hamas leave the Gaza strip and do not play a governance role. One of the most important things we can do is ensure that there is a serious and credible alternative to Hamas, and that must be the Palestinian Authority, which is what our efforts are aimed at.

The right hon. Lady asked two important questions about the UK Government’s position in relation to Iran. We welcome the talks between the United States of America and Iran. I was in Oman after the first stage of the talks and the Foreign Secretary has been there recently. We are talking to all parties and we want to see a diplomatic solution to the nuclear weapon threat that Iran poses not just to the region but to the world. We hope that these talks will prove successful.

The right hon. Lady asked, reasonably, about the allocation of the £101 million. I am not in a position to give a full breakdown of exactly where the money will go, though I will provide the House with that breakdown. I would anticipate that funding is directed to UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority directly, but once we have full programmatic details, we will return to the House with that breakdown. We are talking to partners about those allocations and I am happy to come back in writing on some of the more detailed questions.

Lastly, we support the Abraham accords. I was very pleased, while the right hon. Lady was there, to sign the UK up to an agreement with Bahrain and the US which includes explicit reference to the Abraham accords. We are supporting the Abraham accords not just in our words but in our actions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): At the meeting last night between the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Palestinian Prime Minister and his delegation, it was clear that they were very encouraged by the discussions they had had with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, and rightly

so, because the memorandum of understanding shows serious thinking about the long-term future of Israel and Palestine and leadership towards peace. Does my hon. Friend agree that now is the time to take the next serious step, which is to finally recognise the state of Palestine? The best time to do that might be alongside the French in New York in June.

Mr Falconer: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and her courteous treatment of the Palestinian Prime Minister last night. The question of recognition is raised repeatedly in this House. Our position remains the same: we do wish to recognise a Palestinian state, and we wish to do so as a contribution to a two-state solution. We will make the judgment about when the best moment is to try to make the fullest possible contribution.

As I said to the Palestinian Prime Minister this morning, our responsibility is for the reality of the situation on the ground—the practical viability of a Palestinian state. Of course, other states have taken a different position from the UK Government and chosen to recognise a Palestinian state. That has not called it into existence. Our job in the British Government is to make a practical contribution to a two-state solution, and that is how we intend to approach this issue.

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

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I was glad to see the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary meet the Palestinian Authority's Prime Minister Mustafa and reaffirm this country's support for a two-state solution. A Palestinian state as part of a wider two-state solution remains the only path to long-term peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. The Liberal Democrats have called for the immediate recognition of the state of Palestine. I ask the Minister this question most weeks and will ask it again, and I hope the position will change one week: following yesterday's meeting, will the Government now take this vital step and commit to working with international partners such as France on issuing a joint recognition statement?

Now is the time for a restoration of the ceasefire, the release of the hostages and a return to the political process. This Government have pledged a £101 million package of support for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including for humanitarian relief. That is welcome, yet for more than 50 days Israel has blocked aid from entering Gaza and shuttered border crossing points. As a result, the food stocks of the UN World Food Programme, which previously reached half of Gaza's population, have entirely run out. The risk of starvation, disease and death is very real, even as 116,000 tonnes of food aid languishes at border checkpoints. In a joint statement with French and German counterparts, the Foreign Secretary called this "intolerable", and rightly so, but what are the Government doing to end the blockade and ensure that aid can flow into Gaza?

The International Court of Justice has opened hearings on Israel's responsibility to facilitate humanitarian relief in Gaza. Will the Government commit to abiding by the court's judgment? Two weeks ago, the Government said that they continue to consider the ICJ's opinion on the OPTs. Can the Minister update the House on when we can finally expect the Government's response?

The Government have also reaffirmed their condemnation of violent west bank settler activity, but what concrete steps are being taken to pressure Israel to act on illegal settlements? Finally, will the Government now consider sanctions on those Israeli Ministers, such as Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, who encourage settler violence?

Mr Falconer: I have set out the position on recognition in a previous answer, and I am afraid that I will have to test the hon. Lady's patience because on sanctions I will also set out the position, which is very familiar: we do not comment on sanctions in advance, as to do so might impact their effectiveness. I can confirm, however, that we have raised these issues, including the blockade of aid. As she has identified, we issued a statement with our European partners last week, and the Foreign Secretary raised this with his counterpart on 15 April.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I welcome the work that special envoy Sir Michael Barber will be doing in the Palestinian Authority. When I was working in Pakistan as a diplomat, I saw the excellent work they were doing in building the public sector. Does the Minister agree, however, that that work will be futile if Israel continues to undermine the PA by taking steps towards the annexation of the west bank, and what steps are the Government taking to ensure that this does not happen?

Mr Falconer: I join my hon. Friend in what he says about Sir Michael Barber. We were both in Pakistan at a similar time and both saw the excellent work he did on girls' education there, and I welcome his vital role in relation to the Palestinian Authority. I have been clear, as has the Foreign Secretary, about our position on settlements. They are illegal under international law and we oppose completely any annexation of the west bank.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Foreign Secretary rightly said in his statement yesterday that Hamas have no future in any of the possible ways forward for Palestine and for Gaza. That is a statement of the obvious, but what is the Government's strategy for Palestine? In particular, given that the Minister avoided the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), what discussions has he had with the Americans, because it seems to me that the Trump plan for Gaza, in particular, is very different from any conceivable plan that the UK Government might have?

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Gentleman, one of my predecessors, asks what our plan for Palestine is. Our support to the Palestinian Authority is an important element of our work in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. They must be at the centre of the efforts to ensure that there can be a future for both Palestine and Israel that involves two safe and secure states side by side. We of course speak regularly to our US counterparts across the whole range of issues in my area—in many areas we may diverge, but we continue to have a very close relationship and discuss these matters closely.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) mentioned, members of

[Uma Kumaran]

the Foreign Affairs Committee met the Palestinian Authority Prime Minister yesterday. He was steadfast in his comments to us on his advocacy for peace for the people in Gaza, in the west bank and the occupied territories and in Israel. Those of us on the Labour side of the House stood on a manifesto that stated:

“Palestinian statehood is the inalienable right of the Palestinian people. It is not in the gift of any neighbour and is also essential to the long-term security of Israel.”

The Minister has been asked this question before, but the time to recognise the state of Palestine is long overdue; the time is now. When will the UK finally recognise the state of Palestine?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is committed to these issues. I know that she has travelled to the region recently and has a long history of advocacy, as do so many in this House. As I said in my previous answer, the role of the British Government must be to try and practically bring about the safety and security that two states can provide, and we will consider recognition in that context.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): As has been mentioned by colleagues on the Foreign Affairs Committee, yesterday we met the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority. He outlined to us their plans for the running of Gaza once the conflict is over. However, the Palestinian Authority are also in desperate need of long-overdue reform. Hamas's rule of Gaza has been an absolute disaster for the Gazan people, but the future of Gaza cannot be for the Palestinian Authority to run Gaza in the same fashion in which they have been running the west bank. What guarantees do the Government have that the PA are going to undertake those reforms to their governance, to the corruption issues, and to the rule of law that are desperately needed so that the people of Gaza have a better future?

Mr Falconer: A central element of our discussions with the Palestinian Prime Minister is that reform agenda. The Palestinian Prime Minister is relatively new in his position and, as I said to the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), he has made some important commitments and important practical changes, and we must support the Palestinian Authority to reform in order to best serve the Palestinian people.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): May I put on record my thanks to the Minister for his statement today and commend him and the Foreign Secretary for securing this landmark memorandum of understanding with the Palestinian Government? Following my meeting yesterday with Prime Minister Mustafa, can the Minister tell this House how the MOU and the £101 million for the Occupied Palestinian Territories will allow the Palestinian Authority to reform and provide crucial public services to the Palestinian people?

Mr Falconer: It was a sign of the Palestinian Authority's commitment to some of these practical questions of service delivery that their Health Minister travelled with the Prime Minister for discussions. The MOU provides a framework through which we can have that reform discussion, including strategic dialogues on a whole

range of questions such as the important education questions that the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) raised earlier.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): For how long does the Minister think he will be able to recognise a Palestinian state that retains sufficient economically viable land to actually be a goer?

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important question about the economic viability of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and what any future state of Palestine would rely on for its economy. There clearly are very important questions to be considered about energy, water and the areas themselves. Clearly, many of these issues have been considered as final-status determination issues envisaged for the end of a two-state solution conference. We are doing everything we can to try and support the most practical measures possible to enable the Palestinians to live the most dignified lives that they can.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): May I place on record my thanks to the Minister for all the work that he and the Secretary of State are doing on the MOU, which is very welcome?

On the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I appreciate that we stood on that manifesto, and rightly so, but things have since changed. The Government's position was that we would continue recognition as part of the peace process, but Israel has been blocking aid to Gaza for 50 days now, people are starting to die of starvation, settler violence is increasing in the west bank and we now have an MOU, so is this not the right time to review our position? Will the Minister at least commit to going away and reviewing the decision and give the Palestinians the state recognition that they are way overdue?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is very committed to these issues, and raises them with me here and elsewhere. I will not restate the position, but I will once again confirm from the Dispatch Box our commitment to our manifesto and that we consider recognition an inalienable right of the Palestinian people. However, it must be part of the practical steps taken to bring the violence to an end and a peaceful resolution to the region.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Given that the horrific attacks of 7 October were perpetrated by Hamas, that hostages still remain in captivity in Gaza, that those attacks were carried out with the support and participation of many Gazans, and that there were senior Palestinian Authority diplomats who openly celebrated those attacks, does the Minister not think that unilaterally recognising Palestinian statehood at this moment would constitute a reward for terrorism, rather than the fruit of peaceful negotiation?

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Lady refers to the conditions of the hostages. Last night, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), I attended a presentation by Eli Sharabi, who has British family members and was taken by Hamas on 7 October and held in the most unimaginably cruel conditions. He was

released, only to discover that the British passports that were held by his family as a source of protection were not enough to save them, and were not enough to prevent the killing of his brother 300 metres from him in a tunnel. The whole House remains focused on the hostages who remain in unknown conditions, probably deep underground. Anyone who had anything to do with that can have no role in the future of Gaza. It is, in part, out of our determination that Hamas must leave the strip that our support for the Palestinian Authority is so important.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the significant strengthening of ties between the UK and the Palestinian Authority, not just in trade and extra funding from the UK, but because, as the Foreign Secretary said last night,

“The UK is committed to urgently advancing Palestinian statehood as a key part of a two-state solution.”

It was my pleasure last night to meet not just Prime Minister Mustafa but Basel Adra, the director of the Oscar-winning documentary “No Other Land”, who made clear that recognition is his central demand too. Does the Minister therefore agree with me that President Macron was right when he said last month that

“We must move towards recognition, and we will do so in the coming months”?

Mr Falconer: I welcome my hon. Friend’s engagement and commitment to these issues. I will not rehearse the position that I have set out already on recognition.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Two weeks ago, I had the privilege to speak on behalf of the UK Parliament at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, where over 1,200 MPs from 188 countries passed a resolution supporting a two-state solution. No one voted against it. There was plenty of notice of the UK not recognising a nation state. Last night, I asked the Palestinian Prime Minister what difference it would make if the UK recognised a Palestinian state, and he replied that

“it would be a paradigm change, a new platform. It all starts with that recognition.”

Given the crucial meetings between the UK Prime Minister and the Palestinian Prime Minister as equals, what practical impediment stands in the way of now recognising Palestine as a nation state? I hear repeatedly that we are looking for a practical solution, so will the Minister explain that to the House?

Mr Falconer: Owing to time constraints, I will not rehearse the vital questions about security and governance that will clearly need to underpin a two-state solution in which both states are able to live in peace, security and co-operation. Those final-status determinations have long been vexed. While we are committed to the inalienable right of the Palestinians to a state as part of a two-state solution, let us not pretend that there are not vexed issues at the centre of what a Palestinian state would look like. That is one reason why so much diplomacy has been focused on these issues over the years.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Minister’s statement and thank him for bringing an extensive range of expertise to his role. Does he agree with me that it is only right for a British

Government Minister to ask searching questions of both the PA and the Israeli Government? Will he reassure me that he will continue to ask questions about accountability for the killing of humanitarian workers who are trying to perform their duties?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and for his dedication to these issues. Clearly, there has been an absolutely tragic loss of life among aid workers who are delivering vital services in Gaza. We all remember that a year ago a tragic incident killed seven aid workers from the World Central Kitchen, including James Henderson, John Chapman and James Kirby, three British nationals who remain in our thoughts. It has been more than a year and we expect an update on the investigation by the Israeli military advocate general. We want to see full justice and accountability for British nationals affected by violence, including in relation to the strike in March on a UN building, in which a British national was seriously injured. Over the course of this devastating conflict, more than 400 aid workers have been killed. Our demands are driven by nothing other than a desire to protect the lives of humanitarian workers and demand accountability for those who are killed.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If our Prime Minister can meet the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, and if the United Kingdom Government can enter into a memorandum of understanding with the Government of the Palestinian Authority, what barriers can remain to the United Kingdom recognising the state of Palestine as a matter of logic?

Mr Falconer: I gently suggest to the right hon. Member that that logic does not wholly follow. There are complex final-status determination issues that would underpin any recognition. No two-state solution will be straightforward without significant negotiation, diplomacy and agreement on both sides. As I have set out, recognition remains our goal, but let us not pretend that it is a straightforward decision without complexity.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): In his remarks yesterday, the Palestinian Prime Minister quite rightly reminded MPs of the UK’s historic, moral and legal obligations to the Palestinian people. The importance of our actions to uphold international law today cannot be underestimated, so I must ask the Minister why the UK is still reluctant to sanction Israel for its war crimes against the Palestinians? Why are the Government deepening our trade ties with Israel, as the International Court of Justice warns countries not to assist or aid illegal occupation? Finally, I ask the Minister to listen to the growing calls in this Chamber and announce when the Government will finally recognise the state of Palestine.

Mr Falconer: Our position is clear on international humanitarian law and on the importance of accountability. I will not test your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, by again going through the points about recognition.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): In 2014, I was one of 39 Conservatives who voted in this House for recognition of Palestine. Since then, Governments

[*Martin Vickers*]

have come and gone, and thousands of lives on both sides have been lost. The Minister said a few minutes ago that he could not go into the full details, but I am sure it would be helpful—if not today, in the very near future—to Members from across the House for him to provide a detailed analysis of what needs to change before recognition can take place.

Mr Falconer: I am confident that I will be back in this House to talk about the details of recognition soon.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): As another Member of this House who voted in 2014 to recognise the state of Palestine in a motion that this House passed, I will say that progress on this matter is long overdue. I hope the Minister has heard loud and clear the message from many of us that continuing to delay that is problematic.

The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) might be surprised that I agree with him: there is a concern about what will be left of the state of Palestine. Despite the existence of thermographic technology, Israeli forces are now burning to the ground the agricultural fields in northern Gaza in apparent pursuit of the tunnels that Hamas are using for their terrorist attacks. We know that nearly 4,000 children in Gaza have been diagnosed as suffering from acute malnutrition. We all desperately want to see aid resuming to Palestine, because we know that there is no future for any state if people are starving to death. Will the Minister update us on the practical details he discussed last night with the Palestinian Authority about how we will get food back into Gaza and get movement in this process?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend raises important questions about the viability of the Palestinian state. The Occupied Palestinian Territories must not be reduced either geographically or by forced displacement, and I am happy to reiterate that point at the Dispatch Box. There is clearly an urgent crisis. The World Food Programme has said that it has now run out of food in the Gaza strip. The single most important measure that can be taken to address that crisis is an end to the blockade of aid into the Gaza strip, and that is what we continue to call for.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Can I invite the Minister to bring a greater sense of urgency to the situation? There are children starving to death in Gaza and dying for lack of medicines. There is no water and hardly any power going in. The hospitals are not functioning. That is all a disaster made by the deliberate action of the Israel Defence Forces. What action is the Minister taking to ensure that the blockade ends and that food, medicine and all the necessities for life go in? Those people who are dying of starvation can see food over the fence in Israel, but they are being deliberately starved to death.

Mr Falconer: As I said in my previous answer, we are clear that the single most significant contribution that can be taken on that problem is ending the blockade of Gaza. We have been clear with the Israeli Government at the highest levels, including on 15 April, in the meeting between the Foreign Secretary and his Israeli

equivalent, that that blockade must be lifted. On the longer-term questions of health and some of the other basic social services, I will say that of course we discussed those issues with the Palestinian Authority and relevant Ministers over the past two days. As the right hon. Gentleman says, this is very urgent, and the World Food Programme has been clear. That is why we made the statement over the weekend.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It was sobering yesterday listening to Dr Mustafa, the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, not least as he stressed the UK Government's leadership role and the importance of the recognition of the state of Palestine. Bearing in mind that leadership role and the fact that 147 jurisdictions already recognise that state, will the Minister explain to the House today the reasons for the impediment to that recognition? It is really important that we hear that, because we are here to hold the Government to account.

Mr Falconer: Some 147 states have recognised a Palestinian state, yet no Palestinian state is fully functioning. That underlines the importance of taking the practical measures that will be absolutely vital not only to support Palestinian life, but to ensure that two states can co-exist peacefully, side by side. Many Members have referred to some of the practical impediments, whether it is the removal of Hamas from the Gaza strip or the economic challenges that face the Palestinian territories in both the west bank and Gaza. Let me be clear. An extremely violent conflict continues. Without a ceasefire, it is hard to imagine the creation of a state. I am sure that we will continue to discuss the merits of recognition, but let us not pretend that there are not serious practical considerations to bear in mind before the practical establishment of a Palestinian state is possible. The British Government are focused on changing the actual facts on the ground. That is the approach that we will take.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Other hon. and right hon. Members have talked about what might be left in Palestine, but I will ask about who might be left. Some 20% of the 55,000 pregnant women there—that is 11,000 pregnant women—are so malnourished that their pregnancies are now high risk. That really undermines the future of Palestine's population. What assurance can the Minister give us that the £101 million will be directed to those people who really need it?

Mr Falconer: As I have said already, once we have fully allocated the funding, we will return to the House to outline how it has been prioritised.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I was pleased to see that the Foreign Secretary, along with France and Germany, strongly condemned the use of humanitarian aid as a political tool. The Minister will know very well that the only way to bring peace and stability to the region is by working together with our network of allies. Bearing that in mind, what conversations has he had with our European and international allies about the Palestinian-led planning of recovery and reconstruction in Gaza, as outlined in yesterday's excellent memorandum of understanding?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks important questions. The Foreign Secretary and I, and the whole ministerial team, are engaged with our international partners. We have made a number of statements with European partners; with the Qataris on Sunday, when the Foreign Secretary travelled to Qatar; and in Oman, to which the Foreign Secretary and I travelled recently. We are engaged with many other important partners in the region, including Egypt, Israel and many others.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): We have heard Members across the House ask about recognition and sanctions. Yesterday, I joined a private briefing organised by the Palestinian NGO Network, Medical Aid for Palestinians, Oxfam International, Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Association of International Development Agencies. The message I took away, which is burned into my brain, was that, on the ground, food, water and medicines—the essential of life—have all run out, as the Minister said. Baby milk and the water needed to make it are not available. Would the UK Government's response be the same if the people who were starved, and denied water and medicine, were in Ukraine, God forbid, and if Russia was the perpetrator?

Mr Falconer: The UK seeks to play its full role in every humanitarian crisis. We have conducted important conferences on Sudan, and have attended to issues in Ukraine and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We act wherever we can to try to avert humanitarian suffering.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, in particular the announcement of £101 million for humanitarian aid and the signing of the memorandum of understanding. The Minister has reconfirmed his commitment to a two-state solution. However, in order to have a two-state solution, we need to recognise both states. What criteria are being used to assess when the time is right to recognise Palestine as a state? If the Minister is not able to provide a detailed response today, I am happy to receive one in writing.

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. There is no end of detail to discuss in relation to recognition, and I am sure that we will return to this House to discuss it further. Of course, when we talk of a two-state solution, we envisage two recognised states living peacefully together, providing for their joint safety and security. That is implicit in our long-standing support for a two-state solution.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): In his statement, the Minister said that there could be no role for Hamas in the future of Gaza. I support that, but there can be no future for Gaza unless the killing and destruction ends. That is why, in September last year, it was welcome that the Government suspended 29 arms export licences, following concern that there was a risk that they could be used by the Israelis to break international law in Gaza. However, a further 34 export licences to Israel were granted between September and December last year—more than were originally blocked. Can the Minister explain that decision, and provide the latest number of arms licences to Israel that have been approved?

Mr Falconer: In September, we set out the basis on which we chose to suspend arms licences, and that basis remains. There is not a full restriction on providing licences; many licences are provided either for dual-use goods, or for goods that could not possibly be used for the activities that have caused concern. For example, licences would be issued for body armour used by non-governmental organisation workers in Gaza. There are also items for the legitimate defence of Israel, such as components that could enable its missile defence system to defend it against Iranian drones. I do not have the exact number of licences; it tends to change relatively regularly, given the nature of the flow between the two countries.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I too welcome the MOU and the funding we will provide to the Palestinian Authority. When I went to Jerusalem last year with other Members, we talked to the NGO community—an absolutely vital community in both Israel and Palestine, working for democracy and human rights. On 5 May, the Knesset is planning to vote on another law that will clamp down on the activities of NGOs working to help build a two-state solution. The law will impose an 80% tax on donations from foreign state entities, including the United Kingdom, and ban access to courts for NGOs. What discussions has the Minister had with counterparts in Israel to ensure that our state funding can go to towards building that two-state solution with both Israeli and Palestinian NGOs?

Mr Falconer: We support efforts by both Israeli and Palestinian civil society actors to build links across communities, and I know that many in this House have engaged with organisations of that kind. We are aware of the draft legislation in the Knesset, and we are engaging with colleagues in Israel on these questions.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Today, the International Court of Justice heard that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza under the world's watchful eye. All of us are witnesses to the most horrific crimes against humanity, which are being carried out in plain sight. A million children have been cut off from the basic necessities for survival for well over a month. They are at risk of starvation. I repeat those words: a million children are at risk of starving to death. I fear that once this is over and done with, and all is said and done, we will make mere memorials to mark the most horrific war crimes of our time. This is a tragedy that the world has the power to stop but is refusing to. What more can the Government do to ensure that the civilian population of Gaza, including a million children, are not starved to death, and why is it not being done?

Mr Falconer: The Government are in no doubt about the severity of the humanitarian situation in Gaza. That is why last week, we made statements—both with our allies and alone—about the politicisation of humanitarian aid and the urgent situation that the UN agencies are reporting. More than 90% of Gaza's population has been displaced, and many have been displaced repeatedly. Many Members of this House have heard harrowing tales of residents of the Gaza strip simply trying to survive, returning to their home only to find it totally destroyed, or trying to find medical assistance as

[Mr Falconer]

hospitals across the strip go out of operation. The Government are in no doubt about the severity of the situation, and we raise it with the emphasis that the hon. Gentleman would expect.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on all the work he is doing—I know that a huge amount is going on behind the scenes—and particularly on the memorandum of understanding and the additional funding. When I hosted a meeting of the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group last night, it was quite clear how grateful Prime Minister Mustafa was for the stance that the UK was taking, and that he saw it as part of a sequence of steps towards recognition. Yes, he wanted that as soon as possible, but he recognised the steps that needed to be taken, because of the difficult international context, to ensure that recognition would make a difference. However, who among our other allies, either the E4 or the Five Eyes—except the US, obviously—has provided a similar sort of MOU that can be built on?

Mr Falconer: I will have to revert to my hon. Friend on whether others have a memorandum of understanding. The European Union and others have done important work with the Palestinian Authority, but I was very grateful for the words of the Palestinian Prime Minister last night in Parliament. He has particularly recognised the importance of the UK's work on the reform agenda and on many other things, for which I am very grateful.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): More than 15,000 children have been murdered, more than 15,000 women have been murdered, and more than 15,000 innocent men have been murdered. The Minister used the word “contribution” when making reference to a two-state solution. I ask him whether the contribution of all those who have been murdered—the blood that has been spilled—is not sufficient for Palestine to be recognised as a state.

Mr Falconer: As I said in my last answer, we are incredibly conscious of the suffering in Gaza. We want to see a ceasefire, we want a political process, and we want two states living securely side by side, and all our diplomatic efforts in relation to this question are focused on that.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): In his meeting with MPs, the Palestinian Prime Minister was clear that Israel will change course only if there is real action from states. He stressed that, in line with the International Court of Justice ruling, states have a legal responsibility to impose sanctions—including ending all trade in settlement goods—and to cease any aid or assistance that sustains Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territory. Those measures are backed by a significant number of MPs across this House. When will the Government finally impose meaningful sanctions in order to hold Israel accountable and apply the pressure needed to stop it trampling all over international law without any consequences? Rightly, the Government did that for Russia; wrongly, they will not do it for Israel.

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, but I would gently correct him; as he knows, this Government have taken steps since we became the Government, including sanctions. He also knows that we do not comment on sanctions in advance of issuing them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is a good man and his answers indicate just that, so I read with interest the release on the Government website regarding the visit. I saw the language referring to the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Does the Minister not agree that Government language must be considered and unbiased? While we welcome dialogue and we hope for peace, to achieve that we cannot and must not roll over and use narratives that are not helpful and useful. We must be careful that the Government do not sow division and distrust with our Israeli allies.

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. The term Occupied Palestinian Territories has long been the language of the British Government under multiple different Governments, and it reflects our legal view of the position.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to securing a peaceful future for the region, but that future feels far away for the families of the hostages still held by Hamas. As the Minister mentioned, yesterday he and I heard from Eli Sharabi, who talked about the horrors of his experience and how he lost absolutely everything. He is working tirelessly to secure the release of all hostages, including Avinatan Or, who has British links. Does the Minister agree that the first step in securing the peaceful future we all want to see is the immediate release of all the hostages?

Mr Falconer: I do, and I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend, who has been a tireless supporter of hostage families, including Emily Damari, her mother Mandy and, of course, Avinatan Or, who is an Israeli citizen with a British mother. He is very much in my thoughts, as are all of those left in tunnels for phase 2. They are awaiting a ceasefire that cannot come urgently enough. I join my hon. Friend in calling for the immediate release of all hostages.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Palestinian Authority are key to a two-state solution and should be the basis of the viable Palestinian state we all want to see. I welcome the Minister's focus on practical steps to build up the Palestinian Authority. I think those are a lot more important than statements that might be interpreted as a little performative. Can the Minister update the House on the Government's work with the PA to improve the situation on the ground in the west bank, including tackling the recent increase in Iranian-backed terrorism there and the expansion of Israeli settlements, both of which represent major practical barriers to a two-state solution?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend raises important points, and he has a long history of engagement on these issues. The security challenges in the west bank are important and he is right to raise them. I have set out our position on settlements clearly already from the Dispatch Box,

and I reiterate that. We are talking to the Palestinian Authority about those practical challenges and the importance of being able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Palestinian security forces to prevent violent disturbances within the areas they control. It is vital that settlements are restrained and that the terrible increase in settlement activity is reduced. It is vital, too, that Israel enables the Palestinian Authority to function effectively, which includes paying salaries, having electricity and all the other basic fundamentals that a nation state would require.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It was a real honour to join the meeting with Prime Minister Mustafa in Parliament yesterday. I welcome the Minister's hard work in the signing of the MOU. I desperately want peace for Palestinians and for Israelis, and I was touched by Prime Minister Mustafa's gracious remarks that the way forward has to be peace for all, dignity for all and justice for all. Does the Minister agree that while we work through the short-term practical considerations of recognising the state of Palestine, we have to keep our eyes on that long-term prize of peace, dignity and justice, and that a state of Palestine is a vital part of that?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is right. Those are the principles for long-term peace for both parties, and that is what we will need to work towards.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): The memorandum of understanding is significant, and the message to the Minister about the recognition of the state of Palestine is equally significant. Member after Member has raised the famine in Gaza and its implications.

We are seeing pictures of children who, as a result of malnutrition, are not surviving the hospital treatment they are getting. Historically, our country has been faced with this situation before, and we have overridden blockades. We have not allowed other countries to veto humanitarian aid. Are we not near that stage now? We cannot allow Israel to veto the delivery of aid. Should we not be looking with our partners at the logistics we have on the ground in that region to deliver the aid by sea and by air, whatever statements Israel makes?

Mr Falconer: With and without our partners, we have looked at a range of mechanisms whereby aid might be brought into Gaza, but the truth is that without effective deconfliction mechanisms, aid workers are at real risk, as we have seen in recent months and weeks. There is also a question of scale. There have been airdrops and sea movements of aid into Gaza, but nothing can equal the scale required other than lifting the blockade, and that is what have been focusing on.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): After 570 days, 59 hostages remain. Does the Minister agree that their unconditional release is a key to the ceasefire? What did Prime Minister Mustafa have to say about that yesterday?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his doughty advocacy in this regard. Prime Minister Mustafa told me that he wanted hostages to be released, and I am sure my hon. Friend will have seen some of the other commentary from the Palestinian Authority on these questions. This is critical: the hostages must be released as soon as possible, and I know the whole House continues to share that view.

Maternity Units (Requirement for Bereavement Suite)

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

3.36 pm

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require new maternity units to have a bereavement suite; and for connected purposes.

For anyone experiencing the loss of a baby, that is already one of the most difficult times in their life. It is made more difficult when they experience it in a hospital maternity ward, surrounded by mothers and families celebrating new life. No number of new facilities can take the pain away, but parents whose local hospital has a dedicated bereavement suite away from the main labour ward can process that pain in privacy and peace.

I am often inspired by my constituents in Kettering, and today I am especially proud to introduce this Bill, inspired by the Twinkling Stars Appeal, which campaigned for a new maternity bereavement suite at Kettering general hospital. I pay tribute to the Northamptonshire Health Charity, which has dedicated so much time and care to this appeal, and also to Sands, which works to make sure that anyone affected by pregnancy or baby loss has the care and support that they need. I also want to recognise the work that the NHS is already doing. Day in and day out, staff at Kettering general hospital help people who are going through one of the most difficult experiences that anyone can imagine. They continue to do that despite years of underfunding and understaffing, which is a testament to our hospital staff. Finally, I want to thank all the families who have been involved in this campaign, and anyone who has donated, helped out at a fundraising event, sold masks during the pandemic to raise money, or even done a skydive.

The Rockingham wing, which is the maternity ward of Kettering general, is where I was born as a premature baby, eight weeks early. It is where my mum fought for her life after a complicated and traumatic birth, which was made even more difficult as she was surrounded by happy, healthy mothers and their babies. There are many people in Kettering whose lives, like mine, started in the Rockingham wing, so it was very alarming to hear in 2023 that it was crumbling because of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. I am pleased to say that the RAAC is now being mitigated, and a two-storey extension will be built behind the existing maternity unit to help the team to improve the care that they deliver each year to about 3,000 families and their babies. This will be particularly important in Northamptonshire, where we have a growing population and many new families moving into the area.

On a recent visit to Kettering general, I walked the grounds of the new maternity ward. I saw plans for the new bereavement suite and, thanks to the campaign by the Northamptonshire Health Charity and the efforts of local people, I saw the place where it will be built. Before the appeal, families in Kettering who had lost a baby, either during pregnancy, during the birth itself or through compassionate induction, stayed in a room within the labour suite where mothers could be close to their babies but not next to them, and where partners

walked through the maternity ward to reach them, surrounded by the sounds of new life and delighted parents, making a heartbreaking experience even harder.

Kettering general hospital cares for up to 100 families a year who lose a baby. They will now be cared for in a suite that has a private bereavement room, with en suite facilities and a cold cot for precious time with their baby. It will have a dedicated family room with a kitchenette, a sofa bed, a peaceful private space for families to gather to support each other, and a quiet office space for bereavement midwives, where sensitive conversations can be conducted with care and privacy.

At Northampton hospital, where some of these facilities were already in place, the Daisy suite appeal aims to create somewhere for follow-up care with specialist bereavement nurses that is not on the maternity ward, so that when bereaved parents who have experienced unique trauma return to the hospital, they will not have to walk back through the same maternity ward again, which could trigger painful memories. A bereavement midwife at Northampton hospital wrote to me in support of the campaign, stating:

“Coming to hospital to give birth to a baby who is known to have died or will die is unimaginable. The grief and devastation can never be fully understood as each circumstance will be different. What we can do as a hospital is try our very best not to add to these feelings and make such an awful situation even worse by not providing a supportive and understanding environment. We want them all to feel supported, heard and truly cared for.”

She explained that her team are currently based in the maternity ward, but are not easily accessible for families to drop in for support and are difficult to find for staff members who are looking for support themselves. A bereavement suite would allow them to see more families, allow parents to return after discharge and spend more precious time with their baby, and provide a separate space where families do not come face-to-face with other pregnant women and new-born babies while going through such a heartbreaking time.

These campaigns are based on real-life experiences. The changes being made to our maternity units in hospitals in Northamptonshire are the result of what families have noticed after experiencing bereavement themselves. They want to make a positive difference for future parents. I cannot even begin to express the admiration I have for parents who are taking their pain and channelling it into making things better for those who come after them. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Some of the parents who contacted me mentioned the importance of “quiet care” when going through a time like this. They told me that every parent who is going through the worst time of their lives should have the opportunity to receive care in private.

When I spoke to the Northamptonshire Health Charity, it highlighted the importance of hearing families’ voices in this conversation and spoke about how dedicating time and experience to the campaign can have a healing impact for some of the families who have been involved. It is really important that parent consultation is right at the heart of the Bill. The Government are building an NHS fit for the future, and a big part of that is listening to service users and taking on board their feedback. I believe that this is particularly important in spaces such as bereavement suites, where changes that might feel small, such as the feel of the space or the access to the room, can make a huge difference to parents and families.

In Northamptonshire, bereaved parents have met nurses and walked through the maternity ward, pointing out where changes can be made to better support parents in future.

Currently in the UK, 13 families a day lose their baby before, during or shortly after birth. That is around 4,500 babies a year, so this issue is bigger than Kettering or Northamptonshire. When I was researching bereavement suites for the Bill, I looked on the JustGiving website and found it full of appeals from every corner of the country for funding for new facilities, specialist counselling and trained midwives for bereavement services. A collaboration of charities working to support people affected by the death of a baby have developed the national bereavement care pathway to improve the quality and consistency of bereavement care received by parents after pregnancy loss or the death of a baby.

As of 2024, every NHS trust in England has signed up to the national bereavement care pathway, but we know there is still work to do. Not all hospitals are currently able to provide a properly equipped or suitable bereavement room; some are in the middle of the labour ward, and some are not sound-proofed. The Twinkling Stars suite at Kettering general hospital is a perfect example of how when we welcome contributions from families and parents with experience, we spot things we did not know we needed.

At the moment, it is families, communities and charities who are raising money so that parents can face such a difficult time with a little more privacy and comfort. Nobody can take away the pain of losing a baby, but we can ensure that in that pain, families are met with compassion, dignity and privacy, and that begins with a bereavement suite in every newly built maternity ward.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Rosie Wrighting, Jen Craft, Dr Marie Tidball, Michelle Welsh, Mr Richard Holden, John Cooper, Lee Barron, Mike Reader and Charlie Dewhirst present the Bill.

Rosie Wrighting accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May, and to be printed (Bill 226).

Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 17

INFORMATION NOTICES

“(1) The Social Security Administration Act 1992 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 109A (authorisations for investigators)—

(a) before subsection (1) insert—

“(A1) An individual who for the time being has the Secretary of State’s authorisation for the purposes of this Part is entitled—

(a) for any one or more of the purposes mentioned in paragraphs (a) and (b) of subsection (2), to exercise any of the powers which are conferred on an authorised officer by section 109BZA;

(b) for any one or more of the purposes mentioned in paragraphs (c) and (d) of subsection (2), to exercise any of the powers which are conferred on an authorised officer by section 109BZB;

(c) for any one or more of the purposes mentioned in subsection (2), to exercise any of the powers which are conferred on an authorised officer by section 109C.”;

(b) in subsection (1) for “Secretary of State’s” substitute “”Scottish Ministers””;

(c) in subsection (2)(d), after “offences” insert “or, for the purposes of subsection (A1), other DWP offences”;

(d) in subsection (8), for “109B and 109C below” substitute “109B to 109C”.

(3) In section 109B (power to require information), in the heading, after “information” insert “: officers authorised by Scottish Ministers”.

(4) After section 109B insert—

“109BZA Power to require information about entitlement etc: officers authorised by Secretary of State

(1) An authorised officer may give a person (“P”) a written notice (an “information notice”) requiring P to give an authorised officer the information described in the notice where the officer has reasonable grounds for suspecting that P—

(a) is a person falling within subsection (2) of section 109B, and

(b) has or may have possession of or access to any information about any matter that is relevant for any one or more of the purposes mentioned in section 109A(2)(a) or (b) (entitlement to benefits etc).

(2) Information may be specified in an information notice only if it is reasonable for the authorised officer to require the information for one or more of the purposes mentioned in section 109A(2)(a) or (b).

(3) An authorised officer may require P to give specified information only if the officer has reasonable grounds to suspect that P has or is able to access the information.

(4) Subsections (2E) to (4) of section 109B apply to an information notice under this section as they apply to a notice under that section.

(5) Nothing in this section limits the powers conferred on the Secretary of State by Schedule 3B.

109BZB Power to require information about suspected fraud etc: officers authorised by Secretary of State

(1) An authorised officer may give a person (“P”) a written notice (an “information notice”) requiring P to give an authorised officer specified information where the officer—

- (a) has reasonable grounds to suspect that a person has committed, is committing or intends to commit a DWP offence, and
- (b) considers that it is necessary and proportionate to require the specified information for a purpose mentioned in section 109A(2)(c) or (d) (investigating compliance with the relevant social security legislation etc).
- (2) Information may be specified in an information notice only if it relates to a person who is identified (by name or description) in the information notice as—
 - (a) the person suspected as mentioned in subsection (1)(a), or
 - (b) a member of that person's family (within the meaning of Part 7 of the Contributions and Benefits Act).
- (3) An authorised officer may require P to give specified information only if the officer has reasonable grounds to suspect that P has or is able to access the information.
- (4) An information notice must set out—
 - (a) the identity (by name or description) of the person to whom the information requested relates;
 - (b) how, where and the period within which the information must be given;
 - (c) information about the consequences of not complying with the notice.
- (5) The power under this section to require P to give information includes power to—
 - (a) take copies of or extracts from information;
 - (b) require P to provide information in a specified form;
 - (c) if any specified information is not given to an authorised officer, require P to state, to the best of P's knowledge and belief, both where that information is and why it has not been given to the authorised officer.
- (6) Subsection (2E) of section 109B (communications data) applies to an information notice under this section as it applies to a notice under that section.
- (7) In this section—
 - “information” means information in the form of a document or in any other form;
 - “specified” means—
 - (a) specified, or described, in the information notice, or
 - (b) falling within a category that is specified or described in the information notice.
- (8) Nothing in this section limits the powers conferred on the Secretary of State by Schedule 3B.”
- (5) In section 109BA (power of Secretary of State to require electronic access to information)—
 - (a) in the heading, omit “of Secretary of State”;
 - (b) before subsection (1) insert—
 - “(A1) Subject to subsection (2) below, where it appears to the Secretary of State—
 - (a) that a person keeps any electronic records,
 - (b) that the records contain or are likely, from time to time, to contain information about a matter that is relevant for one or more of the purposes mentioned in section 109A(2)(c) or (d), and
 - (c) that facilities exist under which electronic access to those records is being provided, or is capable of being provided, by that person to other persons,
 the Secretary of State may require that person to enter into arrangements under which authorised officers are allowed such access to those records.”;
 - (c) in subsection (1), for “Secretary of State”, in both places it occurs, substitute “Scottish Ministers”;
 - (d) in subsection (2)—
 - (i) in paragraph (a), after “subsection”, in the first place it occurs, insert “(A1) or”, and

- (ii) in paragraph (b), for “section 109B above” substitute “—
- (i) in the case of arrangements entered into under subsection (A1), section 109BZB;
- (ii) in the case of arrangements entered into under subsection (1), section 109B.”;
- (e) in subsection (3), after “subsection” insert “(A1) or”;
- (f) in subsection (4)—
 - (i) after “subsection” insert “(A1) or”, and
 - (ii) for “section 109B” substitute “—
 - (a) in the case of arrangements entered into under subsection (A1), section 109BZB;
 - (b) in the case of arrangements entered into under subsection (1), section 109B.”.—(Andrew Western.)

This new clause would replace clause 72. It revises the amendments to the Social Security Administration Act 1992 made by clause 72 so that the powers of the Scottish Ministers under the Act are substantially unchanged.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the clause be read a Second time.

3.47 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government new clause 18—*Consequential amendments to the Social Security Fraud Act 2001.*

Government new clause 19—*Devolved benefits.*

Government new clause 20—*Powers of Scottish Ministers.*

New clause 1—*Recovery of overpayments of Carer's Allowance—*

“The Secretary of State may not exercise any of the powers of recovery under this Act in relation to a person who has received an overpayment of Carer's Allowance until such time as—

- (a) the Secretary of State has commissioned an independent review of the overpayment of Carer's Allowance;
- (b) the review has concluded its inquiry and submitted a report containing recommendations to the Secretary of State;
- (c) the Secretary of State has laid the report of the independent review before Parliament; and
- (d) the Secretary of State has implemented the recommendations of the independent review.”

This new clause would delay any payments being taken from people who the Government may think owe repayments on Carer's Allowance until the independent review into Carer's Allowance overpayments has been published and fully implemented.

New clause 2—*Impact of Act on people facing financial exclusion—*

“(1) The independent person appointed under section 64(1) of this Act must carry out an assessment of the impact of this Act on the number of people facing financial exclusion.

(2) The independent person must, after 12 months of the passing of the Act—

- (a) prepare a report on the review, and
- (b) submit the report to the Minister.
- (3) On receiving a report the Minister must—
 - (a) publish it, and
 - (b) lay a copy before Parliament.”

This new clause would look into the impact of the Act on people facing financial exclusion.

New clause 3—*Audit of algorithmic systems used in relation to Carer's Allowance overpayments—*

“(1) An independent audit of algorithmic systems used in the assessment, detection or recovery of Carer's Allowance overpayments must be conducted at least once every six months.

(2) Any audit under subsection (1) must be conducted by persons with relevant expertise in data science, ethics and social policy who have no direct affiliation with—

- (a) the Department for Work and Pensions, or
- (b) any person or body involved in the development or operation of the algorithmic systems under review.

(3) An audit conducted under this section must consider—

- (a) the accuracy of the algorithmic systems in identifying overpayments, and
- (b) the fairness of the systems' design, application and operation, including any disproportionate impact on particular groups.

(4) After every audit a report on its findings must be—

- (a) published;
- (b) laid before both Houses of Parliament within 14 days of publication; and
- (c) made publicly available in an accessible format.

(5) If any audit identifies significant inaccuracies, unfairness or biases in any algorithmic systems, the Secretary of State must, within 30 days of the publication of the report outlining these findings, present an action plan to Parliament which outlines the steps which the Government intends to take to address the identified issues.”

This new clause would provide for an audit of algorithmic systems used in relation to Carer's Allowance overpayments.

New clause 4—*Inclusion of systems within the Algorithmic Transparency Reporting Standard—*

“(1) For the purposes of this section, “system” means—

- (a) algorithms, algorithmic tools, and systems; and
- (b) artificial intelligence, including machine learning;

provided that they are used in fulfilling the purposes of this Act.

(2) Where at any time after the passage of this Act, the use of any system is—

- (a) commenced;
- (b) amended; or
- (c) discontinued;

the Minister must, as soon as reasonably practicable, accordingly include information about the system in the Algorithmic Transparency Reporting Standard.”

This new clause would require the use of algorithms, algorithmic tools, and systems, and artificial intelligence, including machine learning, to be included within the Algorithmic Transparency Reporting Standard.

New clause 5—*Duty to consider domestic abuse risk to account holders—*

“(1) Before any direct deduction order under Schedule 5 is made, the Secretary of State has a duty to consider its effect on any person who—

- (a) is a victim of domestic abuse, or
- (b) the Minister reasonably believes to be at risk of domestic abuse.

(2) In this section “domestic abuse” has the meaning given by section 1 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.”

New clause 6—*Review of whistle blowing processes in relation to public sector fraud—*

“(1) Secretary of State must, within one year of the passing of this Act, conduct a review of whistle blowing processes in relation to fraud in the public sector.

(2) A review conducted under this section must consider—

- (a) the appropriateness and efficacy of existing whistle blowing processes;
- (b) barriers to reporting fraud and reasons for under reporting of fraud; and
- (c) recommendations for change.

(3) The Secretary of State must publish a report containing—

- (a) the findings and conclusions of the review, and
- (b) a timetable for the delivery of any recommendations for change within six months of the completion of the review.”

New clause 7—*Overpayments made as a result of official error—*

“(1) Section 71ZB of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), for “The” substitute “Subject to subsection (1A), the”.

(3) After subsection (1) insert—

“(1A) The amount referred to in subsection (1) shall not include any overpayment that arose in consequence of an official error where the claimant or a person acting on the claimant's behalf or any other person to whom the payment is made could not, at the time of receipt of the payment or of any notice relating to that payment, reasonably have been expected to realise that it was an overpayment.”

This new clause would provide that, where universal credit overpayments have been caused by official error, they can only be recovered where the claimant could reasonably have been expected to realise that there was an overpayment.

New clause 8—*Offence of fraud against a public authority—*

“(1) A person who-

- (a) commits,
- (b) assists or conspires in the committal of, or
- (c) encourages the committal of,

fraud against a public authority commits an offence.

(2) A person who commits an offence under subsection (1) is liable-

- (a) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding the general limit in a magistrates' court or a fine (or both);
- (b) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years.”

New clause 9—*Application of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to investigations conducted by the Department for Work and Pensions—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, introduce regulations for the purpose of applying certain powers of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, subject to such modifications as the order may specify, to investigations of offences conducted by the Department for Work and Pensions.

(2) The powers to be applied must include—

- (a) the power of arrest;
- (b) any other such powers that the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(3) Regulations made under this section shall be made by statutory instrument.”

New clause 10—*Liability orders—*

“(1) Where a person-

- (a) has been found guilty of an offence under section 1 or section 11 of the Fraud Act 2006, or the offence at common law of conspiracy to defraud,
- (b) that offence relates to fraud committed against a public authority, and

- (c) has not paid the required penalties or not made the required repayments,

the Secretary of State must apply to a magistrates' court or, in Scotland, to the sheriff for an order ("a liability order") against the liable person.

(2) Where the Secretary of State applies for a liability order, the magistrates' court or (as the case may be) sheriff shall make the order if satisfied that the payments in question have become payable by the liable person and have not been paid.

(3) The Secretary of State may make regulations in relation to England and Wales—

- (a) prescribing the procedure to be followed in dealing with an application by the Secretary of State for a liability order;
- (b) prescribing the form and contents of a liability order; and
- (c) providing that where a magistrates' court has made a liability order, the person against whom it is made shall, during such time as the amount in respect of which the order was made remains wholly or partly unpaid, be under a duty to supply relevant information to the Secretary of State.

(4) Where a liability order has been made against a person ("the liable person"), the Secretary of State may use the procedure in Schedule 12 to the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007 (taking control of goods) to recover the amount in respect of which the order was made, to the extent that it remains unpaid."

New clause 11—Publication of results of pilot schemes—

"Within three months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish the results of any pilot schemes run with banks to test the provisions in Chapter 1 of Part 2."

New clause 12—Report on cost implications for banks—

"The Secretary of State must, within three months of the passing of this Act, publish a report on the expected cost implications of the provisions of this Act for banks."

New clause 13—Annual reporting of amounts recovered—

"(1) The Secretary of State must publish an annual report detailing the amount of money which has been recovered under the provisions of this Act.

(2) A first report must be published no later than 12 months after the passing of this Act with subsequent reports published at intervals of no more than 12 months."

New clause 14—Impact of Act on vulnerable customers—

"(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before Parliament an assessment of the expected impact of the Act on vulnerable customers.

(2) For the purposes of this section, "vulnerable customers" means someone who, due to their personal circumstances, is especially susceptible to harm, particularly when a firm is not acting with appropriate levels of care."

New clause 15—Publication of an Anti-Fraud and Error Technology Strategy—

"(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, publish an Anti-Fraud and Error Technology Strategy.

(2) An Anti-Fraud and Error Technology Strategy published under this section must set out—

- (a) how the Government intends to use automated technologies or artificial intelligence to tackle fraud against public authorities and the making of erroneous payments by public authorities, and
- (b) a series of safeguards to provide for human oversight of decision making that meet the aims set out in subsection (3);
- (c) how rights of appeal will be protected;
- (d) a framework for privacy and data sharing.

- (3) The aims of the safeguards in subsection (2)(b) are—

- (a) to ensure that grounds for decision making can only be reasonable if they are the result of a process in which there has been meaningful human involvement by a human of adequate expertise to scrutinise any insights or recommendations made by automated systems,
- (b) to make clear that grounds cannot be reasonable if they are the result of an entirely automated process, and
- (c) to ensure that any information notice issued is accompanied by a statement—
 - (i) setting out the reasonable grounds for suspicion that have been relied on, and
 - (ii) confirming that the conclusion has been formed on the basis of human involvement."

New clause 21—Offence of encouraging or assisting others to commit fraud—

"(1) The Social Security Administration Act 1992 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 111A (dishonest representation for obtaining benefit etc), after subsection (1G) insert—

"(1H) A person commits an offence if they—

- (a) encourage or assist another person to commit an offence under this section, or
 - (b) provide guidance on how to commit an offence under this section.
- (1I) An offence under this section can be committed where the encouragement, assistance or guidance happens online.
- (1J) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or an unlimited fine."

(3) In section 112 (false representations for obtaining benefit etc), after subsection (1F) insert—

"(1G) A person commits an offence if they—

- (a) encourage or assist another person to commit an offence under this section, or
 - (b) provide guidance on how to commit an offence under this section.
- (1H) An offence under this section can be committed where the encouragement, assistance or guidance happens online.
- (1I) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or an unlimited fine."

New clause 22—Impact of Act on people with protected characteristics—

"The Secretary of State must, prior to making regulations under section 103 to bring into force any provision of this Act, lay before Parliament an assessment of the expected impact of the Act on people with protected characteristics who are in receipt of social security benefits."

This new clause would ensure any impact of the Bill on people with protected characteristics in receipt of social security benefits was examined prior to the Act's implementation.

New clause 23—Report on public sector fraud during COVID-19 pandemic—

"(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before Parliament a report evaluating the extent of public sector fraud that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(2) The report must include—

- (a) an account of fraudulent or erroneous payments made by or on behalf of public authorities, including but not limited to the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England,

(b) a review of how public procurement practices in place between March 2020 and December 2021, including—

- (i) the use of high priority and expedited contracting for suppliers, and
- (ii) the role of political appointments and personal connections in procurement decisions,

may have contributed to fraud against public authorities,

(c) the cost to the public purse of fraud against public authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and

(d) an assessment of the adequacy of Government oversight and other measures then in place to prevent fraud against public authorities.

(3) Where the report finds or concludes that there were—

(a) failings in Government oversight and other measures then in place to prevent fraud against public authorities, or

(b) any action or inaction by the Government which enabled fraud against public authorities,

the Minister must make a statement to the House of Commons acknowledging these findings and setting out actions planned to ensure any failings are not repeated.”

Amendment 15, in clause 3, page 3, line 10, leave out “10” and insert “28.”

Government amendments 23 and 24.

Amendment 16, in clause 4, page 3, line 33, leave out “Minister” and insert “First Tier Tribunal”.

Amendment 13, page 3, line 33, after “notice” insert “or of the duration of the period mentioned in section 3(4)(a)”.

Amendment 80, page 3, line 34, leave out “7” and insert “28”.

Amendment 17, page 3, line 36, leave out “Minister” and insert “First Tier Tribunal”.

Amendment 18, page 3, line 38, leave out “Minister” and insert “First Tier Tribunal”.

Amendment 14, page 4, line 2, after “notice” insert “, including by extending the duration of the period mentioned in section 3(4)(a) where satisfied that the person is reasonably unable to comply with the requirement to provide the information within the time required by the notice”.

Amendment 19, page 4, line 3, leave out “Minister” and insert “First Tier Tribunal”.

Amendment 81, page 4, line 10, at end insert—

“(7) Where a person has applied for a review of an information notice, the period mentioned in section 3(4)(a) is to be treated as beginning on the day after which the outcome of the review is notified to the person to whom the information notice was given.”

Government amendments 25 to 29.

Amendment 1, in clause 64, page 34, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) Prior to appointing an independent person, the Minister must consult the relevant committee of the House of Commons.

(1B) For the purposes of subsection (1A), “the relevant committee” means a committee determined by the Speaker of the House of Commons.”

This amendment would provide for Parliamentary oversight of the appointment of the “Independent person”.

Government amendments 30, 31, 76, 75, 32 and 33.

Amendment 2, page 40, line 36, leave out clause 74.

This amendment removes the requirement for Banks to look into relevant claimants’ bank accounts.

Amendment 3, in clause 75, page 41, line 21, at end insert—

“(1A) Prior to appointing an independent person, the Minister must consult the relevant committee of the House of Commons.

(1B) For the purposes of subsection (1A), “the relevant committee” means a committee determined by the Speaker of the House of Commons.”

This amendment would provide for Parliamentary oversight of the appointment of the “Independent person”.

Government amendments 34 to 43.

Amendment 8, in clause 89, page 55, line 6, leave out from “unless” to the end of line 14 and insert—

“(a) the liable person agrees, or

(b) there has been a final determination by a court or tribunal that it is necessary and proportionate to exercise a power under Schedule 3ZA.”

This amendment would mean that the Secretary of State can only exercise powers to recover amounts from a person where the person agrees or where a court or tribunal has determined that such recovery is necessary and proportionate.

Amendment 10, page 56, line 16, leave out clause 91.

Government amendments 79, 78, 77, 74, 73 and 44.

Amendment 4, in clause 103, page 63, line 29, leave out from start to “following” in line 32 and insert—

“Subject to subsections (1A) and (2), this Act comes into force on such day as the Secretary of State or the Minister for the Cabinet Office may by regulations appoint.

(1A) No part of this Act may come into force until the recommendations of a report commissioned under section [Recovery of overpayments of Carer’s Allowance] have been implemented.

(2) Subject to subsection (1A), the”

This amendment which would delay the implementation of the whole Act until the findings of the independent review into Carer’s Allowance overpayments has been published and fully implemented.

Amendment 20, page 64, line 1, at end insert—

“(3A) Before bringing into force any of the provisions of Part 1 of this Act, the Secretary of State must consult with banks as to the costs which will be incurred by banks upon application of the provisions of Part 1.

(3B) Where consultation finds that the expected costs to banks are at a disproportionate level, the Secretary of State may not bring into force the provisions which are expected to result in such disproportionate costs.”

Government amendments 72 and 45.

Amendment 5, page 73, line 6, leave out schedule 3.

This amendment is related to Amendment 2 and removes the requirement for Banks to look into relevant claimants’ bank accounts.

Amendment 11, in schedule 3, page 73, line 25, leave out from “accounts” to the end of line 31 and insert—

“which belong to a person who the authorised officer has reasonable grounds to suspect has committed, is committing or intends to commit a DWP offence.”

This amendment would limit the exercise of an eligibility verification notice to cases where the welfare recipient is suspected of wrongdoing.

Amendment 22, page 84, line 12, at end insert “(d) housing benefit.”

Amendment 6, page 84, leave out line 12

This amendment would remove pension credit from being a “relevant benefit” for the purposes of the Act.

Amendment 71, page 84, line 13, leave out from “to” to end of line 17 and insert—

“remove types of benefit from the definition of”.

This amendment would mean that benefits could not be added to the list of “relevant benefits” by regulations.

Amendment 7, page 84, leave out lines 13 to 17.

This amendment ensure that the bill can only be used in relation to benefits listed in the Bill.

Amendment 21, page 84, line 25, after “money” insert

“or such an account which is held by a person appointed to receive benefits on behalf of another person.”

Government amendments 46 to 67.

Amendment 9, in schedule 5, page 98, line 10, leave out from beginning to end of line 24 on page 99.

This amendment would remove the requirement for banks to provide information to the Secretary of State for the purposes of making a direct deduction order.

Government amendments 68 and 69.

Amendment 12, page 111, line 18, leave out schedule 6.

Government amendment 70.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): It is my pleasure to bring this Bill back to the House. I start by thanking all Members who have made contributions so far, and extend a special thanks to Members of the Bill Committee, some of whom are present today, for their detailed scrutiny.

This Government have an ambitious plan for change. To deliver everything we want to achieve, we must spend taxpayers’ money wisely, which is why we committed in our manifesto not to tolerate fraud or waste anywhere in our public services. The Bill delivers on that commitment. It is part of the biggest crackdown on fraud against the public purse in a generation. Nothing less will do, given the appalling position we inherited.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Does the Minister recognise that the Government’s own assessment of the effectiveness of the Bill is that it will recover a tiny 1.8% of losses?

Andrew Western: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we lose a total of £55 billion a year to fraud across the public sector; the Bill will recover £1.5 billion. However, it is part of broader measures—certainly on the Department for Work and Pensions side of the Bill—to save £9.6 billion across the forecast period. By the very nature of the changes that we are making with the Public Sector Fraud Authority, we are designing them to be scalable. As the PSFA becomes more familiar with the work it is undertaking, we think that it will be able to save a significant amount more.

As I was saying, Madam Deputy Speaker, with benefit fraud alone costing £7.4 billion in 2023-24, this is a major problem that is getting worse, not better. We cannot afford to ignore it, and we certainly do not accept it. Fraud against the public sector is not a victimless crime. Our public services, everyone who depends on them, and the taxpayers who fund them, all suffer. And they are increasingly suffering at the hands of fraudsters who use ever more sophisticated techniques to steal money meant for the public good.

The private sector has evolved and adapted its tools and tactics to respond, but, as the scale of the losses that I have just outlined make clear, the same cannot yet be said for the public sector. With this Bill, we will put that right. There will be new powers for the Public Sector Fraud Authority to investigate and deal with public sector fraud outside the tax and social security systems, and new powers for the DWP to modernise its response to fraud and error in the benefit system.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said on Second Reading, this Bill is tough and it is fair. It is tough on the dodgy business people who try to defraud our public services and it is tough on the criminal gangs and individuals who cheat the benefit system. It is fair to claimants who make genuine mistakes, by helping us to spot and prevent errors earlier. And it is fair to taxpayers, who deserve to know that every single pound of their hard-earned money is being spent wisely.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): The Human Rights Act 1998 was one of the best pieces of legislation ever passed by a Labour Government. Can the Minister assure the House that this Bill in no way contravenes the secrecy part of the 1998 Act?

Andrew Western: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance and, indeed, that all of our legal obligations have been satisfied as part of the consideration of this Bill. The imperative thing for me as a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions is that we are supporting those who need the social security safety net, not the fraudsters who pick holes in it.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): One concern that we have is the change in the way that people conduct benefit fraud. Through the use of key buzzwords, they help people to navigate the system so that they are able to take out of it what is not theirs. Does he think that there is scope in the Bill, particularly in some of the new clauses, to include specific legislation to prevent people from using words and buzzwords, or from teaching other people how to cheat the benefit system?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman is correct that we have a problem with so-called “sickfluencers”, but as we will hear in the debate more broadly, the Government do have existing powers through the Fraud Act 2006 and the Serious Crime Act 2007 to take action in those areas if necessary. He is right to suggest that we should be doing more, and I encourage Conservative Members to reflect on what they did in this space during their period in power. He will be reassured to know that I have commissioned work within the Department to look at what further we can do, but in legislative terms—*[Interruption.]* I do believe that we have somebody crossing the Floor, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Just for the record, in case *Hansard* did not pick that up, that was Jennie the dog crossing the Floor, not a Member of Parliament.

Andrew Western: I am sure the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) is grateful to you for that clarification, Madam Deputy Speaker, even if I am not, as Jennie would always be most welcome on this side of the House.

I hope that I have reassured the hon. Gentleman that we do have the legislation required to act.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister said that powers exist, but, plainly, they are not working, because we know that “sickfluencers” are doing their deeds and people are responding to them, particularly in the mental health sphere, where many of the claims are made. Indeed, we know that officials, or those acting on behalf of officials, are looking out for buzzwords, because, if there is a buzzword in there somewhere, they can bank the case and move on to the next one. Therefore, something plainly needs to be done to stop this. Will he look again at the Opposition’s new clauses 8 and 21, which would ensure that “sickfluencers” are targeted specifically, and say what, in the Government’s amended terms, they would do to deal with this particular group that are contributing significantly to the failure identified by my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) in relation to the amount of money that we are able to claim back from the huge sum that is lost to fraud every year?

Andrew Western: I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman that more needs to be done; what we differ on is the need for specific legislation in that regard. Where we are falling down at present is in the scale of the activity we are undertaking. We could be doing significantly more at the moment, but as I said in response to the previous intervention, I have commissioned work to ensure that that happens. We already routinely contact social media companies to ask them to take down specific posts that could help people to commit fraud against the welfare system. I am very happy to consider practical points, but I am convinced that we have the legislative weaponry required to take the necessary action to deal with people who are encouraging others to commit fraud, both online and elsewhere.

Government amendments 23, 24, 39 and 40 bring into scope the kind of information necessary for fraud investigations and enable the PSFA and DWP to compel certain types of special procedure material, including banking records or records of employment, in line with the policy intent. Requesting this type of information is not new for DWP and occurs under its existing powers. The amendments ensure that the PSFA and DWP can compel this information to support fraud investigations, while also ensuring that important exemptions are in place, such as those for excluded material and journalistic material.

Government amendments 30 and 31 seek to address two separate issues in respect of clause 67. Government amendment 30 includes a provision in the Bill so that the powers granted to the PSFA under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984—or PACE—by clause 7 of the Bill are exempt from the application of clause 67(5). This will ensure that the clause does not interfere with existing PACE provisions in relation to legal professional privilege, enabling the Bill’s PACE measures to function as intended.

Government amendment 31 removes subsection (6) in clause 67, which currently overrides existing self-incrimination protections on the PSFA’s information-gathering powers and PACE powers. This allows the

common law principle of the privilege against self-incrimination to apply in the usual way—under the information-gathering powers—and ensures that the proposed PACE powers align with established PACE practices. The amendments ensure that clause 67 provides essential safeguards for the PSFA powers in the Bill related to the processing of information.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): I am sure the Minister will accept that there is growing concern about issues of automated decision making, artificial intelligence and algorithms. While wanting to ensure that we get the best results, is the Minister able to commit to the transparency we need when it comes to AI and algorithms in relation to the Bill to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are not unfairly hit?

Andrew Western: The hon. Member will be pleased to know that I can give him that assurance and that we comply with all the Government’s required standards around the publication of such information.

Government amendments 25 and 26 relate to clause 9, which amends the Police Reform Act 2002 to extend the Independent Office for Police Conduct director general’s functions to include oversight of public sector fraud investigators, enabling them to consider PSFA’s use of PACE powers and associated investigations. Clause 9 also enables the Minister for the Cabinet Office to issue regulations conferring functions on the director general in relation to these investigations. Section 105 of the Police Reform Act 2002 sets out requirements for such regulations made under that Act.

However, section 105 only applies to regulations made by a Secretary of State. As the Cabinet Office has no Secretary of State, this section would not include the regulations that the Minister for the Cabinet Office can make under clause 9. Government amendment 26 corrects that technicality so that section 105 also applies to that Minister. In addition, Government amendment 25 simply removes reference to part 2 of the Police Reform Act 2002 within clause 9(1), as the Bill will refer to the Act more widely, rather than just part 2.

Government amendments 48 and 72 provide a clear legislative framework for how the DWP and the PSFA will handle and transfer seized evidence to the most appropriate law enforcement agency, including the National Crime Agency and the Serious Fraud Office. The amendments will ensure that evidence is handled by the organisation best equipped to deal with the specific nature of the alleged crime, fostering inter-agency collaboration and reducing delays to investigations.

4 pm

Government amendments 27 to 29, 68 and 69 clarify the maximum amount to be deducted from a debtor’s bank by the PSFA and the DWP via a regular direct deduction order under clause 17 and in schedule 5 respectively. The amendments will ensure that the cap is set at a percentage of what the person would reasonably be expected to receive each month, and they provide flexibility to amend that. They will ensure that any deductions are still fair and affordable and do not exceed the maximum percentage set out. Other factors such as the ability to repay will be considered and mean that in most cases the deduction amount will be lower than those rates.

Government amendments 75 and 76 will allow the PSFA to investigate and pursue enforcement action in respect of the offences in sections 6 and 7 of the Fraud Act 2006. Those offences involve possessing, making and supplying articles for use in fraud against a public authority. The amendments will enable the PSFA to tackle the widest range of influencer-style offences, which we discussed earlier, in the same way that the DWP already can, which was a matter of concern to some Bill Committee members.

Government new clauses 17, 19 and 20 and Government amendments 32, 35, 42, 43 and 46 seek to ensure the correct application of the powers in part 2 of the Bill to devolve benefits. In 2020, full responsibility for devolved benefits was transferred to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government. However, the DWP continues to deliver some benefits to claimants in Scotland under agency agreements on behalf of Scottish Ministers until the Scottish Government are able to administer those benefits themselves. The DWP delivers those benefits in line with how it delivers equivalent benefits in England and Wales. The intent is that the measures in part 2 of the Bill will apply to those devolved benefits that the DWP delivers under agency agreements in line with equivalent benefits in England and Wales.

Government new clauses 19 and 20 clarify that the Secretary of State can exercise the new investigatory powers in the Bill with devolved benefits only where those are administered by the Secretary of State on behalf of Scottish Ministers. They also clarify that Scottish Ministers' existing powers under the Social Security Administration Act 1992 are not changed by this part of the Bill.

Government new clause 17 and Government amendments 32 and 46 ensure that the existing information gathering powers contained under sections 109A to 109C remain unchanged by the Bill for Scottish Ministers. That has resulted in some reordering and redrafting in clause 72, where the DWP's new information-gathering power under the Bill is held. Government amendment 35 clarifies the position in relation to devolved benefits in clause 85, ensuring that the exemptions contained in proposed new section 109H do not impact Scottish Ministers' powers under the 1992 Act.

Dr Murrison: The Minister is presumably keen to determine how much money is lost to fraud in Scotland, and I imagine he will require the Scottish Government to report back to the UK Government on their progress in clamping down on benefit fraud, but the same should apply in the rest of the country. That, of course, is the purpose of new clause 13, which would require an annual report on the amount of money recovered through the processes that he has outlined. Will he accept new clause 13? Will he also assure me on the point about the Scottish Government's reporting of fraud?

Andrew Western: I assure the right hon. Member on his point with regard to the Scottish Government. However, I will resist new clause 13 because the publication of the DWP's annual accounts will provide sufficient information about our performance on fraud and error.

Government amendment 42 specifies that the functions of the independent person who can be appointed by the Secretary of State in clause 87 do not apply to devolved benefits unless those are delivered by the Secretary of

State under agency agreement. Government amendments 60 and 67 will amend the time required for compliance with a production order served in Scotland. That is to match normal conventions in Scotland. Government amendment 43 ensures that the new debt recovery powers taken by the Secretary of State under the Bill apply only to devolved benefits, while the Secretary of State recovers devolved debts under agency agreements.

Government new clause 18 and Government amendment 33 are consequential amendments to the Social Security Fraud Act 2001 and ensure that the powers of Scottish Ministers under the 2001 Act are unchanged by the Bill. Government amendments 36, 37 and 38 seek to clarify exemptions in the DWP's information-gathering powers to deliver the intended policy outcome.

A key safeguard in the new DWP information-gathering powers is the exclusion of personal information about users of particular types of free services, such as advocacy and advice services that offer crisis support, for example when someone is fleeing domestic abuse. The intent of the safeguard is to ensure that nobody is deterred from seeking the support they need when they need it. However, the current drafting of that exemption in the Bill as "not for profit" is too broad. That excludes certain information that is very likely to be relevant to a DWP fraud investigation. For example, it prevents the Department from compelling information from housing associations, such as an individual's address or tenancy, which can be instrumental in proving or disproving a suspicion of fraud.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): The independent person is required to produce an annual report on the use of the new powers, which, as the Minister has just laid out, are quite extensive. However, there is no requirement for the DWP to adopt the report's recommendations. In cases where it does not accept the recommendations, will the Government consider committing to at least explaining why they have reached that conclusion?

Andrew Western: I would be very happy to report to the House on the reasons why we would not do that. I am sure the hon. Lady will allow me to write to her separately to set out how I intend for us to do that. It seems to be a reasonable request.

Returning to my original point, the current drafting would mean that DWP can compel information of that kind from private landlords or estate agents, but not from housing associations. There is an inequity there that we are seeking to address with the amendments, clarifying the drafting and continuing to protect the personal information of service users of crisis support or advocacy services.

The Bill also brings forward new information-gathering powers that govern how DWP-authorised officers can compel information to support an investigation into fraud. It also sets out where information must not be compelled—for example, to protect the long-standing principle of legal professional privilege. Separately, the Bill brings forward powers of entry, search and seizure for DWP-authorised investigators, those tasked with investigating the most serious cases of fraud. It does that by bringing those authorised investigators under the remit of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 in England and Wales, and by creating similar powers in

Scotland for DWP-authorised investigators. That ensures that those investigators are governed by a similar legal framework to other law enforcement bodies that are granted access to use those types of powers.

Government amendment 41 seeks to ensure that the exemptions to information that DWP-authorised officers can compel are not applicable to authorised investigators when using powers of entry, search and seizure. Government amendment 45 mirrors that provision for the PSFA. Those amendments will support effective fraud investigation, as without access, crucial evidence might remain out of reach, slowing down our response to fraud. Those exemptions are important, but the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, which applies in England and Wales, already provides such restrictions and safeguards by only enabling that information to be compelled with the approval of the courts, coupled with similar conventions that apply for Scotland. The amendment ensures that there is no duplication. The powers in the Bill remain in line with existing conventions, as set out in PACE, and correctly reflect the norms of the Scottish legal system.

Turning to Government amendments 61 to 66, paragraph 10 of schedule 3ZD currently refers to definitions within PACE in relation to special procedure material, confidential professional material, excluded material and items subject to legal privilege.

Government amendments 63 and 51 set out specific definitions to avoid linking provisions that relate solely to Scotland with existing legislation that applies to England and Wales. This also ensures that legal privilege and “items subject to legal privilege” references contained in the schedule are correctly defined for Scotland. Government amendments 61, 62, 64, 65 and 66 are consequential to amendment 63.

Government amendments 47 and 48 ensure that the powers for the DWP under PACE taken by the Bill in schedule 4 are aligned with those of the police and other Government Departments, such as HMRC, and provide a clear legal framework for what evidence can be seized and how it should be handled. Government amendments 47 and 48 mean that DWP-authorised investigators, such as the police, can seize items that are reasonably believed to be evidence of an offence, not just DWP-related offences, when undertaking entry, search and seizure activities in England and Wales. This will mean that potential evidence of any other offence, if discovered in the course of a search, can be preserved and may be seized where it is considered necessary to prevent it from being destroyed or moved. The amendments ensure that the law is clear on how it must be handled and transferred to the most appropriate law enforcement agency in England and Wales. Government amendments 49, 50 and 59 make similar provisions for authorised investigators in Scotland to those I have just described for England and Wales.

Government amendments 57 and 58 clarify how authorised investigators can prevent access to seized evidence from any offence if it may prejudice criminal proceedings in Scotland, by amending the definition of “offence” in schedule 3ZD inserted by schedule 4 of this Act. This mirrors the same provisions that are already in the Bill as it applies to England and Wales.

Government amendments 53, 54, 55 and 56 are all minor and technical amendments to correct inconsistencies in terminology. Government amendment 34 is a minor

and technical amendment to provide the correct reference to powers in the Social Security Administration Act 1992, to ensure that the powers in Scotland align with those in England and Wales. Government amendment 52 amends the period of time in which a warrant must be exercised to Scotland from three months to one month. This corrects the Bill to ensure that it is consistent with the usual practice in Scotland.

Government amendment 70 ensures that the court has the power to order a person, having been disqualified, to provide their NI or EU driving licence, as is already the case for those holding a GB licence, under the new debt recovery powers. The Bill as drafted would allow a DWP debtor who evades payment and holds an NI or EU licence to be disqualified from driving. However, it inadvertently limits the court’s ability to order that person to produce their licence unless it was issued in Great Britain, undermining the power and causing administrative difficulties for the court and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. Government amendment 70 corrects this and ensures parity between GB, NI and EU driving licences under the powers in schedule 6.

Government amendments 73, 74, 77, 78 and 79 ensure that the application and limitation period in clause 99 follows the policy intention that the PSFA can investigate fraud and recover debt in England and Wales. Government amendment 44 also ensures that the DWP’s debt recovery powers in this Bill are not limited in Scotland to the usual five-year time limits in the Prescription and Limitation (Scotland) Act 1973. This makes it clear that the longer 20-year recovery period in Scotland applies to such provisions introduced or amended by this Bill. As I have set out, the intent behind these amendments is to ensure the delivery of the intended policy intent or to ensure the correct territorial application of the Bill.

David Davis: I thank the Minister for giving way, and I hope he will forgive me for waiting till what appears to be the end of his list. When the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) asked him about the application of the Human Rights Act in this context, he said that the Bill did not breach it, in effect. My advice is a little different, and I waited to hear about his amendments to see whether anything in them changed that. My advice is that suspicionless financial surveillance could breach article 8, which covers the right to privacy, and article 14 on the prohibition of discrimination. Will the Minister make his legal advice on this available to the House? This is incredibly important and it is central to the major criticism of this Bill.

Andrew Western: I have already made clear that I am satisfied with the advice I have received. We will make available all the information we are required to make available, but the right hon. Member will appreciate that I am not able to give an undertaking to release all legal advice at this stage. What I can say to him is that I am very confident that there is no breach of article 8 in particular. That has been explored at length as we have gone through the process.

I welcome the ongoing engagement with industry and key stakeholders. We have made a significant effort to engage all interested parties and listen to their views. That feedback has been important in shaping our approach to the Bill to date and will continue to be so as it moves to the other place.

4.15 pm

Before I finish, I will make some quick remarks about the non-Government amendments on the DWP eligibility verification measure and debt recovery powers. Amendments 2 and 5 from the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) would remove the eligibility verification measure entirely. I must resist that. We have a fundamental disagreement about the proportionality of the measure, and I think his concerns continue to be misplaced. We explored this at length in Committee. I appreciate where he is coming from and his perspective, but I disagree with him.

When fulfilling our duty to protect public money, we must also balance individuals' rights to privacy. These powers will include robust safeguards, reporting mechanisms and independent oversight to give confidence that they will be used fairly and effectively. The Information Commissioner himself has welcomed the changes made to previous iterations of the eligibility verification measure, which addressed many of the concerns he had had with the previous Government's Data Protection and Digital Information Bill. I must also highlight the importance of the measure from a fiscal perspective. It alone will save £940 million over the next five years and £500 million annually once fully rolled out.

Similarly, amendment 11 from my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) seeks to restrict the eligibility verification power for use only when there is a suspicion of fraud. That would undermine the measure entirely, as there are existing information gathering powers sufficient to deal with such cases. We require the power because it will enable better data sharing between the private and public sector to help check that claimants are meeting the criteria for their benefit and to detect incorrect payments at an earlier stage before any suspicion of wrongdoing has arisen. It is not a power to be used to respond to suspected fraud. Information will not be shared with the DWP under the assumption that a claimant is guilty of any wrongdoing. The DWP must look into why the account has been flagged by the bank and ascertain whether an incorrect payment has been made. That is why, following receipt of the information from banks, the DWP will make further inquiries to determine whether a benefit has been incorrectly paid and whether that is due to fraud or error. It would be impossible for the DWP to suspect fraud before it has even established that a benefit has been incorrectly paid.

Amendments 8 and 9 from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker) would reduce the effectiveness of the proposed debt powers within the Bill. The Department can already apply to the court for a third party debt order, and a key reason for introducing the direct deduction order is to recover more public money without unnecessarily using the court's time. It is also highly unlikely that debtors who have repeatedly refused to engage with the Department and repay voluntarily will suddenly agree to recovery taking place directly from their bank accounts.

I remind the House that obtaining information from banks, including relevant bank statements, under this measure is a vital safeguard to establishing an affordable deduction rate where someone has refused to engage. It will prevent further issues for a debtor than the use of courts could bring about—for instance, a county court judgment or court costs—and it will enable the Department

to use regular as well as lump sum deduction orders. I look forward to the debate and to responding to colleagues' contributions in my closing remarks.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I echo the Minister's comments about the work of the Bill Committee. We had a constructive few weeks getting into the nitty-gritty.

I have no doubt that the House will agree that fraud is unacceptable, whether against individuals, organisations or the state. The money taken does not belong to those responsible. When it comes to defrauding the Government, money is taken from every single taxpayer. At the same time, however, errors do unfortunately happen. They might be made accidentally by the claimant or by the Department. Although there is no ill intention, errors can still be costly to the taxpayer, and that impacts some of the most vulnerable people in our country.

The question, then, is how best to tackle fraud and error in the welfare state and the public sector. Although we welcome many of the principles behind the Bill—much of which builds on the work of the Conservatives before the general election, as I am sure will be mentioned many times this afternoon—we are concerned that it has been rushed through. On one hand, there are gaps where the legislation is not tough enough. It is not a strong deterrent to make potential fraudsters think again, and it does not sufficiently safeguard public money. On the other hand, parts of the Bill have not been sufficiently prepared, and are incredibly vague and unclear on their implications for those involved and on whether the benefit justifies the cost.

This issue must be considered in the context of a sickness benefit bill that is forecast to hit nearly £1 billion by the end of the decade—even after the Government's questionable welfare reforms—which is vastly more than we spend on defence, and more than we spend on schools and policing. We have tabled a number of amendments to address those points.

New clauses 21 and 8 seek to tackle the rise in so-called sickfluencers on social media, such as those on TikTok and YouTube who post videos showing people how they might be able to make fraudulent claims for benefits, including the personal independence payment, which requires not medical evidence but self-assessment. As we have heard, the advice offered includes specific buzzwords, template claims and guidance on passing questions at interview stage to inflate the value of claims fraudulently. We do not want to target people who provide genuine advice and guidance to people about how the welfare system and public authorities work, but that is very different from providing assistance and encouragement to commit fraud, which is not acceptable.

We recognise the vital work of not-for-profit organisations such as Citizens Advice—which works right across the country, including in South Hams and Plymouth in my constituency—and groups such as Improving Lives Plymouth. They do much to support those seeking to claim what they are entitled to. However, online sickfluencers must be tackled.

In Committee, the Minister queried our new clause and asked why it provided only for a seven-year prison sentence when similar offences carry a 10-year sentence. We have addressed that in new clauses 21 and 8, which, as the Minister will see, propose a 10-year sentence to bring them into line with similar offences.

Dr Luke Evans: In their response to my question about sickfluencers, the Government said that relevant legislation is already in place. If that is the case, how many convictions have there been under that legislation? We could infer from that number whether or not the system is working and what we need to do. My suspicion is that we need these measures to be able to hold people to account.

Rebecca Smith: I echo my hon. Friend's concern that the existing powers are not being used enough. I ask the Minister to give us further information on how those powers are being used and an assurance that they will be used further should our new clauses be unsuccessful.

We believe that creating a specific offence to target such online fraud would send the clear message to sickfluencers that what they are doing is not only morally wrong but illegal—something that clear gives them no alternative than to realise that they will be caught. If the Government continue to oppose our amendments because they believe the powers already exist to tackle such crime, I would be grateful if the Minister set out, at the very least, how the Government will ensure that that legislation is used to the fullest, particularly with regard to the DWP, given that Government amendments 75 and 76 refer to the PFSA specifically. We are keen to see how those powers can be used fully used as the deterrent we need to tackle DWP claims. I want to know that, after today's debate and vote, sickfluencers will be left in no doubt that the full weight of the law will be used against them, as they actively defraud the state.

Our new clause 9 is on powers of arrest. We welcome measures in the Bill—first announced by the previous Government—to give DWP investigators greater powers to aid with their investigations, such as search and seizure, and there must be appropriate safeguards around that. This will bring benefit fraud investigations into line with tax fraud investigations in His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which is very welcome, but we want to go further and address other shortfalls in the DWP powers. New clause 9 would add the power of arrest to the powers given to DWP investigators and resolve the seemingly illogical current position: the Government want to give DWP investigators the power to enter and search a premises, seize, retain and dispose of material, obtain sensible material and use reasonable force, but not to arrest someone if the evidence shows that it is necessary.

In Committee, the Minister highlighted that the police would be able to carry out the arrest function on behalf of the DWP should it ever be necessary, but we question whether that is a sustainable position and believe that our new clause would ensure we do not place an additional burden on the police. This is not without precedent and would bring the DWP into line with the approach taken to serious and organised crime across Government, such as at HMRC and the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority.

Our new clause 10 is on liability orders, because we are concerned about the seizure of assets. We want to ensure that the DWP does everything it can to recover funds fraudulently claimed, even when that money is no longer sitting in a bank account. It cannot be right that someone can use that money to buy expensive cars, flat-screen TVs or other luxury assets, which the state cannot then recover from them. Our new clause 10

would give the Secretary of State powers to apply to the courts to seize assets where someone has been found guilty of fraud and the funds have not been recovered in order to repay the state. In a similar vein to our sickfluencers new clause, we believe these additions are needed to send the strongest message to those who are knowingly defrauding the system that they will be caught and will have to pay.

New clause 10 does not just give powers to seize assets to the Secretary of State; it says that she must use them. The DWP has said that it can already do this, but we know through written parliamentary questions that those powers have not been used in the last five years, albeit the DWP could make use of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. We believe there must be an explicit expectation that assets will be seized, and we need new clause 10 to ensure this is achieved.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): It is great to hear that the hon. Member's party is committed to taking tougher action against benefit fraud after 14 years of failing in office. Does she also welcome longer sentences for fraud in other areas of Government such as covid corruption, including for those Tory donors who committed the crime?

Rebecca Smith: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but that is not what we are debating; it is certainly not part of my speech.

Our new clauses 11, 12 and 20 are on the impact on banks. We have concerns about the lack of detail in the Bill when it comes to the eligibility verification mechanism and the requirements that will be put on banks and other financial institutions. We do not have the statutory code of conduct. We do not know what it will cost banks. We do not know the results of any pilot schemes, and we do not know whether the amount recovered will be more than what it costs to administer. Madam Deputy Speaker, had you been in our Committee, you would know that the code of conduct was probably the thing most frequently commented on, and the Ministers did a huge amount to reassure us that it was forthcoming—

Neil Coyle: And cheesecake!

Rebecca Smith: And cheesecake as well—I did not want to say it from the Front Bench, but I have now. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will have to look back at *Hansard*, but I will never look at a cheesecake in the same way.

The code of conduct was regularly raised in Committee, and we got assurances continually from the Ministers, but we still lack that detail. We have therefore tabled a number of amendments to get clarity, including to require the Government to publish their statutory code of conduct, information on the testing completed to date and an impact assessment on the cost implication of the Bill for banks, as well as an amendment to allow banks to challenge the expansion of these powers if the costs that would be incurred exceed a pre-agreed amount. We know that banks and financial institutions want to help tackle fraud, but measures must be proportionate and not unduly burdensome, or they risk diverting resources from tackling other types of financial crime

[Rebecca Smith]

to meet these requirements. We cannot simply assume that the banks and financial institutions will do what is right; we need to give them an incentive to do it, too.

Our amendments 16, 17, 18 and 19 refer to the need for a first-tier tribunal. The Bill takes significant powers for the Secretary of State, giving them the power to review decisions that they, the Cabinet Office or the Public Sector Fraud Authority made. Amendments 16 to 19 change the appeal body from the Minister for the Cabinet Office to the first tier tribunal, ensuring that there is not just independent oversight but an effective independent channel of appeal against information notices that does not just lead back to the organisation that issued the notice.

4.30 pm

New clause 6 is on whistleblowing. If we are serious about cutting fraud and error, we need to have confidence in our whistleblowing procedures for civil service staff. I experienced at first hand at the very beginning of my career what it is like to see public sector fraud being committed, and to feel the pressure of wanting to act, while not knowing what would happen to me or my career if I did the right thing; that is perhaps one of the biggest regrets of my life.

In December 2023, the National Audit Office published a report investigating whistleblowing in the civil service and setting out what further improvement is required. The election came before the Conservatives were able to act, but we hope the new Government will take forward new clause 6 to review the whistleblowing processes for public sector fraud. Elsewhere in Government, new protections have been proposed for NHS whistleblowers, but that should not be the end of the Government's ambition. They must have their own house in order when they come after fraud and error on the part of the general public, and I would at least like to hear a commitment to addressing the National Audit Office report.

I turn to new clause 14. Throughout all this, we must not forget to consider the impact of fraud, error and recovery on vulnerable people. In the absence of details being provided to banks about how their eligibility verification mechanism would work, we have concerns about the potential risks of debanking for vulnerable customers and those in receipt of benefits. New clause 14 would require the Secretary of State to consider the impact of the Bill on vulnerable customers' access to banking, and would ensure that their access was protected. I note our support for the principles behind several of the amendments tabled by the Liberal Democrats spokesperson, the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), including those that consider the impact on financial exclusion and those at risk of domestic abuse.

Overall, while the Bill comes with the right intention of tackling fraud and error—indeed, eye-watering sums have been mentioned today—we have significant concerns, which our amendments seek to address, and we hope that the Government will support them. However, even if this Bill passes, it will not on its own be enough to bring fraud and error to zero, and the Government must set out what further action will be taken on enforcement, the use of artificial intelligence and technology, and social media. They must keep pushing, and must

make it clear to fraudsters that they will not succeed, while protecting vulnerable people from error. If they become complacent and fail to address these issues, I fear that the Bill will not deliver the results that we—and not least the hard-working taxpayer whose money is being stolen—all need.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the next speaker, may I make it clear that I will come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson immediately afterwards?

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): I welcome the return of this Bill to the House. I was happy to speak on it on Second Reading, when I welcomed the Government's crackdown on fraud, because every pound lost to fraudulent claims is a pound that could be spent on the vital public services on which my constituents in Clwyd North rely. It is extremely good to see the recognition of the issue, and the action taken in response to the £7.1 million of fraud and error payments in 2022-23 in Wales alone—that figure is up by £600,000 on the previous year.

The fine-tuning of this Bill is important, and that fine-tuning is done through the Government amendments, which speak to the correct application under devolution settlements, policy intent, the application and limitation of part 3, and the consequential amendments proposed to parent Acts. I was glad to be a member of the Public Bill Committee that considered the Bill in more detail, and I throw my weight behind the comments made about how the Bill Committee progressed, and how helpful that was to Committee members. The explanations and expansions by the Ministers served us well and have brought us to where we are today.

I spoke on Second Reading about the distinction between intentional fraud and accidental individual error, and I am pleased that Government amendments speak to reservations relating to that, and to proportionality. Crucial safeguards will be strengthened to ensure that no one is pushed into undue financial hardship because of debt recovery. Those safeguards include strict affordability checks on recovery payments, and checks on vulnerabilities.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I take the hon. Lady's point about the need to strengthen safeguards, but passing the Bill would mean that we would be extending the powers of the Department for Work and Pensions before we had the opportunity to look at the independent review of the carer's allowance overpayments scandal and see what reform of the Department was necessary. Does she share that concern?

Gill German: The Bill will protect vulnerabilities where we see them and it is very much a Bill of last resort. It is aimed at people who are not engaging with the DWP on fraud and error cases. Now that carers are aware of the problems that have occurred in the system, we hope that they engage, so I do not believe that the Bill will impact them in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests. Indeed, the Bill will protect claimants by enabling early dialogue, which will stop errors sooner and prevent debt building up through genuine mistakes; I initially had a reservation on that point.

It is clearer than ever that the measures are powers of last resort for those who have refused to engage and are able to pay—it is important to emphasise that point. The measures put DWP powers in line with those that already exist for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Child Maintenance Service, and put the importance of the public money spent by those bodies on an equal footing.

The behaviour change that is expected to come as a wider benefit of the Bill is welcome. The Bill encourages debtors to negotiate a repayment plan ahead of using the measures of last resort. Importantly, as has been said, it deters organised fraudsters and those looking to become involved in fraud by ensuring that it is not framed as a victimless crime. It is anything but, because it robs us all of vital money for public services. We are not willing to shrug our shoulders at that, as the Conservative party did at the rising tide of fraud during the covid pandemic and beyond. We must all reinforce the narrative that benefit fraud is not a victimless crime, and our tackling it through the Bill is long overdue.

Throughout the passage of the Bill—in Committee and now on Report—I have been reassured that those who have genuine difficulty navigating the social security system have nothing to fear from the Bill. Indeed, it will raise awareness of the importance of early dialogue. However, I still have concerns about the complexity of the system and how it is administered, as I voiced at Second Reading, but that is for another day. As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I will continue to focus on that, as well as having regular dialogue on the subject with my constituents.

To conclude, I welcome the Bill and the fine tuning that has come about through Government amendments passed in Committee. I was pleased to serve on my first Public Bill Committee, and thank the Chairs, Ministers and all involved for its smooth running. I am happy to support the Government amendments put to the House today.

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

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I start by assuring the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) that my office has talked me out of mentioning the Waitrose cheesecake that was a hot topic throughout Committee. On a more serious note, I would like to explore the challenges in the Bill. As we have heard, fraud can only be a bad thing, as it robs the public purse, but we need to ensure that our approach is proportionate, and that is where the rub is for us, as Liberal Democrats.

First, I want to focus on the covid crisis. We all lived through that, and some of us were in hot seats. I was leader of Torbay council at the time, so it felt as if I was in the eye of the storm for some of those challenges. I am afraid to say that for many of us in this Chamber, it feels as if the Conservatives were asleep at the wheel, given the level of fraud that we saw taking place during the pandemic. The fact that £10 billion-worth of fraud occurred around personal protective equipment is shocking. Some £16 billion of fraud occurred around support for businesses. While it was extremely important that we supported businesses appropriately, the safeguards were

extremely limited. One businessman in Torbay said to me that it was as if the Chancellor of the Exchequer had got handfuls of £50 notes, filled carrier bags across the town centre, and said to the criminal element, “Come and help yourselves.” The reality is that the money could and should have been put to good use. In my constituency, Torbay hospital is crying out for investment. We have a sewage scandal, and the Environment Agency could be supported in tackling that issue. We also have the cost of living crisis; we could support people in ensuring warmer homes. All that money could help with those things.

A colleague and good friend has already alluded to the carer's allowance crisis, and the real challenge that it poses. More than 136,000 people—the population of the Torbay unitary authority area—are affected by it. There is some £250 million of cost on those people. We Liberal Democrats fear that the powers in the Bill could make things even tougher for those who have challenges to do with the carer's allowance.

Members do not have to take it from me that the benefits system is broken; the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister have said that it is. If there is such agreement in Government that the benefits system is broken, why are we adding to this edifice? It is built on a foundation of sand, yet we are looking to pile more responsibilities on to it, without looking for the true, positive culture change in the DWP that we need.

Colleagues have alluded to the areas of debate around the Bill. I will touch on a few major concerns that we Liberal Democrats have. The opportunity that the Bill presents for Orwellian levels of mass surveillance of those who get means-tested benefits causes me grave concern.

David Davis: The hon. Gentleman has got to a point on which I wholeheartedly agree with him. Something like 9.8 million people will fall directly under the reach of this Bill; if we include their carers, landlords and a variety of other people, it is more than 10 million people. I would think that the number of fraudsters in that number is very small, but not vanishingly small, so we will put probably more than 9 million people under unnecessary surveillance. He is right to call that Orwellian.

Steve Darling: I concur strongly with the right hon. Gentleman.

Also of core concern to us is the lowering of the bar for being able to take money out of people's bank accounts, and the opportunity to withdraw driving licences from offenders. However, as colleagues have said, the best practice document is missing. That was alluded to on a number of occasions. It is difficult to understand the true nature of this Bill if we do not know what that guidance will look like.

We also have real challenges around Henry VIII powers. Elements of the Bill should be written into it, but are not, so there are real issues there. We welcome the independent reviewer of the Bill, but the Secretary of State will be able to appoint their own independent reviewer; we do not welcome the Secretary of State effectively marking their own homework by making the appointment themselves.

[Steve Darling]

Big Brother Watch, Age UK and a multitude of other charities have highlighted concerns about the Bill, such as the breakdown in trust that it could cause and the risk of amplifying the challenges faced by people with disabilities. It could also impact on some of the most vulnerable people in our society, such as those with learning disabilities. That causes us great concern; Liberal Democrats would like to see a real culture change. In our manifesto, we talked about co-design, which involves working with people who are benefits claimants and people with disabilities to make sure that the system is a better fit and more fit for purpose. As far as we are concerned, taking a more relational approach, rather than an adversarial one, is the way forward.

4.45 pm

The carers investigation is ongoing. It is not set to report until later this summer, yet the Government are rushing ahead with the proposals in the Bill. I suggest to colleagues that they do not back these proposals until we hear that investigation's findings and see what lessons can be learned.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of amendments 10, 11 and 12, which stand in my name. I would like to start, though, by placing on record my thanks to the Minister for Transformation, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), including for his willingness to engage in a discussion on the terms of this Bill. It has been extremely helpful, so I wanted to place that on record.

I also make it clear that my amendments do not in any way seek to undo or frustrate the Government's legitimate aim of recovering public money from fraudsters and criminals. We absolutely need to do that to ensure that criminal behaviour does not undermine the benefits, legitimacy or standing of our welfare system. The Bill rightly seeks to tackle organised crime and online fraud, but worryingly it also ushers in dangerous new powers compelling banks to trawl through financial information.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I support his amendments. The fact is that millions of innocent people whose behaviour has attracted no suspicion at all will be subject to intrusion into their bank accounts. Is it not odd that there is also access to bank accounts for the £40 billion of tax unpaid by tax avoiders, but that power is rarely used? In the last year for which I have seen figures, 300,000 people were suspected of tax avoidance, but only 1,000 had their banks investigated. Is it not the case that this legislation appears to treat wealthy tax avoiders differently from the poor?

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. It is the very poorest in our society who will be most affected by this legislation. Banks will be able to trawl through financial information even when there is no suspicion of wrongdoing—that is the key point in this debate. The very poorest, including disabled people on PIP, older people on pension credit, carers and those on universal credit, will effectively have fewer rights to privacy than everyone else. I am also deeply concerned about the slippery slope of compelling banks to act as an arm of the state.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for tabling his amendments. We have the finest legal system in the world, and one of its principles is the presumption of innocence. As drafted, the Bill undermines that fundamental principle, which will raise stress and anxiety and undermine vulnerable people in our society. Does the hon. Member agree that that is the current position with the Bill?

Neil Duncan-Jordan: Yes, and I am going to address that point shortly.

It is not the purpose of banks to act as an arm of the state, and compelling them to do so sets a very dangerous precedent that we in this House need to be aware of. We also know that organised crime groups, which are responsible for more than £7 billion of large-scale fraud, will evade detection by spreading funds across multiple accounts, beyond the reach of the algorithmic scanning that will be used to flag overpayments. It will be welfare recipients who are caught up in the net of bank surveillance, regardless of whether they are suspected of fraudulent activity.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his eminently reasonable and common-sense approach to this debate and on amendment 11. Does it seem to him, as it seems to me, that this legislation takes place in a wider context? Along with the proposed tightening of eligibility for personal independence payment, it moves us towards a hostile environment for benefit claimants, particularly disabled benefit claimants. We will end up treating them as suspects automatically. Does he agree that it was right for us to oppose this measure when the Conservatives wanted to do it? I tabled an early-day motion, signed by nearly 50 MPs, to that effect. We have to oppose this measure now. The best way to resolve it is by the Government accepting his eminently reasonable—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. That was a very long intervention. Perhaps we would be better off going back to Neil Duncan-Jordan.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will cover the connection between this piece of legislation and the Green Paper shortly.

Neil Coyle: Will the outcome for the individual disabled people my hon. Friend is concerned about—the vast majority of whom commit no fraud—be any different if these measures are implemented? They will not be affected, because they are not committing any crime.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: As I have tried to explain, the Bill introduces fundamental changes to the nature of our welfare system and its use.

David Davis: I am a signatory to amendment 11. In answer to the point that has just been made to the hon. Gentleman, if the banks use algorithms, they will have an error rate of at least 1%. That means 10,000 or more innocent people will be dragged through the system by this proposal.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: The right hon. Member brings me to my next point, which is the risk of a Horizon-style scandal on a massive scale, given the sheer volume of

accounts that will be scanned. That is glaringly obvious. These new powers also strip those who receive state support of that fundamental principle of British law, the presumption of innocence, as the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) said earlier.

Amendment 11 would ensure that the Government can tackle fraudsters, but would limit the use of an eligibility verification notice to cases where a welfare recipient is suspected of wrongdoing and not merely of error. That proportionate and necessary safeguard would prevent the corruption of our welfare system, which will turn it from a safety net—meant to offer dignity and support to those in need—into a punitive system, where accessing help comes at the cost of someone's privacy and civil liberties.

The Bill grants the Department draconian powers to apply to a court to have people stripped of their driving licence if they have an outstanding debt, whether for overpayment, fraud or error. Amendments 10 and 12 would remove that power from the Bill. There are fairer and more effective ways to enforce the law. Analysis of the Bill has shown that where assessment deems that a financial deduction would cause hardship, the debtor can face losing their licence. That is not justice in my view, but a penalty for being poor.

I have heard the claims that this measure will be a last resort when the debtor has failed to engage over a period, but that overlooks the fact that non-engagement can be a symptom of hardship rather than wrongdoing. Many welfare recipients, including those with mental health conditions and caring responsibilities, find it difficult to navigate the complex bureaucracy of our social security system, and may be unfairly deemed not to have engaged with the DWP.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is important and necessary to have better legislation to look after people. I doubt that anyone in the Chamber has not been confronted by a constituent who has made an inadvertent mistake. Given the complexity of the paperwork and the reams of questions, it is beyond the ability of most people to respond. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern, and that of many others, that if the system continues to be so complicated, it will inadvertently drive people into a position for which they are not responsible?

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I agree. I think that the complexity of our system lends itself to errors on the part of individuals who find it extremely difficult to navigate. In Committee, several witnesses explained that people avoid repayment for a variety of reasons, including not knowing where to get help, simply being overwhelmed by the whole process, or facing multiple debts. I hope that the Minister will provide further reassurance on that specific point relating to amendments 10 and 12.

All these challenges will only be made worse if the Government proceed with the planned cuts in disability benefits outlined in the recent Green Paper, which will affect more than 3 million families. The last Government stripped our welfare state to the bone during 14 years of deep cuts—disabled people are already far more likely to be in destitution and to rely on food banks—but spying on millions of people or piling cuts on to a failed system will not repair our welfare model. The Government must pause for thought, meet representatives of disability

organisations, and build a fairer system with their consent and confidence. Our welfare state needs to provide support for those who need it, and the change that we promised as a Government must lead to a more compassionate and caring society—one that enables rather than penalises. These are the values that make us different from the last Government, and we should not forget that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It would be helpful if Members tried to confine their speeches to five minutes or so, but I do not propose to introduce a formal time limit yet.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I wish to speak in support of new clause 11, entitled “Publication of results of pilot schemes”. Make no mistake: this Bill allows for a massive expansion of state powers. It will permit mass financial surveillance of the public. It is a massive overreach by the state, so of course it requires close scrutiny. It requires the publication of those results, and then they must be analysed.

Let me put this in context. Before the covid years, fraud and error across the tax and benefit system were at an all-time low. Then, in 2020, after a state-imposed lockdown—another massive state intervention—unprecedented financial support was set up for millions of people, in a rush of panic, with the full support of Members on both sides of the House. I exclude myself from that, but very few Members opposed the arrangement, and it opened up all sorts of new vulnerabilities in the system.

This support was set up only because of a blanket stay-at-home mandate from the state. It was the state that opened up those fraud vulnerabilities, and it was the state that saw, as a result of those impositions, many millions more people claiming universal credit. Let me give the House the figures. In March 2020, 3 million people were receiving universal credit. By November that year 5.8 million were receiving it, and in January 2025 the number was 7.5 million. Just as the heavy-handed state intervention of lockdown left the public paying a very high price, I am concerned that the Bill, another heavy-handed state intervention, will also leave the public paying a very high price. As Big Brother Watch states, the Bill will introduce

“an unprecedented system of mass financial surveillance; create a second-tier justice system for people on the poverty line; undermine the presumption of innocence; result in serious mistakes risking the freedoms and funds of our country's elderly, disabled and poor; and turn Britain's once-fair welfare system into a digital surveillance system.”

I have said it before and I will say it again, lockdown was an experiment inflicted on the British people without their consent and that experiment failed. The Bill will be another such experiment on the British public.

5 pm

We should not be surprised that we saw such an increase in the amount of money lost to fraud in the system. The truth is that when there is a knee-jerk reaction to a moment of crisis, there will be serious repercussions. When the state takes extra powers and the powers of the state go unchecked, many inequities flow. The Bill is another example of that. There seems

to be an unwillingness to talk about it. There is a collective denial about the reality of what lockdown did to our country and the dire consequences we are all suffering. We need to admit our mistakes and learn from them. That is the only way we will not repeat such mistakes of mass state intervention again. That state intervention, a one-size-fits-all approach, exacerbated by haste and rapid deployment, lacks the detail of planning. It lacks tried and tested vehicles of delivery, and it lacks safeguards. The massive intervention proposed by the Bill at the very least needs further testing and piloting, and, most importantly, the publication of the results and an analysis of them.

I am sorry to have to say it, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I have no faith that the Government have done the homework required to implement the scheme, and not without good reason. This is a Government who do not have a good track record on doing impact assessments or on doing their homework before major legislation is introduced, such as: the removal of the winter fuel payment from pensioners and the fallout from that; the impact of VAT on schools; the devastation to the farming community and to food security caused by the taxes on farms; and the impact on business and employment of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions.

We are seeing the failure of not doing tests, impact assessments and thoroughly working out how things will work. Much more detailed work needs to go into a change of this enormity. This extraordinary power is ineffective and entirely disproportionate to the revenue the Government expect to raise via its use. The Government's own estimate is that it will get back less than 1.4% of the estimated annual loss to fraud and error. Talk about a hammer to crack a nut. This is power for power's sake, an absolutely unnecessary power grab from the people. Today sees the threat unchecked, untested and coming forward. Looming on the horizon are other forms of state intervention and global intervention, with the World Health Organisation's new international health regulations. Now is the time for Members to have a conversation about massive state interventions and why we do not want them.

In conclusion, it is ironic, is it not, that a massive state overreach and the draconian legislation used for lockdown led to high levels of fraud, error and millions more people on benefit? It will, supposedly, now be solved and corrected by yet another massive state overreach and draconian legislation. It was wrong then and it is wrong now.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): Sometimes in these debates, we are trying to influence those on the Front Bench; to be honest, on this legislation, I have given up on that. I just want to get on the record, for my constituents, why I am concerned about this piece of legislation and why I support amendment 11.

We have all prefaced our speeches by saying that we all want to tackle fraud. To follow on from the speech by the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), in that process during covid, I think I was the first MP to raise the issue of the massive fraud that was going on with bank loans. When I wrote to the then Chancellor and to various Ministers, I received responses that had almost been dictated by the banks, saying that all the security measures had been put in place and that it was being administered effectively; we then discovered that

it was, I think, £13 billion, although we recovered an element of that, so I am very wary about ensuring that public expenditure avoids the levels of fraud that we saw during that time.

I am concerned about this Bill, which takes huge steps constitutionally, legally and on civil liberties. Others have made similar points. Our tradition is that someone is innocent until proven guilty—that has been the legal principle from Magna Carta onwards. The investigation powers are usually triggered by some element of suspicion. This legislation rides roughshod over that long 1,000-year tradition.

On privacy, whatever assurances we are given about the Bill's compliance with human rights legislation—I have my doubts—it introduces, for the first time that I have seen in this country on an issue like this, mass surveillance.

David Davis: The right hon. Gentleman goes right to the point I tried to make with the Minister. There are 25 NGOs supporting amendment 11. It is almost certain that if we go down this route, it will end up in court. I think the Government will lose on article 8, on the question of individual privacy.

John McDonnell: Following the right hon. Gentleman's track record on issues like this—he has been proved right on virtually every occasion—I agree. In addition to the mass surveillance, the extent of the information that can be sought and interpreted from the Bill is extremely wide-ranging and open to challenge.

What has annoyed me is that we are now introducing legislation in advance of what we were promised by way of codes of conduct and operation. We have no idea how this will work out in practice without those codes. Members may recall that the codes set out detail on how the system would operate at every level, with the information seeking, investigatory powers and so on. We do not have those, but we are being told not to worry, because the other place will receive them—well, that is not our responsibility as MPs. Our responsibility is to deal with the matter here.

We also do not know how the “independent persons”, as they are described in the legislation, are to be appointed or how they are going to operate. The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) raised the question of how their reports and recommendations will then be implemented. There is also the question of whom they will be accountable to and whether there is any accountability for those independent persons to this House.

Time and again, when we have introduced legislation like this in the past that has short-circuited the traditional protective constitutional and legal mechanisms, it has led to debacles and miscarriages. I warn Ministers that that is exactly what we are facing here. Reference has been made to issues with regard to the use of computers, models and algorithms. We seem to have learned nothing from where we have made those errors.

As I also raised on Second Reading, what is happening here is discriminatory. We are choosing a class of people—largely working-class people—who are claiming benefits, and we are targeting them. If there is a class of people we should be targeting who have a record of fraud and of claiming things that they should not, well, here we

are. As the expenses scandal demonstrated, if there is one group of people we should be examining more closely, it is Members of Parliament.

I want to talk very briefly about the impact of these measures from a constituency point of view. As an MP for 28 years and a councillor for over 12 years—40 years in total—I have met lots of people who do not claim benefits to which they are entitled. They are often older people, but there are others as well. Why do they not claim? In my experience, it is because of the stigma attached to claiming benefits. With this Bill, we are adding a bit more stigma, which will act as a disincentive to those who genuinely qualify for benefits and should be coming forward. It is that terror of making an error, that fear of risking being penalised for claiming a benefit they may not be entitled to—or of being paid too much. There is a real fear among my constituents about such miscarriages.

Most of the constituents who come to our constituency surgeries have tried everything else by the time they get to us. They are the ones with the most chaotic lives. And they are the ones who get sanctioned time and again, not because of any deliberate act, but often because they have mental health issues, or because something in their life, prevents them from attending that interview, or from applying for enough jobs in time. What will happen to them? They will be dragged into this system again. At the moment, they come to us—this is largely the case in my constituency—because most of the advice agencies have been closed down thanks to the cuts that have taken place, and they come to us in desperation. This Bill will make people even more desperate. It will deter people who qualify for benefits from claiming, and it will cause real hardship and impose severe penalties on those who least deserve it. That is why I think this is a poor piece of legislation, and it will not be long before we are back here again to amend it, to restore some elements of civil liberties and protection for the poorest in our society.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I shall impose, with immediate effect, a four-minute time limit.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): When it comes to public money, everyone accepts the importance of preventing fraud; there is no dispute about that. The mere thought that our benefit system could be exploited loosens the cement holding our welfare system together. However, if we look back in history, there has been a track record of fraud recovery measures not delivering what was hoped. This measure will also probably never save the £1.5 billion that is expected of it, so I ask: will the alleged rewards of this legislation ever match the scale of the imposition on our civil liberties, and are we really going after the right targets?

We all want to catch deliberate and professional fraudsters, but they are precisely the people who are astute enough to change tactics, set up separate bank accounts, and avoid suspicion. Instead, it will be the innocent and the accidental claimants who fall into the trap. The implicit assumption is that we should trust in the DWP as a completely error-free organisation across the entirety of its massive operation. But the DWP does make mistakes. It makes mistakes all the time. And even when it knows that it has made a mistake, and it has been told so, it is very capable of making the same mistake all over again.

In my constituency of Horsham, Anthony and his husband were accused of providing misinformation to the DWP and were overpaid £10,000 as a result. Anthony protested without success. After a long fight the case went to appeal. The tribunal wasted no time deciding in his favour—it was an open and shut case. But then, earlier this year, Anthony and his husband were migrated over to universal credit. After confirming all details were correct, the DWP overpaid them again, and then sought to claw the money back over the following months. The DWP's mistake, but Anthony pays the penalty.

The DWP has its rules, but real life does not run in straight lines. Real life is messy. How can we possibly rely on the DWP to mark its own homework when we know that there are just four fraud advisers per regional office to handle cases flagged by frontline staff?

Yes, there are some checks and balances within this legislation, but what is really needed is a profound cultural change within the DWP, and that is much harder to achieve. The common experience of people who have to deal with the DWP on a daily basis is that they feel that it is always looking to catch them out. Years and years of inflammatory rhetoric under a succession of Conservative Governments have convinced people to regard the DWP as their enemy, not their friend. If anything, the Bill digs that hole a little deeper.

What concerns me most about the Bill is its extreme overconfidence. It assumes that Government agencies always get things right and that individual citizens are to be automatically treated as objects of suspicion. In Committee, the Government were resistant to any amendments except their own, so I very much hope that they will reconsider today and accept the Liberal Democrat amendments.

5.15 pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I rise to speak against amendments 2, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9, and new clauses 12 and 15.

Fraud in the benefit system affects us all. It costs us as a country almost £1 million an hour. It takes money from the most vulnerable in society and undermines the legitimacy of and public support for our social security system. However, many of the amendments proposed simply do not recognise the vital need for this legislation. Some, such as amendments 2 and 9, would hamstring the Bill by preventing us gathering key information. Others, such as amendments 8, 5 and 6, would limit the effectiveness of the Bill and make its powers more difficult to use. Others, such as amendments 4 and new clauses 12 and 15, would seek to delay its effects.

These amendments, however differently proposed, all suffer from the same pathology: they fail to take fraud seriously. We have heard a number of speeches today from opponents of the Bill, but we are yet to hear from them any serious practical suggestions about how we might tackle fraud. These opponents say that they are concerned to protect the vulnerable, but I say gently that they can offer no proposals on how to prevent the fraud that is stealing from the neediest in our society.

Many Members are coming from a genuine place of concern about how to strike the right balance between protecting the public purse on the one hand and the

[David Pinto-Duschinsky]

privacy and rights of claimants on the other. I think the Bill gets the balance right. The powers it provides are proportionate.

Rebecca Smith: Will the hon. Member give way?

David Pinto-Duschinsky: I have limited time, so I will make progress.

The powers the Bill provides are proportionate, measured and ringed with safeguards. It is a mark of this that, as we heard from the Secretary of State on Second Reading, the Information Commissioner has stated that the Bill as currently drafted has addressed their previously stated concerns.

As well as being proportionate, the powers are necessary to fight the ever-more sophisticated frauds that we are facing. Over the past decade, financial institutions have extensively overhauled their use of technology and data and their approaches to the evolving fraud threat, yet the Government have not. It is illuminating, but perhaps not surprising, that while social security fraud has risen dramatically post covid, fraud volumes and losses in the financial services sector, including credit card fraud, have fallen according to UK Finance. The public sector has paid a steep price for not modernising its anti-fraud approach and failing to adopt industry best practices. It is a gap that this Bill seeks to address.

Most of all, the measures in the Bill are crucial for protecting the vulnerable and safeguarding the legitimacy of the system itself. Our social security system rests on public consent and a belief that money is fairly spent. Fraud and error chips away at this social contract, and it takes money from those who need it most. The public in Hendon and across the country expect us to take action. There is nothing progressive whatsoever about permitting fraud. The only people who benefit are the criminals who exploit our system and those who wish to undermine its role as a cornerstone of a civilised and fair society.

For the sake of the most vulnerable, the taxpayer, fairness and the system itself, I hope the House will join me in supporting the Bill and voting down those amendments.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): There continue to be many problems with the Bill, but I recognise that the Minister and his team have had extensive conversations with the Scottish Government and made a number of amendments as a result. I welcome the communication between the two Governments and urge the Minister to ensure that the DWP team have extensive conversations in advance of the coming welfare Bill so that it will not need so many Government amendments on Report for how it interacts with Scottish legislation and Scottish systems.

I turn to new clause 1 on carer's allowance. It would be completely fair to wait until a review has been done—there needs to be a significant look into that—as clawing back money from people without seeing the results of that review would be incredibly problematic. I am therefore happy to support the new clause.

On sickfluencers, I am concerned that although the shadow Minister has tried to draft new clause 21 to exclude people giving advice, it might unintentionally

catch some of those people. On that basis, I am not keen to support it as I would be worried about people who offer genuine advice being caught up in that. However, I understand that she attempted to draft it carefully to try to avoid that.

I would be more than happy to support amendment 11—the SNP will support it—on the suspicion of wrongdoing. I am thinking in particular about the speech made by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). I was not going to mention the propensity of former MPs to claim things fraudulently, but in looking at who actually costs the taxpayer significant amounts of money, if the Government were to say, “We know that people who hold millions of pounds in offshore trust funds often dodge tax, so we are going to survey all their bank accounts,” I imagine that there would be some sort of uprising, particularly from some wealthier people we are aware of. But because the Government are saying, “It’s cool; it’s just poor people who will be impacted,” we are all expected to assume that this surveillance is fine. It is not fine; it is an absolute imposition on people’s lives. As many have said, it is treating everybody as though they are fraudsters.

Let us look at the amount of money set to be saved. The Government will save less money annually than the DWP makes in overpayments. Rather than imposing on so many people’s civil liberties, surely cracking down on DWP official error overpayments, which would save more money, would be a better place to begin. It is absolutely daft.

I completely agree with new clause 7, tabled by my colleagues the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry), particularly in relation to the reasonable expectation that people could understand that they had been overpaid. A constituent contacted me recently because they had a letter telling them that they are to be migrated to universal credit. They are terrified that they will be deported because the word “migrated” was used in that letter. They do not understand the language used by the DWP. Given that universal credit is so complicated to calculate, so many people could not reasonably have been expected to understand that they were being overpaid. The DWP should take that into account before looking at mass surveillance.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): The Bill addresses the serious issue of fraud and error in our public services. I welcome the Government’s continuation of the work of the previous Government to protect taxpayers’ money and uphold the integrity of our welfare system. The amendments proposed by the official Opposition would not undermine the Bill; they would enhance it. Our amendments would preserve the fundamental principles of fairness and proportionality while strengthening the tools at our disposal to tackle wrongdoing.

In that spirit, I rise to speak in support of new clauses 8 and 21. New clause 8 is a measured and necessary proposal that would simply bring the Department for Work and Pensions in line with other Government bodies, such as HMRC and the Child Maintenance Service, which already have the power to issue arrest warrants for cases of serious fraud against the state. Why should it lack those enforcement capabilities when the crimes that it deals with are just as serious?

The taxpayer enters into a social contract with the state—a contract based on trust, responsibility and accountability. My constituents pay their taxes and quite rightly expect that those who cheat, lie or exploit the system will face the consequences. We in this House are the guardians of that social contract. If the public believe that we are turning a blind eye to fraud or failing to act decisively, that trust begins to erode and the social contract will be put at risk. Illegal actions must have legal consequences. In supporting new clause 8, the Government could send a clear and unequivocal message: fraud and deceit have no place in our society.

Turning to new clause 21, it has recently been highlighted that individuals are using social media to promote ways of defrauding the system, including through the Motability scheme. That is deeply troubling. Although Ministers have previously responded positively to my questions on that, the current version of the Bill does not go far enough. Unless the Government support our amendments, they will fail to take the concrete steps needed to address that evolving form of deceit.

This House has an opportunity today to work across party lines to further strengthen the Bill and reaffirm our commitment to protecting the social contract between the Government and those governed. Let us act with unity and resolve to reduce fraud, restore public trust and ensure that our systems work for those who truly need them and not for those who seek to abuse them.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Under the previous Conservative Government, fraudsters got away with claiming billions of pounds of covid support funds, as an eye-watering £39.8 billion went uncollected due to tax evasion and other criminal activity. While vulnerable members of our society have seen their benefits cut and our public services are in need of investment, it is not right that public spending has been misplaced into the pockets of fraudsters. I am therefore grateful for many of the measures in the Bill that will work to reduce instances of fraud. However, I have concerns about some of the broader measures regarding the powers the legislation would give the Department for Work and Pensions and the potentially intrusive impact that could have on the civil liberties of citizens.

I speak in support of new clause 23, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), which would require a report to Parliament within six months on the causes and cost of public sector fraud during the covid-19 pandemic. The report would include an account of any fraudulent payments and a review of procurement practices during covid, including contracting for suppliers and the role of political appointments and personal connections in procurement decisions, as well as an assessment of the adequacy of Government oversight to prevent fraud against public authorities. Much of that work has already been undertaken by the Public Accounts Committee—I am a member, as I was in the previous Parliament—and it would be worthwhile for the Minister to take a look at some of our reporting on those topics.

If failings are found, the new clause would require an outline of corrective actions, including a statement to this House to acknowledge the findings and to set out actions planned to ensure that any failings are not repeated. With public trust in politics at alarmingly low levels, we must take all possible steps to ensure integrity

and the highest possible standards in governance. The cronyism, rule breaking and sleaze scandals of the last Conservative Government did huge damage to public trust in politics and politicians in this country. The new clause would lead to an increase of accountability and I urge the Minister to accept it.

Even though I am glad to see the Government introduce measures that would crack down on instances of fraud, I have grave concerns about some of the broader measures in this legislation that would lead to an unacceptable increase in intrusion on individual privacy. That is why I speak in favour of amendment 2, which would revoke clause 74 and remove the requirement for banks to look into relevant claimants' bank accounts. Some measures in the Bill raise significant concerns regarding the privacy of individuals, and I have heard from constituents who are alarmed at some of the powers that could be introduced with this legislation. I believe that fraud must be rooted out and that more should be done to prevent fraud from happening in the first place. However, clause 74 is an unnecessary and invasive step that I urge the Government to refrain from taking.

I have heard from people who are concerned about the powers granted in the Bill because it enables the Government to have direct access to individuals' bank accounts and even enables the DWP to withdraw funds or revoke driving licences. That concern is particularly serious when it comes to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, disabled people and those living in poverty, who could face devastating consequences as a result of wrongful penalties.

I welcome the Government's commitment to cracking down on fraud. There were clear failures by the previous Conservative Government during the covid pandemic, which we saw highlighted in the PPE procurement scandal and the bypassing of the usual procurement rules via the VIP lane. It is essential that proper rules are in place to ensure that public spending is carried out in an effective, efficient and transparent way, and I am glad to support new clause 23, which would strengthen transparency and accountability on this issue. However, grave concerns about the intrusive powers that this legislation could introduce have been expressed across the House today, particularly those that allow the Government to require banks and other financial institutions to share client data, and as such, I urge the Minister to accept amendment 2 to revoke clause 74.

5.30 pm

Siân Berry: There is a lot I could say, but I will mainly just commend to Members my new clause 7, which would remove official error from the most punitive measures in the second part of the Bill. I spoke against the whole suite of intrusive legislation in the second part of the Bill on Second Reading, and Green MPs still oppose it now. I was pleased to serve on the Public Bill Committee, and I will be supporting a number of other amendments that I also backed there, alongside the hon. Members from both sides of the House who proposed them. On Second Reading and in Committee I described how the Bill treats already stigmatised benefit claimants as suspects, not citizens, through blanket intrusion and surveillance. It is absolutely wrong that this legislation should go through in this form. I think the first part works, but the second part is absolutely out of order.

[Siân Berry]

New clause 7, tabled in my name, is about fair play. It would bring a test for the recovery of universal credit overpayments caused by official error into line with regulation 100(2) of the Housing Benefit Regulations 2006, so that they could be recovered only where the claimant could have reasonably been expected to realise that there was an overpayment. Let us be in no doubt, mistakes by the DWP can have huge financial and psychological impacts on people who are receiving benefits, and the risk of harm is particularly acute with official error overpayments, which individuals have no way of anticipating. I point out that new clause 7 is equivalent to an amendment proposed by Labour Front Benchers during the passage of the Welfare Reform Act back in 2012, when the Government first started to recover universal credit overpayments.

Turning to a few of the other important amendments before the House today, I restate my support for amendments 2 and 5, in the name of the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling). These seek simply to remove the totally indefensible bank spying powers. I express my support for amendments 10 and 12, in the name of the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan), which rightly seek to do away with the driving disqualification powers, which I have previously opposed. I also put on record my support for amendment 11, also in the name of the hon. Member for Poole, which rightly limits the banks' spying powers to cases with existing suspicion of wrongdoing. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker) has taken forward amendments 8 and 9, which I tabled in Committee. My Green party colleagues and I will also be voting for new clause 1, in the name of the hon. Member for Torbay, on carer's allowance and lessons learned.

It matters when we treat people who need a safety net as suspects. It matters when Governments invade privacy with a blanket intrusion that affects older people, disabled people and other minorities in a disproportionate way. And it matters that the powers proposed today extend to impoverishing citizens and punishing them for our own Department's mistakes. Treating people with humanity and due process should be the default setting, not these intrusive new blanket laws, and I hope that Parliament will ask Ministers to dial up the competence, dial down the stigma and think again.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Over the past few months, it has been one thing after another for the vulnerable, the sick and disabled people. The recently announced cuts to welfare will affect 6% of the population in Wales, according to Policy in Practice, punishing the sick and disabled. This Bill adds to that punishment by increasing state financial surveillance of welfare recipients. It is full of intrusive measures, from granting access to three months of bank statements, to allowing direct deductions from bank accounts without court orders and providing police with powers under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to enter and search a property. That is not just my opinion: numerous charities and organisations from Age UK to the Child Poverty Action Group support Big Brother Watch's recommendation to oppose eligibility verification powers under clause 74, for example.

Similar powers were proposed by the previous Conservative Government and considered a potential breach of privacy under the Human Rights Act. Labour

MPs at that time were among critics of those powers. It is disappointing to see so few Labour MPs here today, but I thank those who have once again spoken up. I am glad to see amendments, including amendments 8 and 9 tabled by the hon. Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker) and amendment 11 tabled by the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan), that seek to address such concerns, including by limiting or removing powers to compel banks to provide sensitive financial information.

Even the thought of this provision is causing real anxiety and distress, such as for my constituent Simon Mead and his family. Mr Mead's daughter, who receives PIP due to the long-term effects of brain cancer as a child, and his son, who suffers from psychosis and schizophrenia, are extremely worried about the Government accessing their private financial decisions. It is already affecting their day-to-day life and decisions. When I wrote to the Government outlining Mr Mead's concerns before the Bill was published, I was told that the Bill is "not designed to cause distress or to undertake covert surveillance of disabled people, or any benefit claimant".

Well, that is obviously not the case, is it?

Combined with restricting winter fuel payments, the refusal to abolish the two-child cap and the sweeping welfare cuts, many vulnerable and disabled people genuinely feel that they are being disproportionately targeted. This is a reality that the Labour Government must accept and address. The Bill further stigmatises people who we are supposed to protect—those who are entitled to state support—who are already suffering following recent UK Government decisions. As Members of Parliament, it is our job to better people's lives and ensure that everyone in our community feels supported. We are here to serve and to serve all our constituents, which includes the vulnerable, the elderly, the disabled and the infirm. We are not here to cause further distress and hardship. We need to ensure that constituents have access to the help and services they need. Sadly, this Bill does the opposite.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That is the end of the Back-Bench contributions. We come to the Front Benches and first the shadow Minister.

Rebecca Smith: With the leave of the House, I will make a few additional comments. This is the perfect opportunity to respond to some of the points made about Conservative amendments and new clauses.

The hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) was on a short time limit and was not able to take any interventions, but I want to speak to the points he made on including our new clauses—for example, new clause 12. He rattled off the other amendment numbers quickly, so I hope he will forgive me if I did not hear them all, but I believe that new clauses 12 and 15 were included. His implication was that the new clauses we tabled would delay the Bill being put into law. That would not be the case, because each of them is worded for after the Act comes into force. The new clauses would be additional safeguards on the cost implications for banks, annual reporting and the publication of an antifraud and error technology strategy that would make the Bill even better, rather than essentially being wrecking amendments. Regardless of the other amendments included in the hon. Member's list, ours are certainly not in that vein.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said that she was slightly unhappy about new clause 21 because those who genuinely help benefit claimants get what they are entitled to may inadvertently be caught by it. That is not our intention. We want only those who push people towards committing fraud to be caught. Citizens Advice and Improving Lives Plymouth, for example, which help people claim what they are entitled to, would not be caught by the new clause, because they would be involved in error only if a mistake were made, rather than through fraud. I appreciate what she said, but that was not our intention. The wording of our new clause covers that.

Concern was raised in Committee about the extent of bank account searches. In our view, other bank accounts used by those who commit fraud would not be checked under the Bill, so we probably need to go further to ensure that fraud is properly tackled. To be more light-hearted for a moment, if I may, anybody reading the report of the debate will see plenty of references to cheesecake, and I think I should explain why. Concern was raised in Committee about the fact that, under the Bill, an account's individual transactions could be assessed and judged, so everybody would feel terrible if they bought a cheesecake from Waitrose—other shops are available—and that would be a problem in future. If anybody was wondering why we were talking about cheesecake, it related to concern about transactions being checked. At the time, the Minister kindly reassured us that the Bill would not provide for individual transactions to be checked; it would deal just with benefit payments and whether someone has capital that they should not have while claiming benefits. I hope that that is helpful.

Andrew Western: With the leave of the House, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. In the time I have, I will try to respond to some of the points raised. I have listened closely to the concerns set out by Members from across the House, and I will of course ensure that they are taken forward as the Bill progresses to the other place, but today I will resist all non-Government amendments. I will make initial comments in response to several Members, before turning specifically to the nature of the amendments and new clauses.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), and the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford), said that the Bill builds on the previous Administration's work to tackle fraud and error. I have to say, I think that is a fairly generous interpretation of that work, not least because, as far as I can see, the previous Government introduced absolutely no powers for the Public Sector Fraud Authority to tackle fraud across the public sector, and, moreover, nothing on debt recovery. The only evidence we can find of any new powers the previous Government sought to introduce is in the eligibility verification space. I accept that they sought to do that, but they did so in a rather botched fashion, which was subject to significant criticism, and with none of the safeguards and oversight in place. We have now built those into the Bill. I absolutely agree with the Opposition spokesperson that the Government cannot be complacent in tackling fraud—and we will not be—but I say gently that, having allowed fraud and error in the welfare system to spiral to £9.7 billion at the time of the last election, the same cannot be said of the previous Government.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), spoke of a broken welfare system. I do not want to be drawn into a debate on that, but a broken approach to tackling benefit fraud and error is certainly part of any problem that the Department faces.

5.45 pm

I want to address the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) made about the eligibility verification measure in relation to his amendment 11. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) spoke of the impact this would have on the poorest, giving them less right to privacy than everybody else. I understand their concerns, but that is not my interpretation, because we have already established in this place the right of Government to receive information or data from private organisations, including banks and building societies, that points to financial standing. HMRC already receives data on every interest-bearing account in the country, so this is not an unprecedented power. HMRC sends out 550 notices to data holders covering 130 million accounts, and 100 notices to card-acquiring service providers. It receives 20 million lines of data on card sales. I understand Members' concerns, but I challenge gently the extent to which the measure is unprecedented.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington alluded to the risk of a Horizon-type event. I want to assure the House of a very clear difference. The Horizon scandal emerged because evidence was taken from a single source. That will not be the case here. We will receive flagged information from banks of a potential breach of eligibility criteria. However, that will not be a sufficient source of evidence to prove fraud. That will trigger a look at the account, and if there is not an obvious reason why somebody is potentially in breach of eligibility criteria, a human investigation will be triggered that looks at a range of sources of evidence to establish the reason. Only then would there be any suggestion that fraud or error has occurred. There can be legitimate reasons for somebody having an amount of capital above that allowed by their benefit. For instance, if somebody on universal credit received a payment of more than £16,000, which is the maximum amount of capital allowed, as a result of the Horizon scandal or the infected blood scandal, they would be exempt. I understand the concerns, but I think this is distinct from the Horizon scandal.

Kirsty Blackman: Can the Minister reassure us that no action will be taken to stop social security payments until the human investigation has happened?

Andrew Western: I am happy to provide that assurance; the hon. Member has stolen my next line. I can say categorically that this is a data push only. No decisions will be taken as a direct result, other than a decision to look further into an account, and potentially initiate a human investigation, if needed.

I want to say a little more about amendments 10 and 12, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole, which relate to driving licences. He rightly said that welfare recipients may not be able to engage with

[Andrew Western]

the Department. For the record, nobody in receipt of benefits or paid through pay-as-you-earn employment will be in scope of the debt recovery powers and therefore of the power to suspend driving licences. Where we do seek to suspend someone's driving licence, it is worth remembering that this is after we have made at least four attempts to contact them through our debt management team, and at least four further attempts through our debt enforcement team, and we have established their ability to repay by looking at three months' bank statements. If, when we seek to deduct from that bank account, an individual has removed the funds that we know they have, it is only then that we would look into the possibility of suspending their driving licence. Even then, because this is very much a last resort power, we would seek to agree a repayment plan with them right up until the end. The court would set repayment terms if a driving licence was suspended. It is also worth saying that it is always a suspended decision, subject to compliance with an affordable repayment plan set by the court. As I say, this is a power of last resort. I hope colleagues are reassured to hear of the many steps before we reach that point and, most importantly of all, to hear that the power does not apply to current benefit recipients or anybody paid through PAYE employment.

The right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) mentioned new clause 11 and the publication of pilot scheme results. I would like to clarify for the House that we are not proposing any further pilot schemes as a result of introducing this legislation. Two pilot schemes have already taken place, so we know that our proposals work. We will be adopting a test-and-learn approach so that we can scale things up. The question of whether this mechanism will yield information that is helpful to us in our inquiries was settled by the previous Government.

Esther McVey: Have all the details and all the information from the only pilot schemes that the Government are prepared to run been published in their entirety?

Andrew Western: Information of that nature was published prior to Second Reading and is available to Members.

I turn to the amendments and new clauses that attracted the most attention in today's debate. New clause 1, tabled by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Torbay, pertains to the carer's allowance. I pay tribute to the millions of unpaid carers across the country. This Government value carers highly, and recognise the vital and valuable contribution they make every day. Like others, I see that in my constituency work, week after week, and I am in awe of all that carers do.

This Government inherited a system in which busy carers, already struggling under a huge weight of responsibility, have been left to repay large sums of overpaid carer's allowance, sometimes worth thousands of pounds. We need to understand exactly what went wrong, so that we can set out our plan to put this right. That is why we launched an independent review of earnings-related overpayments, and we were delighted that Liz Sayce agreed to lead that review, which will investigate how overpayments of carer's allowance have occurred, what can best be done to support those who

have accrued them, and how to reduce the risk of these problems occurring in future. The independent review is under way and is anticipated to conclude this summer.

But we are not sitting back; we are taking action now. We continue to review and improve our communication with carers to make it as easy as possible for them to tell us when something has changed in their life that could affect their carer's allowance entitlement. Moreover, this Government introduced the largest ever increase in the earnings limit since carer's allowance was introduced; the weekly carer's allowance earnings limit increased to £196 from 7 April this year. It is now pegged permanently to 16 hours.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Clearly, many carers have been affected by overpayments. Overpayment comes as a shock to many who are trying to work in order to bridge the gap between carer's allowance and their family's costs, and it has a significant impact on their mental health. Does the Minister share my gratitude to Liz Sayce for the work that she is doing to hopefully provide clarity for the many carers who are trying to juggle unpaid family care and work?

Andrew Western: I absolutely agree. Liz Sayce is doing excellent work, and I look forward to seeing the conclusions of her review in due course.

Turning to new clause 1, as I have said, the independent review that has been commissioned is expected to arrive at its conclusions this summer. It would be irresponsible for me to commit in advance to implementing all recommendations. As the House will understand, the recommendations will need to be given careful consideration when they are provided to the Department. Moreover, I do not believe that the new clause would have the effect intended.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Western: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will not, as I am short of time. New clause 1 would prevent recovery of carer's allowance overpayments via the new recovery powers in this Bill, but the DWP would still be able to recover carer's allowance overpayments through deductions from benefits or through deductions from PAYE earnings. This would place carers in an unequal position in regard to overpayment recovery, with recovery depending on whether they were in receipt of benefits or in PAYE employment. Even if I believed that that was what the amendment intended, suspending recovery of all carer's allowance overpayments until the independent review has concluded would be disproportionate. There are safeguards and protections for those with overpayments, including appeal rights, affordable repayment plans and, in exceptional circumstances, the option to waive the debt.

I turn to new clause 21, which the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for South West Devon, spoke to, and I will refer to new clause 8, which proposes to introduce a new offence of fraud against a public authority. In my view, that is already covered by existing offences, making the amendment duplicative and unnecessary. Fraud is already an offence under the Fraud Act 2006, and the common law offence of conspiracy to defraud, regardless of whether the fraud is against public authorities or anyone else, is already in existence.

The Government amendments to clause 70 bring together the offences in sections 6 and 7 of the Fraud Act 2006 of

“possessing, making or supplying articles for use in frauds”, with the offences of “assisting and encouraging” that are found in sections 44 to 46 of the Serious Crime Act 2007. That allows us to tackle the issue that Committee members were concerned about—influencer-style offences, in which a person provides the knowledge needed to commit a fraudulent act through internet videos or manuals.

Dr Luke Evans: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Andrew Western: I will not. I took an intervention from the hon. Gentleman on this subject earlier, but I am short of time. *[Interruption.]* Had he stayed for the whole debate, I might have been more willing to do so, but I responded to his earlier intervention.

In my view, we simply need to enforce existing law. Similarly, new clause 21 seeks to amend the Social Security Administration Act 1992 to introduce an offence of encouraging or assisting fraud. Again, in my view this is unnecessary, because that is covered by the Fraud Act 2006 and the Serious Crime Act 2007. The hon. Member for South West Devon asked for assurance that we would use the powers that we already have. As I said in response to interventions, I have commissioned work in the Department to look at how we can further use the powers that we have; in my view, historically, we have not taken best advantage of them.

Iqbal Mohamed: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Andrew Western: I am sorry, but I will not.

Turning to new clause 10, we want to ensure that the Government have access to a wide, appropriate and proportionate range of debt recovery powers, so that we have multiple methods of recovering money from those who have the means to pay but refuse to do so. However, new clause 10 is not required, as equivalent action is already provided for through existing legislation for the DWP, and by clause 16 of this Bill for the PSFA. Clause 16 clarifies that the PSFA is able to seek alternative civil recovery through the civil courts. In addition, there are direct deduction orders and deduction from earnings orders in the Bill, which could include liability orders.

I have largely covered amendment 11. In closing, I want to make a few observations about amendments 8 and 9, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker), but spoken to by other Members. In my view, those amendments would reduce the effectiveness of our debt recovery powers as proposed in the Bill, so I cannot agree to them. I recognise the importance of dialogue with customers all the way through the journey of debt recovery. As I set out in response to the concerns about the revocation of driving licences raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole, we will seek to engage with people at all stages of the journey. If we identified any vulnerabilities, we would cease recovery, and at all stages we would look to agree an affordable repayment plan.

I hope that I have addressed the majority of the points raised by right hon. and hon. Members, and I thank them again for their contributions. I thank the witnesses who gave their time to the Committee, and

those who provided written evidence. Finally, I extend my thanks to the Clerks, the House staff and civil servants who have contributed to the passage of the Bill.

For too long, too little effort has been made to get a grip on public sector fraud, resulting in the totally unacceptable levels that we see today. With this Bill, we are taking the powers needed to act and to finally take the fight to the crooks and the con artists, from criminal gangs attacking our welfare system to covid fraudsters who stole from hard-working people in a time of national emergency.

This Bill is critical. It will save us billions of pounds, and it is part of a broader package in the Department to save £9.6 billion for the DWP by 2030. I hope that all Members feel able to support it today.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 17 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

6 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 3 February).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

New Clause 18

CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS TO THE SOCIAL SECURITY FRAUD ACT 2001

“(1) The Social Security Fraud Act 2001 is amended as follows.

(2) Section 3 (code of practice about use of information powers) is amended in accordance with subsections (3) and (4).

(3) Before subsection (1) insert—

“(A1) The Secretary of State must issue a code of practice relating to the exercise of the powers that are exercisable by an authorised officer under section 109BZB of the Administration Act.”

(4) In subsection (1), for “Secretary of State” substitute “Scottish Ministers”.

(5) Section 4 (arrangements for payments in respect of information) is amended as follows.

(6) Before subsection (1) insert—

“(A1) The Secretary of State must ensure that such arrangements (if any) are in force as the Secretary of State thinks appropriate for requiring or authorising, in such cases as the Secretary of State thinks fit, the making of such payments as the Secretary of State considers appropriate in respect of compliance with relevant obligations by any person.

(A2) In subsection (A1), “relevant obligation” means an obligation to provide information, or access to information, under section 109BZB or 109BA of the Administration Act.”

(7) In subsection (1)—

(a) for “Secretary of State” substitute “Scottish Ministers”;

(b) for “he thinks”, in both places it occurs, substitute “they think”;

(c) for “he considers” substitute “they consider”.

(8) Omit subsection (4).”—(*Andrew Western.*)

This new clause would replace clause 73. It ensures that the amendments to sections 3 and 4 of the Social Security Fraud Act 2001 reflect the changes made by the Bill to the Secretary of State’s powers to require information under the Social Security Administration Act 1992 and continue to operate effectively in relation to the Scottish Ministers’ powers to require information under the Social Security Administration Act 1992.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 19**DEVOLVED BENEFITS**

“In the Social Security Administration Act 1992, after section 121D, insert—

“121DZA *Devolved Benefits*

- (1) Subject to subsection (3), powers of the Secretary of State under this Part (including powers of an individual who has the Secretary of State's authorisation for the purposes of this Part as mentioned in section 109A) are not exercisable in relation to a devolved benefit.
- (2) A benefit is a devolved benefit if functions under this Part are exercisable in relation to the benefit by the Scottish Ministers by virtue of section 53 of the Scotland Act 1998, read with section 32 of the Scotland Act 2016.
- (3) The powers referred to in subsection (1) are exercisable in relation to a devolved benefit where arrangements made under section 93(1) of the Scotland Act 1998 (agency arrangements) have the effect that the Secretary of State is to exercise any functions of the Scottish Ministers under this Part on behalf of the Scottish Ministers in relation to the benefit.
- (4) See also section (Powers of Scottish Ministers) of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025.”—(*Andrew Western.*)

This new clause means that the powers of the Secretary of State under Part 6 of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 (enforcement) cannot be exercised in relation to a devolved benefit except where the Secretary of State administers that benefit on behalf of the Scottish Ministers under agency arrangements.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 20**POWERS OF SCOTTISH MINISTERS**

“(1) Nothing in this Part is to be taken as adding or removing functions of the Scottish Ministers under the Social Security Administration Act 1992.

(2) Accordingly, those functions continue to be the functions that are exercisable under that Act by the Scottish Ministers by virtue of section 53 of the Scotland Act 1998, read with section 32 of the Scotland Act 2016 (including where an amendment made by this Part has the effect that a provision of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 refers to the Scottish Ministers expressly).”—(*Andrew Western.*)

This new clause provides that the functions of the Scottish Ministers under the Social Security Administration Act 1992 continue to be exercisable by virtue of section 53 of the Scotland Act 1998, read with section 32 of the Scotland Act 2016, despite any amendments made to that Act by Part 2 of the Bill.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 1**RECOVERY OF OVERPAYMENTS OF CARER'S ALLOWANCE**

“The Secretary of State may not exercise any of the powers of recovery under this Act in relation to a person who has received an overpayment of Carer's Allowance until such time as—

- (a) the Secretary of State has commissioned an independent review of the overpayment of Carer's Allowance;
- (b) the review has concluded its inquiry and submitted a report containing recommendations to the Secretary of State;
- (c) the Secretary of State has laid the report of the independent review before Parliament; and
- (d) the Secretary of State has implemented the recommendations of the independent review.”—(*Steve Darling.*)

This new clause would delay any payments being taken from people who the Government may think owe repayments on Carer's Allowance until the independent review into Carer's Allowance overpayments has been published and fully implemented.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 73, Noes 255.

Division No. 180]**[6.1 pm****AYES**

Adam, Shockat
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Aquarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Blackman, Kirsty
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chowns, Ellie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Darling, Steve
Davies, Ann
Dean, Bobby
Denyer, Carla
Dillon, Mr Lee
Duffield, Rosie
Easton, Alex
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Harding, Monica
Hobhouse, Wera
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jones, Clive
Khan, Ayoub
Lake, Ben

Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Helen
McMurdoch, James
Medi, Llinos
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Olney, Sarah
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Slade, Vikki
Stone, Jamie
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Wilkinson, Max
Wishart, Pete
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Zöe Franklin and
Mr Will Forster**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Tahir
Allister, Jim
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Bailey, Mr Calvin

Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barker, Paula
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen

Burton-Sampson, David	Hack, Amanda
Byrne, Ian	Hall, Sarah
Byrne, rh Liam	Hardy, Emma
Cadbury, Ruth	Harris, Carolyn
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hatton, Lloyd
Campbell, Irene	Hayes, Helen
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Hayes, Tom
Carden, Dan	Hazelgrove, Claire
Carling, Sam	Hillier, Dame Meg
Champion, Sarah	Hinchliff, Chris
Charalambous, Bambos	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Charters, Mr Luke	Hopkins, Rachel
Clark, Feryal	Hughes, Claire
Collins, Tom	Hume, Alison
Conlon, Liam	Hurley, Patrick
Coombes, Sarah	Irons, Natasha
Cooper, Andrew	Jogee, Adam
Costigan, Deirdre	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Cox, Pam	Jones, Louise
Coyle, Neil	Jones, Ruth
Creagh, Mary	Jones, Sarah
Creasy, Ms Stella	Josan, Gurinder Singh
Curtis, Chris	Juss, Warinder
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Kane, Chris
Dalton, Ashley	Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> <i>by Chris Elmore</i>)
Darlington, Emily	Kendall, rh Liz
Davies, Paul	Khan, Afzal
Davies-Jones, Alex	Khan, Naushabah
Dean, Josh	Kirkham, Jayne
Dearden, Kate	Kumar, Sonia
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Kumaran, Uma
Dickson, Jim	Kyle, rh Peter
Dixon, Anna	Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Dodds, rh Anneliese	Lamb, Peter
Dollimore, Helena	Lavery, Ian
Doogan, Dave	Law, Noah
Downie, Graeme	Leadbeater, Kim
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Leishman, Brian
Eagle, Dame Angela	Lightwood, Simon
Edwards, Lauren	MacAlister, Josh
Edwards, Sarah	Macdonald, Alice
Efford, Clive	Madders, Justin
Egan, Damien	Martin, Amanda
Elmore, Chris	Maskell, Rachael
Entwistle, Kirith	Mather, Keir
Eshalomi, Florence	Mayer, Alex
Esterson, Bill	McAllister, Douglas
Evans, Chris	McCarthy, Kerry
Fahnbulleh, Miatta	McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
Falconer, Mr Hamish	McDonald, Chris
Fenton-Glynn, Josh	McDonnell, rh John
Ferguson, Patricia	McEvoy, Lola
Ferguson, Markia	McGovern, Alison
Foster, Mr Paul	McKee, Gordon
Foxcroft, Vicky	McKenna, Kevin
Foy, Mary Kelly	McKinnell, Catherine
Francis, Daniel	McMahon, Jim
Frith, Mr James	McNeill, Kirsty
Furniss, Gill	Midgley, Anneliese
Gardiner, Barry	Minns, Ms Julie
Gardner, Dr Allison	Mohamed, Abtisam
Gelder, Anna	Moon, Perran
Gemmell, Alan	Morden, Jessica
German, Gill	Morgan, Stephen
Gill, Preet Kaur	Morris, Joe
Goldsborough, Ben	Mullane, Margaret
Gould, Georgia	Murray, Chris
Grady, John	Murray, rh Ian (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Greenwood, Lilian	Murray, James
Griffith, Dame Nia	Myer, Luke
Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	

Naish, James	Snell, Gareth
Naismith, Connor	Stainbank, Euan
Narayan, Kanishka	Stevens, rh Jo
Nash, Pamela	Stevenson, Kenneth
Newbury, Josh	Stone, Will
Niblett, Samantha	Sullivan, Kirsteen
Nichols, Charlotte	Swallow, Peter
Onn, Melanie	Tapp, Mike
Onwurah, Chi	Taylor, David
Owen, Sarah	Thomas, Gareth
Paffey, Darren	Thompson, Adam
Patrick, Matthew	Thornberry, rh Emily
Peacock, Stephanie	Tidball, Dr Marie
Pennycook, Matthew	Toale, Jessica
Pinto-Duschinsky, David	Tomlinson, Dan
Pitcher, Lee	Trickett, Jon
Platt, Jo	Tufnell, Henry (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Adam Jogee</i>)
Powell, Joe	Turmaine, Matt
Powell, rh Lucy	Turner, Karl
Poynton, Gregor	Turner, Laurence
Prinsley, Peter	Twigg, Derek
Quigley, Mr Richard	Twist, Liz
Ranger, Andrew	Uppal, Harpreet
Reid, Joani	Vaz, rh Valerie
Rhodes, Martin	Vince, Chris
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell	Wagh, Paul
Richards, Jake	Welsh, Michelle
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny	Western, Andrew
Rigby, Lucy	Western, Matt
Ryan, Oliver	Wheeler, Michael
Sackman, Sarah	Whitby, John
Scrogham, Michelle	White, Jo
Sewards, Mark	White, Katie
Shah, Naz	Woodcock, Sean
Shanker, Baggy	Wrighting, Rosie
Shanks, Michael	Yang, Yuan
Siddiq, Tulip	Zeichner, Daniel
Simons, Josh	
Slaughter, Andy	
Smith, Cat	
Smith, David	
Smith, Jeff	
Smyth, Karin	

Tellers for the Noes:
Gerald Jones and
Gen Kitchen

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 10

LIABILITY ORDERS

- (1) Where a person—
 - (a) has been found guilty of an offence under section 1 or section 11 of the Fraud Act 2006, or the offence at common law of conspiracy to defraud,
 - (b) that offence relates to fraud committed against a public authority, and
 - (c) has not paid the required penalties or not made the required repayments,

the Secretary of State must apply to a magistrates' court or, in Scotland, to the sheriff for an order (“a liability order”) against the liable person.
- (2) Where the Secretary of State applies for a liability order, the magistrates' court or (as the case may be) sheriff shall make the order if satisfied that the payments in question have become payable by the liable person and have not been paid.
- (3) The Secretary of State may make regulations in relation to England and Wales—
 - (a) prescribing the procedure to be followed in dealing with an application by the Secretary of State for a liability order;

- (b) prescribing the form and contents of a liability order; and
- (c) providing that where a magistrates' court has made a liability order, the person against whom it is made shall, during such time as the amount in respect of which the order was made remains wholly or partly unpaid, be under a duty to supply relevant information to the Secretary of State.

(4) Where a liability order has been made against a person ("the liable person"), the Secretary of State may use the procedure in Schedule 12 to the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007 (taking control of goods) to recover the amount in respect of which the order was made, to the extent that it remains unpaid."—
(*Rebecca Smith.*)

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 101, Noes 258.

Division No. 181]

[6.14 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Hudson, Dr Neil
Anderson, Lee	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Argar, rh Edward	Jopp, Lincoln
Atkins, rh Victoria	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Bacon, Gareth	Lam, Katie
Bedford, Mr Peter	Lamont, John
Bhatti, Saqib	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Blackman, Bob	Lockhart, Carla
Bool, Sarah	Lopez, Julia
Bowie, Andrew	Mak, Alan
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Malthouse, rh Kit
Brandreth, Aphra	McMurdock, James
Braverman, rh Suella	McVey, rh Esther
Burghart, Alex	Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Moore, Robbie
Cartlidge, James	Morrissey, Joy
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Morton, rh Wendy
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Cocking, Lewis	Mundell, rh David
Cooper, John	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Costa, Alberto	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	O'Brien, Neil
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Philp, rh Chris
Cross, Harriet	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Davies, Gareth	Rankin, Jack
Davis, rh David	Reed, David
Dewhurst, Charlie	Robertson, Joe
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Robinson, rh Gavin
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Rosindell, Andrew
Easton, Alex	Shannon, Jim
Evans, Dr Luke	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Fortune, Peter	Simmonds, David
Fox, Sir Ashley	Smith, Greg
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Smith, rh Sir Julian
French, Mr Louie	Smith, Rebecca
Fuller, Richard	Spencer, Dr Ben
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Stafford, Gregory
Garnier, Mark	Stephenson, Blake
Glen, rh John	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Griffiths, Alison	Stuart, rh Graham
Harris, Rebecca	Swann, Robin
Hayes, rh Sir John	Thomas, Bradley
Hinds, rh Damian	Tice, Richard
Hoare, Simon	Timothy, Nick
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Trott, rh Laura
Holmes, Paul	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Huddleston, Nigel	Vickers, Martin

Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin

Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:
Rebecca Paul and
Jerome Mayhew

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barker, Paula
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Curtis, Chris
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex

Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gill, Preet Kaur
Goldsborough, Ben
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Hurley, Patrick
Irons, Natasha
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth

Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe

Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Gerald Jones and
 Gen Kitchen

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 21

OFFENCE OF ENCOURAGING OR ASSISTING OTHERS TO COMMIT FRAUD

“(1) The Social Security Administration Act 1992 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 111A (dishonest representation for obtaining benefit etc), after subsection (1G) insert—

“(1H) A person commits an offence if they—

- (a) encourage or assist another person to commit an offence under this section, or
- (b) provide guidance on how to commit an offence under this section.

(1I) An offence under this section can be committed where the encouragement, assistance or guidance happens online.

(1J) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or an unlimited fine.”

(3) In section 112 (false representations for obtaining benefit etc), after subsection (1F) insert—

“(1G) A person commits an offence if they—

- (a) encourage or assist another person to commit an offence under this section, or
- (b) provide guidance on how to commit an offence under this section.

(1H) An offence under this section can be committed where the encouragement, assistance or guidance happens online.

(1I) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or an unlimited fine.”—(*Rebecca Smith.*)

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 95, Noes 257.

Division No. 182]

[6.26 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Anderson, Lee	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Evans, Dr Luke
Argar, rh Edward	Fortune, Peter
Atkins, rh Victoria	Fox, Sir Ashley
Bacon, Gareth	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bedford, Mr Peter	French, Mr Louie
Bhatti, Saqib	Fuller, Richard
Blackman, Bob	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Bool, Sarah	Garnier, Mark
Bowie, Andrew	Glen, rh John
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Griffiths, Alison
Brandreth, Aphra	Harris, Rebecca
Braverman, rh Suella	Hayes, rh Sir John
Burghart, Alex	Hinds, rh Damian
Cartledge, James	Hoare, Simon
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Holmes, Paul
Cocking, Lewis	Huddleston, Nigel
Cooper, John	Hudson, Dr Neil
Costa, Alberto	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Jopp, Lincoln
Cross, Harriet	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Davies, Gareth	Lam, Katie
Davis, rh David	Lamont, John
Dewhurst, Charlie	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
	Lopez, Julia

Mak, Alan	Smith, Greg
Malthouse, rh Kit	Smith, rh Sir Julian
McMurdock, James	Smith, Rebecca
McVey, rh Esther	Spencer, Dr Ben
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew	Stafford, Gregory
Moore, Robbie	Stephenson, Blake
Morrissey, Joy	Stuart, rh Graham
Morton, rh Wendy	Swann, Robin
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Thomas, Bradley
Mundell, rh David	Tice, Richard
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Timothy, Nick
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Trott, rh Laura
O'Brien, Neil	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Philp, rh Chris	Vickers, Martin
Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Whately, Helen
Rankin, Jack	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Reed, David	Wild, James
Robertson, Joe	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew	Wood, Mike
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil	
Simmonds, David	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Rebecca Paul and
Jerome Mayhew

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Charalambous, Bambos
Abbott, Jack	Charters, Mr Luke
Abrahams, Debbie	Chownes, Ellie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Clark, Feryal
Akehurst, Luke	Collins, Tom
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Conlon, Liam
Ali, Rushanara	Coombes, Sarah
Ali, Tahir	Cooper, Andrew
Anderson, Callum	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Costigan, Deirdre
Arthur, Dr Scott	Cox, Pam
Asato, Jess	Coyle, Neil
Athwal, Jas	Creagh, Mary
Atkinson, Catherine	Creasy, Ms Stella
Atkinson, Lewis	Curtis, Chris
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Bailey, Olivia	Dalton, Ashley
Baines, David	Darlington, Emily
Baker, Richard	Davies, Paul
Ballinger, Alex	Davies-Jones, Alex
Barker, Paula	Dean, Josh
Baxter, Johanna	Dearden, Kate
Beales, Danny	Denyer, Carla
Begum, Apsana (<i>Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana</i>)	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Benn, rh Hilary	Dickson, Jim
Berry, Siân	Dixon, Anna
Betts, Mr Clive	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Dollimore, Helena
Bonavia, Kevin	Downie, Graeme
Botterill, Jade	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Eagle, Dame Angela
Brickell, Phil	Edwards, Lauren
Buckley, Julia	Edwards, Sarah
Burgon, Richard	Efford, Clive
Burke, Maureen	Egan, Damien
Burton-Sampson, David	Elmore, Chris
Byrne, Ian	Entwistle, Kirith
Byrne, rh Liam	Eshalomi, Florence
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Esterson, Bill
Campbell, Irene	Evans, Chris
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Carden, Dan	Falconer, Mr Hamish
Carling, Sam	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Champion, Sarah	Ferguson, Mark
	Ferguson, Patricia
	Foster, Mr Paul
	Foxcroft, Vicky

Foy, Mary Kelly	McKinnell, Catherine
Francis, Daniel	McMahon, Jim
Frith, Mr James	McNeill, Kirsty
Furniss, Gill	Midgley, Anneliese
Gardiner, Barry	Minns, Ms Julie
Gardner, Dr Allison	Mohamed, Abtisam
Gemmell, Alan	Moon, Perran
German, Gill	Morden, Jessica
Gill, Preet Kaur	Morgan, Stephen
Goldsborough, Ben	Morris, Joe
Gould, Georgia	Mullane, Margaret
Grady, John	Murray, Chris
Greenwood, Lilian	Murray, rh Ian (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Griffith, Dame Nia	Murray, James
Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Myer, Luke
Hack, Amanda	Naish, James
Haigh, rh Louise	Naismith, Connor
Hall, Sarah	Narayan, Kanishka
Hardy, Emma	Nash, Pamela
Harris, Carolyn	Newbury, Josh
Hatton, Lloyd	Niblett, Samantha
Hayes, Helen	Nichols, Charlotte
Hayes, Tom	Onn, Melanie
Hazelgrove, Claire	Onwurah, Chi
Hillier, Dame Meg	Owen, Sarah
Hinchliff, Chris	Paffey, Darren
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Patrick, Matthew
Hopkins, Rachel	Peacock, Stephanie
Hughes, Claire	Pennycook, Matthew
Hume, Alison	Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Hurley, Patrick	Pitcher, Lee
Irons, Natasha	Platt, Jo
Jogee, Adam	Powell, Joe
Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Powell, rh Lucy
Jones, Louise	Poynton, Gregor
Jones, Ruth	Prinsley, Peter
Jones, Sarah	Quigley, Mr Richard
Josan, Gurinder Singh	Ranger, Andrew
Juss, Warinder	Reid, Joani
Kane, Chris	Rhodes, Martin
Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Kendall, rh Liz	Richards, Jake
Khan, Afzal	Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Khan, Naushabah	Rigby, Lucy
Kirkham, Jayne	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Kumar, Sonia	Ryan, Oliver
Kumaran, Uma	Sackman, Sarah
Kyle, rh Peter	Scrogham, Michelle
Kyrke-Smith, Laura	Sewards, Mark
Lamb, Peter	Shah, Naz
Lavery, Ian	Shanker, Baggy
Law, Noah	Shanks, Michael
Leadbeater, Kim	Siddiq, Tulip
Leishman, Brian	Simons, Josh
MacAlister, Josh	Slaughter, Andy
Macdonald, Alice	Smith, Cat
Madders, Justin	Smith, David
Martin, Amanda	Smith, Jeff
Maskell, Rachael	Smyth, Karin
Mather, Keir	Snell, Gareth
Mayer, Alex	Stainbank, Euan
McAllister, Douglas	Stevens, rh Jo
McCarthy, Kerry	Stevenson, Kenneth
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain	Stone, Will
McDonald, Chris	Sullivan, Kirsteen
McDonnell, rh John	Sultana, Zarah
McEvoy, Lola	Swallow, Peter
McGovern, Alison	Tapp, Mike
McKee, Gordon	Thomas, Gareth
McKenna, Kevin	Thompson, Adam
	Thornberry, rh Emily

Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Waugh, Paul

Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Gerald Jones and
Gen Kitchen

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 3

INFORMATION NOTICES

Amendments made: 23, page 3, line 22, leave out paragraphs (a) and (b) and insert—

- “(a) journalistic material, or
(b) excluded material,”

This amendment allows an information notice to require a person to give to the Minister information which amounts to special procedure material under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 but not any information that amounts to journalistic material or excluded material under that Act.

Amendment 24, page 3, line 25, leave out “14” and insert “13”.—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 23.

Clause 9

INCIDENTS ETC

Amendments made: 25, page 6, line 11, leave out “Part 2 of”

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 26.

Amendment 26, page 8, line 2, at end insert—

- “(4) In section 105 (powers of Secretary of State to make orders and regulations), after subsection (5) insert—
“(6) In this section, references to the Secretary of State include references to the Minister for the Cabinet Office for the purposes of section 26G (power to make regulations about public sector fraud investigators).”—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment means that section 105 of the Police Reform Act 2002 (powers of Secretary of State to make orders and regulations) applies in relation to the power of the Minister for the Cabinet Office to make regulations under new section 26G of that Act (inserted by clause 9 of the Bill), with the result (among other things) that such regulations would be subject to the negative procedure.

Clause 22

AMOUNT OF DEDUCTIONS

Amendments made: 27, page 14, line 27, leave out from “the” to “and” on line 28 and insert “relevant amount.”.

This amendment, together with Amendment 28 and Amendment 29, would mean that the maximum amount to be deducted under a regular direct deduction order under clause 17 in relation to any period of 28 days is to be calculated by reference to the amount the Minister expects to be credited to the account in a month.

Amendment 28, page 14, line 29, leave out from first “the” to end of line 30 and insert “relevant amount.”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 27.

Amendment 29, page 14, line 35, leave out subsection (5) and insert—

- “(5) For the purposes of subsection (3), the “relevant amount” is the amount that the Minister reasonably expects to be credited to the account in question in (or in respect of) a typical month during the period for which the order will have effect, having regard to all statements given to the Minister in relation to the account (see sections 19(2) and 31(1)).”—(Andrew Western.)

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 27.

Clause 67

DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION ETC:

INTERACTION WITH EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Amendments made: 30, page 36, line 14, at end insert—

- “(5A) Subsection (5) does not apply in relation to the provisions of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 as applied by section 7.”

This amendment has the effect that clause 67(5) does not apply in relation to the PACE powers given to authorised investigators in relation to investigating suspected fraud against public authorities. Those powers contain their own safeguards around material that is legally privileged.

Amendment 31, page 36, line 15, leave out subsection (6).—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment removes the statutory provision that a person may not be required under a provision in Part 1 of the Bill to give information which tends to incriminate themselves or their partner. This means that the normal rules on self-incrimination will apply.

Clause 70

INTERPRETATION

Amendments made: 76, page 37, line 14, at end insert—

- “(aa) the offences in sections 6 and 7 of that Act (possessing, making or supplying articles for use in frauds), and”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 75.

Amendment 75, page 37, line 34, at end insert—

- “() For the purposes of applying this Part in relation to the offences in sections 6 and 7 of the Fraud Act 2006 (possessing, making or supplying articles for use in frauds), references in this Part to fraud against a public authority are to be read as including the commission of those offences by—
(a) in relation to section 6 of the Fraud Act 2006, possessing or having control of an article for use in the course of or in connection with a fraud against a public authority, and
(b) in relation to section 7 of that Act, making, adapting, supplying or offering to supply an article—
(i) knowing that it is designed or adapted for use in the course of or in connection with fraud against a public authority, or
(ii) intending it to be used to commit, or assist in the commission of, fraud against a public authority.”—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment, together with Amendment 76, means that the PSFA can investigate and pursue enforcement action in respect of the offences in sections 6 and 7 of the Fraud Act 2006 (possessing, making or supplying articles for use in fraud) where those offences involve articles for use in fraud against a public authority.

Clause 72

INFORMATION NOTICES

Amendment made: 32, page 38, line 24, leave out Clause 72.—(Andrew Western.)

See the explanatory statement for Amendment NC17.

Clause 73

CODE OF PRACTICE

Amendment made: 33, page 40, line 29, leave out Clause 73.—(Andrew Western.)

See the explanatory statement for Amendment NC18.

Clause 81AMENDMENTS TO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE
AND POLICE ACT 2001

Amendment made: 34, page 46, line 10, after “2” insert “(1)(e) and (f)”.—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment narrows the reference to the powers in paragraph 2 of new Schedule 3ZD to the Social Security Administration Act 1992 (inserted by Schedule 4 to the Bill) to those in paragraph 2(1)(e) and (f), which are the powers relevant for section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001.

Clause 85DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION ETC:
INTERACTION WITH EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Amendments made: 35, page 49, line 21, at end insert “so far as the provision applies in connection with the exercise of powers by or on behalf of the Secretary of State”.

This amendment limits new section 109H so that it only applies in relation to a provision for the processing of information so far as the provision applies in connection with the exercise of powers by or on behalf of the Secretary of State.

Amendment 36, page 50, line 9, leave out “on a not for profit basis” and insert “free of charge”.

This amendment and Amendment 38 mean that the exception in clause 85(8) to the requirement to provide information applies only in relation to services provided free of charge.

Amendment 37, page 50, line 10, leave out “the provision of temporary accommodation” and insert “services that involve the provision of accommodation”.

This amendment means that services that involve the provision of any accommodation free of charge are covered by the restriction on the disclosure of personal data in clause 85(8).

Amendment 38, page 50, line 12, leave out “the recipients of the services” and insert “persons receiving such a service free of charge”.

See the explanatory statement to Amendment 36.

Amendment 39, page 50, leave out lines 14 and 15 and insert—

- “(a) journalistic material, or
- (b) excluded material.”.

This amendment allows authorised officers to require information which amounts to special procedure material under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, but not information that amounts to journalistic material or excluded material under that Act, to be given to them under the provisions of Part 6 (enforcement) of the Social Security Administration Act 1992.

Amendment 40, page 50, line 17, leave out “14” and insert “13”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 39.

Amendment 41, page 50, leave out lines 18 to 22 and insert—

“(10) But subsections (5) to (9) do not apply in relation to—

- (a) the provisions of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 as applied by section 109D, and
- (b) Schedule 3ZD.”—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment has the effect that section 109H(5) to (9) of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 (inserted by clause 85 of the Bill) does not apply in relation to the PACE powers, and equivalent powers in Scotland, given to authorised investigators in relation to DWP offences.

Clause 87

INDEPENDENT REVIEW

Amendment made: 42, page 50, line 37, at end insert “by or on behalf of the Secretary of State”.—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment means that the independent review function applies in respect of the exercise of functions by or on behalf of the Secretary of State, and therefore not in connection with the exercise of functions by the Scottish Ministers.

Clause 89

RECOVERY AND ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS

Amendment made: 43, page 54, line 31, at end insert—
“other than an amount or a penalty relating to a devolved benefit.

(2A) For the purposes of this Part—

- (a) a benefit is a devolved benefit if functions under this Part are exercisable in relation to the benefit by the Scottish Ministers by virtue of section 53 of the Scotland Act 1998, read with section 32 of the Scotland Act 2016, but
- (b) powers of the Secretary of State under section 80B (and Schedule 3ZA) and section 80C (and Schedule 3ZB) are exercisable in relation to the recovery of an amount or a penalty relating to a devolved benefit where arrangements made under section 93(1) of the Scotland Act 1998 (agency arrangements) have the effect that the Secretary of State is to exercise any functions of the Scottish Ministers under this Part on behalf of the Scottish Ministers in relation to the benefit.

(See also section (Powers of Scottish Ministers) of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025).—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment means that the new powers of recovery are not available in relation to a devolved benefit, except where the Secretary of State exercises functions of the Scottish Ministers in relation to that benefit under agency arrangements.

Clause 99

APPLICATION AND LIMITATION

Amendments made: 79, page 62, line 10, leave out “an England and Wales” and insert “a relevant”.

This amendment, together with Amendments 78 and 77, replaces references to “an England and Wales public authority” with references to “a relevant public authority” (but this does not affect the substance of the references).

Amendment 78, page 62, line 18, leave out “England and Wales” and insert “relevant”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 79.

Amendment 77, page 62, line 22, leave out “an “England and Wales” and insert “a “relevant”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 79.

Amendment 74, page 62, line 24, leave out
“or a devolved Welsh authority”.

This amendment, together with Amendment 73, means that the extension to time limits for bringing claims in relation to fraud against public authorities in connection with covid applies to claims brought by devolved Welsh authorities (as well as other English, Welsh or UK-wide bodies exercising reserved functions).

Amendment 73, page 62, line 30, leave out paragraph (c).

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 74.

Amendment 44, page 62, line 40, at end insert—

“() In the Prescription and Limitation (Scotland) Act 1973, in Schedule 1 (obligations affected by prescriptive periods of 5 years under section 6), in paragraph 2(fb)(i), at the end insert ‘, including as amended by the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025’.”

This amendment ensures that the reference in paragraph 2(fb)(i) of Schedule 1 to the Prescription and Limitation (Scotland) Act 1973 to Part 3 of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 is to that Part as amended by this Bill.—(Andrew Western.)

Schedule 1

FRAUD AGAINST PUBLIC AUTHORITIES: POLICE AND CRIMINAL EVIDENCE ACT 1984 POWERS

Amendments made: 72, page 66, leave out lines 20 to 22 and insert—

“(2A) Subsection (2B) applies where an authorised investigator—

- (a) has seized something or taken something away following a requirement made by virtue of section 19 or 20 on the basis that it is evidence of an offence, and
- (b) considers that the thing may be evidence that is relevant to an investigation of an offence (whether or not the offence mentioned in paragraph (a)) in relation to which another person has functions.

(2B) Where this subsection applies—

- (a) an authorised investigator may transfer the thing to that person,
- (b) where that person considers that the thing may be evidence that is relevant to an investigation in relation to which that person has functions, that person may accept and retain the thing, and
- (c) any provision of an enactment that applies to anything seized or taken away by that person applies to the thing as if it had been seized or taken away by that person for the purposes of the investigation of the relevant offence.

(2C) In subsection (2B)(c), “enactment” includes an enactment contained in subordinate legislation within the meaning of the Interpretation Act 1978.”.

This amendment allows an authorised investigator to transfer something seized in the exercise of PACE powers to another person with functions in relation to an offence to which the thing is relevant.

Amendment 45, page 66, line 27, at end insert—

“(5) Schedule 1 (special procedure) is to be read as if—

- (a) in paragraph 1, for ‘one or other of the sets of access conditions’ there were substituted “the first set of access conditions”;
- (b) in paragraph 2(a)(ii), for ‘and does not also include excluded material’ there were substituted “, or consists of or includes excluded material.”;
- (c) paragraph 3 (second set of access conditions) were omitted;

(d) in paragraph 12—

- (i) in paragraph (a)(i), for ‘either set of access conditions’ there were substituted “the first set of access conditions”;
- (ii) paragraph (b) were omitted.”

This amendment means that the Minister can obtain material that is excluded material under Schedule 1 to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 as applied by clause 7 of the Bill.—(Andrew Western.)

Schedule 3

ELIGIBILITY VERIFICATION ETC

Amendment proposed: 11, page 73, line 25, leave out from “accounts” to the end of line 31 and insert—

“which belong to a person who the authorised officer has reasonable grounds to suspect has committed, is committing or intends to commit a DWP offence.”—(Neil Duncan-Jordan.)

This amendment would limit the exercise of an eligibility verification notice to cases where the welfare recipient is suspected of wrongdoing.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 85, Noes 238.

Division No. 183]

[6.39 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Harding, Monica
Adam, Shockat	Hobhouse, Wera
Allister, Jim	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Amos, Gideon	Jardine, Christine
Aquarone, Steff	Jarvis, Liz
Babarinde, Josh	Jones, Clive
Begum, Apsana (<i>Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana</i>)	Khan, Ayoub
Bennett, Alison	Lake, Ben
Berry, Siân	Lavery, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty	Law, Chris
Brewer, Alex	Leadbitter, Graham
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Leishman, Brian
Burgon, Richard	Lockhart, Carla
Byrne, Ian	Logan, Seamus
Campbell, Mr Gregory	MacCleary, James
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Chadwick, David	Maguire, Helen
Chamberlain, Wendy	Maskell, Rachael
Chambers, Dr Danny	McDonnell, rh John
Chowns, Ellie	Medi, Llinos
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Milne, John
Darling, Steve	Morello, Edward
Davies, Ann	Morgan, Helen
Davis, rh David	Morrison, Mr Tom
Dean, Bobby	Munt, Tessa
Denyer, Carla	Murray, Susan
Dillon, Mr Lee	Olney, Sarah
Doogan, Dave	Perteghella, Manuela
Duffield, Rosie	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Easton, Alex	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Forster, Mr Will	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Foy, Mary Kelly	Robinson, rh Gavin
Franklin, Zöe	Roome, Ian
George, Andrew	Sabine, Anna
Gethins, Stephen	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)	Shannon, Jim
Goldman, Marie	Slade, Vikki
Gordon, Tom	Stone, Jamie
	Sultana, Zarah
	Swann, Robin
	Taylor, Luke
	Thomas, Cameron

Trickett, Jon
Wilkinson, Max
Wishart, Pete
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Chris Hinchliff and
Iqbal Mohamed

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Curtis, Chris
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Downie, Graeme
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren

Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gill, Preet Kaur
Goldsborough, Ben
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Hurley, Patrick
Irons, Natasha
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast*
by Chris Elmore)
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kirkham, Jayne
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter

Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Chris
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMurdock, James
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Murray, James
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Patrick, Matthew
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Ranger, Andrew
Reid, Joani
Rhodes, Martin

Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Scroggham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Snell, Gareth
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Swallow, Peter
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote*
cast by Adam Jogee)
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Gerald Jones and
Gen Kitchen

Question accordingly negated.

Schedule 3**ELIGIBILITY VERIFICATION ETC**

Amendment made: 46, page 87, line 3, leave out “109B and 109BZA” and insert “109BZA and 109BZB”.—
(*Andrew Western.*)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment NC17.

Schedule 4

SOCIAL SECURITY FRAUD:
SEARCH AND SEIZURE POWERS ETC

Amendments made: 47, page 88, line 16, after “for” insert—

“(a) the reference to any other offence in section 19(3)(a), and”.

This amendment allows a DWP authorised investigator in England or Wales, while searching premises under a warrant, to seize anything they reasonably believe to be evidence of any offence (not just a DWP offence) if they reasonably believe it is necessary to do so to prevent the evidence being concealed, lost, altered or destroyed.

Amendment 48, page 89, leave out lines 18 to 20 and insert—

“(2A) Subsection (2B) applies where an authorised investigator—

- (a) has seized something or taken something away following a requirement made by virtue of section 19 or 20 on the basis that it is evidence of an offence, and
- (b) considers that the thing may be evidence that is relevant to an investigation of an offence (whether or not the offence mentioned in paragraph (a)) in relation to which another person has functions.

(2B) Where this subsection applies—

- (a) an authorised investigator may transfer the thing to that person,
- (b) where that person considers that the thing may be evidence that is relevant to an investigation in relation to which that person has functions, that person may accept and retain the thing, and
- (c) any provision of an enactment that applies to anything seized or taken away by that person applies to the thing as if it had been seized or taken away by that person for the purposes of the investigation of the relevant offence.

(2C) In subsection (2B)(c), “enactment” includes—

- (a) an enactment contained in subordinate legislation within the meaning of the Interpretation Act 1978, and
- (b) an enactment contained in, or in an instrument made under, an Act of the Scottish Parliament.”.

This amendment allows an authorised investigator to transfer something seized in the exercise of PACE powers in England and Wales to another person with functions in relation to an offence to which the thing is relevant.

Amendment 49, line 24, at beginning insert “Subject to paragraph (2A).”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 50.

Amendment 50, page 91, line 26, at end insert—

“(2A) The power to seize and remove a document, equipment or other item or material on the premises may be exercised if the person has reasonable grounds for believing—

- (a) that it is evidence in relation to any offence, and
- (b) it is necessary to seize it in order to prevent the evidence being concealed, lost, altered or destroyed.”

This amendment allows a DWP authorised investigator in Scotland, while searching premises under a warrant, to seize an item they reasonably believe to be evidence of any offence (not just a DWP offence) if they reasonably believe it is necessary to do so to prevent the evidence being concealed, lost, altered or destroyed.

Amendment 51, page 91, line 31, leave out “or material”.

This amendment corrects a reference to an “item subject to legal privilege”, which is a defined term.

Amendment 52, page 92, line 10, leave out “three months” and insert “one month”.

This amendment requires a warrant under paragraph 1 of Schedule 3ZD, which applies in relation to Scotland, to be executed within one month rather than three months. This is consistent with the usual practice in Scotland.

Amendment 53, page 92, line 30, leave out “of items” and insert “under paragraph 2(1)(d)”.

This amendment corrects an inconsistency in terminology.

Amendment 54, page 93, line 6, leave out “an item” and insert “something”.

This amendment corrects an inconsistency in terminology.

Amendment 55, page 93, line 7, leave out “item” and insert “thing”.

This amendment corrects an inconsistency in terminology.

Amendment 56, page 93, line 11, leave out “item” and insert “thing”.

This amendment corrects an inconsistency in terminology.

Amendment 57, page 93, line 14, leave out “a DWP” and insert “an”.

This amendment ensures that an authorised investigator does not need to give a person access to something that has been seized if the investigator believes that doing so would prejudice the investigation of any offence (not just a DWP offence).

Amendment 58, page 93, line 15, leave out “a DWP” and insert “an”.

This amendment ensures that an authorised investigator does not need to give a person access to something that has been seized if the investigator believes that doing so would prejudice criminal proceedings relating to any offence (not just a DWP offence).

Amendment 59, page 93, line 15, at end insert—

“(7) Sub-paragraph (8) applies where—

- (a) the power in paragraph 2(1)(d) has been exercised to seize and remove something on the basis that it is evidence of an offence, and
- (b) an authorised investigator considers that the thing may be evidence that is relevant to an investigation of an offence (whether or not the offence mentioned in paragraph (a)) in relation to which another person has functions.

(8) Where this sub-paragraph applies—

- (a) an authorised investigator may transfer the thing to that person,
- (b) where that person considers that the thing may be evidence that is relevant to an investigation in relation to which that person has functions, that person may accept and retain the thing, and
- (c) any provision of an enactment that applies to anything seized or taken away by that person applies to the thing as if it had been seized or taken away by that person for the purposes of the investigation of the relevant offence.

(9) In sub-paragraph (8)(c), “enactment” includes—

- (a) an enactment contained in subordinate legislation within the meaning of the Interpretation Act 1978, and
- (b) an enactment contained in, or in an instrument made under, an Act of the Scottish Parliament.”

This amendment allows an authorised investigator to transfer something seized in the exercise of entry, search and seizure powers in Scotland to another person with functions in relation to an offence to which the thing is relevant.

Amendment 60, page 94, line 13, leave out “7” and insert “10 working”.

This amendment replaces the reference to 7 days with a reference to 10 working days, which is the standard time for complying with a production order in Scotland.

Amendment 61, page 94, line 24, after “records” insert “within paragraph 9B(1)(a)”.

See my explanatory statement for Amendment 63.

Amendment 62, page 95, line 42, after “records” insert “within paragraph 9B(1)(a)”.

See my explanatory statement for Amendment 63.

Amendment 63, page 96, line 7, at end insert—

“Meaning of “items subject to legal privilege”

9A In this Schedule, “items subject to legal privilege” are—

- (a) communications between a professional legal adviser and their client, or
- (b) communications made in connection with or in contemplation of legal proceedings and for the purposes of those proceedings,

which would be protected in legal proceedings from disclosure by virtue of any rule of law relating to the confidentiality of communications.

Meaning of “excluded material”

9B (1) In this Schedule, “excluded material” means—

- (a) personal records which a person has acquired or created in the course of any trade, business, profession or other occupation or for the purposes of any paid or unpaid office and which the person holds in confidence;
- (b) human tissue or tissue fluid which has been taken for the purposes of diagnosis or medical treatment and which a person holds in confidence;
- (c) journalistic material which a person holds in confidence and which consists—
 - (i) of documents, or
 - (ii) of records other than documents.
- (2) A person holds material other than journalistic material in confidence for the purposes of this paragraph if the person holds it subject—
 - (a) to an express or implied undertaking to hold it in confidence, or
 - (b) to a restriction on disclosure or an obligation of secrecy contained in any enactment, whenever passed.
- (3) A person holds journalistic material in confidence for the purposes of this paragraph if—
 - (a) the person holds it subject to such an undertaking, restriction or obligation, and
 - (b) it has been continuously held (by one or more persons) subject to such an undertaking, restriction or obligation since it was first acquired or created for the purposes of journalism.

Meaning of “personal records”

9C In this Schedule, “personal records” means documentary and other records concerning an individual (whether living or dead) who can be identified from them and relating—

- (a) to the person’s physical or mental health,
- (b) to spiritual counselling or assistance given or to be given to the person, or
- (c) to counselling or assistance given or to be given to the person, for the purposes of the person’s personal welfare, by any voluntary organisation or by any individual who—

- (i) by reason of the person’s office or occupation has responsibilities for the person’s personal welfare, or
- (ii) by reason of an order of a court has responsibilities for the person’s supervision.

Meaning of “journalistic material”

- 9D (1) In this Schedule, “journalistic material” means material acquired or created for the purposes of journalism.
- (2) But material is only journalistic material for the purposes of this Schedule if it is in the possession of a person who acquired or created it for the purposes of journalism.
- (3) A person who receives material from someone who intends that the recipient is to use it for the purposes of journalism is to be taken to have acquired it for those purposes.

Meaning of “special procedure material”

- 9E (1) In this Schedule, “special procedure material” means—
 - (a) material to which sub-paragraph (2) applies, and
 - (b) journalistic material, other than excluded material.
- (2) Subject to the following provisions of this paragraph, this sub-paragraph applies to material, other than items subject to legal privilege and excluded material, in the possession of a person who—
 - (a) acquired or created it in the course of any trade, business, profession or other occupation or for the purpose of any paid or unpaid office, and
 - (b) holds it subject—
 - (i) to an express or implied undertaking to hold it in confidence, or
 - (ii) to a restriction or obligation such as is mentioned in paragraph 9B(2)(b).
- (3) Where material is acquired—
 - (a) by an employee from the employee’s employer and in the course of the employee’s employment, or
 - (b) by a company from an associated company,
 it is only special procedure material if it was special procedure material immediately before the acquisition.
- (4) Where material is created by an employee in the course of the employee’s employment, it is only special procedure material if it would have been special procedure material had the employer created it.
- (5) Where material is created by a company on behalf of an associated company, it is only special procedure material if it would have been special procedure material had the associated company created it.
- (6) A company is to be treated as another’s associated company for the purposes of this paragraph if it would be so treated under section 449 of the Corporation Tax Act 2010.

Meaning of “confidential professional material”

9F In this Schedule, “confidential professional material” means material to which paragraph 9E(2) applies.”

This amendment, together with Amendments 61, 62, 64, 65 and 66, would replace references in new Schedule 3ZD to definitions in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 with free-standing definitions. The free-standing definitions are the same as those in the 1984 Act, except that the definition of “items subject to legal privilege” reflects the usual language in relation to legal privilege in Scotland.

Amendment 64, page 96, line 8, at the beginning insert “Other”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 63.

Amendment 65, page 96, leave out lines 12 to 21.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 63.

Amendment 66, page 96, leave out lines 29 and 30.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 63.

Amendment 67, page 96, line 30, at end insert—

“‘working day’ means a day other than—

(a) a Saturday or a Sunday, or

(b) a day which is a bank holiday in Scotland under the Banking and Financial Dealings Act 1971.”—
(Andrew Western.)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 60.

Schedule 5

RECOVERY FROM BANK ACCOUNTS ETC

Amendments made: 68, page 101, leave out line 18 and insert “relevant amount.”

This amendment and Amendment 69 mean that the maximum amount to be deducted under a regular direct deduction order under new Schedule 3ZA (to be inserted into the Social Security Administration Act 1992 by Schedule 5 to the Bill) in relation to any period of one month is to be calculated by reference to the amount the Secretary of State expects to be credited to the account in a month.

Amendment 69, page 101, leave out lines 19 to 22 and insert—

“(4) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (3), the “relevant amount” is the amount that the Secretary of State reasonably expects to be credited to the account in question in (or in respect of) a typical month during the period for which the order will have effect, having regard to all statements given to the Secretary of State in relation to the account (see paragraphs 3(2) and 15(1)).”—(Andrew Western.)

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 68

Schedule 6

DISQUALIFICATION FROM DRIVING

Amendment made: 70, page 114, line 26, at end insert—

“() For the purposes of this paragraph, “driving licence” includes any document by virtue of which a person is authorised under Part 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 to drive a motor vehicle in Great Britain.”—(Andrew Western.)

This amendment means that the definition of “driving licence” in paragraph 5 of Schedule 6 includes any document by virtue of which a person is authorised under Part 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 to drive a motor vehicle in Great Britain.

Third Reading

King’s consent signified.

6.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This Labour Government were elected on a mandate for change—to create more good jobs in every corner of the country, to drive up living standards for working people and to get our vital public services back on their feet. Delivering our plan for change means ensuring that every single pound of taxpayers’ money is wisely spent and goes to those in genuine need. That is what this legislation will help to deliver, with the biggest-ever crackdown on fraud against the public purse.

It is unacceptable that the Conservative Government allowed fraud against the public sector to spiral to £55 billion a year. That includes a staggering £7.4 billion a year of benefit fraud alone. It is unforgivable that they failed to ensure that the Public Sector Fraud Authority was fit

for purpose, or to properly update the DWP’s anti-fraud powers for 14 long years. When we think of all the new ways in which fraudsters and scam artists rip people off, including by using data and technology, that simply beggars belief. Today we say: no more.

Our Bill updates the powers of the Public Sector Fraud Authority so that it can effectively fight fraud across the public sector on behalf of Government Departments and public authorities. It also makes vital upgrades to the DWP’s fraud powers and sets out new powers to investigate fraud, so that for the first time, our serious and organised crime investigators can apply to the court for a warrant to enter and search the premises of suspected fraudsters, and can seize evidence such as computers and phones. There are updated powers to gather information, so that we can compel third parties such as airlines to give us information, and can require it to be delivered electronically, so that we can tackle fraud as quick as possible. Our new eligibility verification measure will enable us to get crucial data from banks and financial institutions to check if people are getting money they are not entitled to, and if they have more savings than the rules allow, or are fraudulently claiming benefits abroad when they should be living in the UK.

The Bill extends financial penalties to people who have fraudulently claimed any type of DWP payment, including grants and loans, not just benefits, and it gives us new powers to get money back from people who can pay but who have repeatedly failed to do so, bringing our powers in line with those of other parts of Government, such as the Child Maintenance Service and HMRC. All this is being done in a fair and proportionate way; the measures are tightly defined in the legislation, and there are strong safeguards and independent oversight, including through annual reports to Parliament and codes of practice, which we will bring forward in Committee in the other place.

I thank the Minister for Transformation and the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, for steering the Bill through its Committee and Report stages, supported by excellent civil servants and House of Commons staff. I thank all members of the Public Bill Committee from right across the House for their detailed questions and thoughtful scrutiny of the Bill. They have done this country a good service, because this Bill provides us with the tools we need to tackle modern fraud in the benefit system and across the public sector, helping to save £1.5 billion over the next five years as part of the DWP’s wider action to save a total of £9.6 billion from benefit fraud and error.

People who work hard and play by the rules, and people who depend on our public services and vital benefits, deserve to have trust and faith in the system, and they are rightly angry when they see people abuse it. Our message is clear: if you knowingly defraud the benefit system or cheat our public services, whether you are a large or small company, a criminal gang or an individual, we will find you; we will stop you; and we will get our money back. This Labour Government will restore trust and fairness in the system and ensure that every pound of public money delivers for the British people and our country. I commend this legislation to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

6.55 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Every penny of taxpayers' money lost to fraud or error is money wasted, so we Conservatives support many of the measures outlined in the Bill, not least those that continue the hard work done by my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions prior to the general election. The Government have a responsibility to ensure that every penny they raise in taxation is spent well. That is fair to taxpayers, who have worked hard to earn that money. When it comes to welfare, at the heart of our system must be the principle that Government support should go only to those for whom it is intended. Every penny that does not undermines the entire system. It erodes public trust and support. That has put support for some of the most vulnerable people in society at risk. That is why, in government, we did the groundwork for the clauses of the Bill that enable banks to help crack down on fraudsters, recognising that while the state should never be able to see what someone spends their money on, it should be able to check whether they are entitled to the money that they are claiming.

The amendments we have tabled to the Bill are constructive, so I am disappointed that the Government have chosen not to support them. Videos from sickfluencers are hard to avoid when searching online about benefits, but rather than helping people to claim something that they may need and should rightly receive, the videos tell people how to game the system. We want taxpayers to get their money back, even if it has already been spent. Why should we tolerate people using social media platforms to help others commit fraud, and to help them cheat the tests that are there to ensure that support goes to those who need it? Why should someone who has committed fraud be able to keep their high-end television or luxury car, just because they spent their ill-gotten gains before the Department got to them? We are clear that both those things should be tackled, but sadly Labour has shown itself to be on the side of the fraudsters.

As I said at the outset, we back the overall purpose of the Bill and much of its content, but I hope that the Secretary of State's colleagues in the other place will take note of the constructive approach we have taken and the arguments made, particularly those made so

articulately by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) today and in Committee. I look forward to seeing the Bill improved before it may become law.

6.58 pm

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

FORENSIC SCIENCE REGULATOR

That the draft Forensic Science Regulator Draft Code of Practice 2025 (Version 2), which was laid before this House on 20 March, be approved.—(*Sir Nic Dakin.*)

Question agreed to.

Business of the House (Today)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and Health Service Commissioner for England (Appointment) not later than one hour after their commencement; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and proceedings may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

ELECTORAL COMMISSION: RE-APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

[Relevant document: Second Report of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, Re-appointment of the Chair of the Electoral Commission, HC 829.]

Ordered,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, praying that His Majesty will re-appoint John Pullinger CB as the Chair of the Electoral Commission with effect from 1 May 2025 for the period ending on 30 April 2029.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and Health Service Commissioner for England

[Relevant document: First Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Appointment of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, HC 781.]

7 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, praying that His Majesty will appoint Paula Sussex CBE to the offices of Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and Health Service Commissioner for England.

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has an important role in holding public service providers to account and achieving justice for complainants. I thank Rebecca Hilsenrath KC, who stepped in as acting ombudsman following Sir Rob Behrens's departure. She provided leadership and stability for the PHSO, ensuring a continued focus on the experience of its service users, while considering how to maximise the impact of the organisation in improving public services for the long term. On behalf of this House, I praise her for her hard work over the past 12 months, and wish her all the best for her future as the PHSO's chief executive officer.

Following the formation of a new Parliament, the process of recruiting a new ombudsman was relaunched in January. I thank the House and the recruitment panel, particularly the chair, Liam Laurence Smyth, for their speed in conducting the recruitment; they made a recommendation to the Prime Minister in March. The Government support Paula Sussex's appointment to the role, as we believe that she has the ability and experience to lead the PHSO, bringing insights from her time in the public and private sectors. In accordance with section 1 of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967, and section 1 of the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993, I commend Paula Sussex to the House for the role of Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and Health Service Commissioner for England.

7.2 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I am pleased to speak in support of this important motion concerning the appointment of the next Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and Health Service Commissioner for England—collectively known as the ombudsman. That office is one of the cornerstones of accountability in our democracy. It exists to ensure that when individuals are let down by Government Departments or the NHS, their voice is heard, their complaints are fairly investigated and, where appropriate, redress is delivered. In short, the ombudsman plays a vital role in protecting the rights of ordinary citizens, especially the most vulnerable among us. I am sure that, if they have not done so already, Members on all sides of the House will at some point refer constituents to the ombudsman—I certainly have.

This appointment comes at a critical moment. Our public services, particularly the NHS, are under real pressure. Complaints relating to delays, miscommunication and administrative failures are unfortunately becoming

more common. In that context, the role of the ombudsman is not just reactive; it must be proactive in identifying systemic failings and recommending improvements to prevent harm before it occurs. We Conservatives have carefully considered the proposed candidate, and believe that she brings a strong track record to the role, a deep understanding of institutional accountability and a proven ability to lead with integrity. It was great to have the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), involved in the selection process.

We must have confidence that the next commissioner can act independently of Government and party politics, guided only by the principle of fairness and the interests of the public.

The effectiveness of this role lies not in its visibility but in its vigilance. The ombudsman must be diligent, thorough and fearless in pursuit of justice, particularly for those who may feel powerless in the face of large institutions. This role is not an easy one. It requires judgment, patience, empathy and a readiness to confront uncomfortable truths. We believe the nominee has those qualities and will serve the public with distinction. We therefore support this motion for the sake of those who rely on these services and for the sake of good government.

7.4 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I echo the Minister in thanking Rebecca Hilsenrath for the work she has done in stepping into an interim role and fulfilling that job with great distinction. I also thank the Prime Minister and the wider Cabinet Office for the speed with which they responded to the recommendation from the interview panel, which I had the great pleasure of sitting on as the representative of the House, as Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

I want to bring two things to the attention of the House. Paula Sussex underwent a pre-appointment hearing by the Committee last week, and the Committee was very impressed with her. She reports to our Committee; we scrutinise the work of the ombudsman. I recused myself from that role for obvious reasons, but I want to assure the House—and this has been echoed by the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden)—that I am convinced we selected the standout candidate in a very competitive and well-qualified field. I think she will fulfil the job with great distinction, use the data available to drive improvements to public service and, as everybody recognises, represent and champion the interests and concerns of our constituents.

7.6 pm

Georgia Gould: I will respond briefly to echo the thanks to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for his role on the panel, which was critical. It is important that this role has cross-party support and that this appointment has the confidence of the House, to ensure that this important role can be fulfilled with rigour and independence, that our citizens always have a voice in public services and that public service providers are accountable to Parliament. I recommend this appointment to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

PETITIONS

Allotments in Wymondham

7.7 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): I rise to present a petition concerning the future of allotments in Wymondham, signed by 391 residents of South Norfolk. These signatures reflect the strength of feeling in the town about the importance of these much-loved growing spaces. The decision by Anglian Water to end the lease of this land risks tearing up decades of community gardening, friendship and pride. It is clear from the response of local people that this is not just about soil and sheds—it is about the social fabric of Wymondham. It is vital that this issue is brought before the House, so that those in positions of power understand what this land means to those who tend it.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of South Norfolk,

Declares that the allotmenters of Wymondham are saddened by the ending of the lease of the land by Anglian Water to Wymondham Town Council, which will result in the loss of allotment plots.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Anglian Water to uphold its corporate responsibilities to local people and areas, including the allotmenters of Wymondham.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003057]

Protection of Primitive Goat Species in the Scottish Borders

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I rise to present this petition from my constituents to the House of Commons, which was put together by the Wild Goat Conservation Group, particularly David Braithwaite and Gail Brown. It calls for the cull of wild goats on Langholm moor and Newcastleton hill to stop. I want to record my thanks to the more than 4,300 people from across the United Kingdom who have signed a similar online petition on this matter and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for his support.

The petition

“Declares that wild goats have been roaming Langholm Moor and Newcastleton Hill for hundreds of years and play an important part in the biodiversity and natural history of the Scottish Borders... Oxygen Conservation who own the land they roam have”

—callously—

“started to cull this ancient animal without...consideration to the historical and emotional significance they carry for the local community... The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make representations to the Scottish Government on their behalf, to encourage them to stop

the cull of wild goats on Langholm Moor and Newcastleton Hill and ensure the survival of this ancient animal in the Scottish Borders by granting them national protected status.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk,

Declares that wild goats have been roaming Langholm Moor and Newcastleton Hill for hundreds of years and play an important part in the biodiversity and natural history of the Scottish Borders; further declares that, despite this, Oxygen Conservation who own the land that they roam have started to cull this ancient animal without any consideration to the historical and emotional significance they carry for the local community; and notes that over 4,300 people have signed a similar petition to the Scottish Parliament on this issue.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make representations to the Scottish Government on their behalf, to encourage them to stop the cull of wild goats on Langholm Moor and Newcastleton Hill and ensure the survival of this ancient animal in the Scottish Borders by granting them national protected status.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003064]

The Future of Acoustic Couch, Bracknell

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The Acoustic Couch is a fantastic, inclusive community-run grassroots music venue in the heart of Bracknell. Grassroots music venues play a huge role in communities across the country but have faced substantial difficulties in recent years, and I know the Government recognise the need to protect them.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Bracknell and supporters of the Acoustic Couch,

Declares that the Acoustic Couch is a community-run grassroots music venue that contributes richly to the culture and economy of Bracknell; further declares that the current venue which houses the Acoustic Couch is under a carpark that is no longer structurally sound, and will therefore be closed from the end of 2025; notes that Bracknell Forest Council has been working with the Acoustic Couch to identify possible alternative venues, but an affordable and accessible location has yet to be identified; and further declares that grassroots music venues across the country have faced substantial difficulties in recent years, and recognises the need to protect their invaluable contribution to our shared music heritage.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider what support can be made available to secure the future of the Acoustic Couch in Bracknell.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003065]

River Thames: Unauthorised Mooring

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Sir Nicholas Dakin.*)

7.11 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): No issue in my constituency demonstrates more the inertia and failure of the previous political leadership than the problem of overstayed, wrecked and abandoned boats that have been left to proliferate along the banks of the Thames for the last decade. I am pleased to have the opportunity today to bring this issue to the attention of the House and the Minister.

Esher and Walton is a river community. The Thames forms our boundary with London; its waters have brought Vikings to raid Walton and kings to live in Hampton Court, and it is loved by my constituents. We have rowing clubs in Molesey and Walton that generate home-grown Olympians, the Ajax and Viking sea scouts, and wild swimming groups. We have riverside businesses that contribute to our local economy and provide residents and tourists with access to the most famous river in our land. All these activities have been impacted by the sunken, wrecked and abandoned boats, alongside unlicensed overstay boats. They line the entire length of my constituency, from the Dittons through Molesey and down into Walton-on-Thames.

There are wrecked vessels, half sunk and rusting, on the banks opposite Hampton Court Palace, visible to the hundreds of thousands of tourists who visit. Next door, there are overstay boats which one constituent described as a “small village”; it is Dickensian. The overstay boats are almost always unregistered. They turn up, moor, and then stay for months, sometimes years. In addition to this impunity, they generate litter and waste. Some boats apparently operate as Airbnbs. Others have erected fences: they have fenced off public land on the towpath, put up “Keep out” and “Private” signs, and intimidated residents. Stretches of land—our riverbank, enjoyed for centuries by my constituents—have become no-go areas characterised by drug use and antisocial behaviour.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for introducing this debate. I spoke to her beforehand to hear her thoughts on what she hopes to achieve. I represent a constituency that is equally as nice as hers, and I can well understand the desire to stay and take advantage of the lovely locations on the River Thames. However, the people she describes are taking advantage and preventing others from having enjoyment that is meant for all. Does she agree that we must have regulations in place that allow for reasonable enjoyment, without people taking advantage?

Monica Harding: The hon. Gentleman makes the main point that I want to make today: I will speak about regulations and who is accountable.

One resident told me:

“In the past few years, my neighbours and I have been subjected to constant harassment, including threats of physical harm, theft of property, firing of catapults, fly-tipping, dog fouling and antisocial behaviour.”

That is profoundly unfair on my constituents. Residents who pay their taxes have lost the river as they know it.

Rowing clubs and boat hire and paddle board companies are unable to launch. Residents with boats who want to take them out and moor alongside riverside restaurants and cafés are unable to do so. The Molesey regatta, which has been a fixture of my community since 1867 and in which I declare an interest as an honorary president, has been required to alter the course of its race.

In October, a single clean-up of one stretch of riverbank populated by these boats yielded more than 1 tonne of waste. The Environment Agency has failed to get to grips with the situation over a period of years, meaning that the number of such boats in Elmbridge has risen steadily. At the last count, the tally was approaching 250.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): In Maidenhead, the local authority and generous individuals have taken matters into their own hands and have been able to get rid of many sunken boats along our stretch of the Thames. The EA has regarded owners of land as being responsible, but lots of riverbank owners are not known—we do not know who lots of the mooring owners are—and that causes significant delays and costs. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time for the Environment Agency to step up and take responsibly? It should be supporting our community, rather than trying to pass on responsibility to unknown landowners.

Monica Harding: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In my constituency, the sense of frustration and disappointment with the Environment Agency is palpable. When a highly visible problem goes unaddressed year after year, as it has for a decade, and when a situation is allowed to deteriorate, it creates a deep sense of disappointment and frustration, and it undermines the faith that people have in the Government to deal with the things that affect people’s day-to-day lives.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I recognise the frustrations and problems that my hon. Friend is having getting the relevant supervisory authorities to pay heed. In Brecon, we have a similar issue: the canal might run dry following Welsh Water’s decision to start charging the Canal & River Trust for the water it extracts, yet none of the relevant authorities have responded to our request for a meeting. Does my hon. Friend agree that in instances like that, it would be helpful for the Minister whose Department is implicated to pay attention? They should come to Brecon and help us to find a solution.

Monica Harding: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, but I would like the Minister to come to Esher and Walton first, although I appreciate his desire for her to visit his constituency as well.

My predecessor in Esher and Walton, a previous Deputy Prime Minister, brought the former Environment Secretary to see the problem for herself. They committed to the permanent removal of these boats, but nothing happened: yet another broken Conservative promise. Either my predecessor was uninterested or he was ineffective. Like many, I had hope that the new Government would bring change. I wrote to the newly appointed Secretary of State and the chief executive of the Environment Agency as soon as I was elected, asking for action. At that point, there were 180 boats. I was pleased with the Minister’s reply, which acknowledged that the EA, as

[*Monica Harding*]

the navigation authority along the non-tidal Thames, was committed to managing the situation and to delivering a detailed action plan laying out clear steps for enforcement. I was assured that EA officials wished to regain the trust of the community.

As a result of that letter, the EA towed away two of the largest and longest staying boats during an enforcement day—hooray! Elmbridge borough council housing department joined the operation and modelled a joined-up approach with the police and the Environment Agency to respond to any homelessness issues. My local council is ready and willing to play its part, but it is frustrated that the EA is not playing its part.

The enforcement success in the autumn should have marked the beginning of renewed energy and action, with a long-term plan to finally get to grips with the problem. Instead, it was followed up with almost nothing, and the situation has since deteriorated.

That is despite months and months of advocacy and regular meetings with the EA, in which I have heard again and again about its intention to clear the boats. It has consistently overpromised and underdelivered.

I was promised a survey of abandoned vessels before comprehensive removals and a long-term strategic enforcement plan as a prelude to making progress in the spring. Well, it is spring now, but both documents were endlessly delayed. Last month, the EA finally produced the survey, but it was presented so confusingly that the council found it almost useless, and I am now told that the EA cannot resource any of it. When the plan came, it was manifestly insufficient.

In today's letter, the Minister referenced that document—the Thames waterways compliance and enforcement plan for Elmbridge—which I have read. It runs for 10 pages and makes one minor mention of taking action to reduce the number of unauthorised and unregistered boats, which should have been the central focus. As one of its tactical objectives, the plan promises to develop a clear and tactical plan. We have yet another promise, but no plan.

All in all, the document marked a dramatic roll-back of previous ambitions. It has an almost complete lack of measurable targets, metrics and accountability mechanisms. In other words, there is no way to assess the progress of the EA in delivering outcomes against agreed objectives or on key concerns, such as the number of boats removed, the number of registration offences or the rubbish cleared. In fact, at our last meeting, the area manager suggested that the problem had become so big that it was too expensive to fix.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for giving way—rivers have two banks, and we share one of them. I congratulate Spelthorne borough council, the EA and the police on doing such a good job on the Spelthorne side. I offer my support to the hon. Member in her endeavour to make her side of the river better. If we can give any assistance, we will of course do so.

Monica Harding: I am grateful to my constituency neighbour. I would love to work with him, the Environment Agency, our relevant borough councils and the police in order to fix this problem.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con):

I thank the hon. Lady for giving way in such an important debate. I entirely share her frustrations about progress with these boats. This issue affects many of my constituents not just in Weybridge, but across my constituency. I am sure that she will come on to this point. Given the nature of rivers, does she agree that a positive step forward would be working with me, my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds) and the Minister to try to get a group together so that rather than pushing the boats on, we can tackle the issue once and for all?

Monica Harding: I thank the hon. Member, my constituency neighbour, for that point. I have no intention at all of pushing the boats down to his constituency: I want them gone. There can be nothing more powerful for our constituents than us working across parties in order to fix this problem.

The BBC picked up on this story this morning. The EA gave a statement to BBC Radio Surrey in which it claimed to be taking

“firm, lawful and proportionate action”.

That is manifestly not the case: the action is not firm or proportionate. It also said that the current situation highlights the need for a “more sustainable, systemic response” and pledged a “longer-term approach”. This is the same hot air that we have heard for years and years, waffling on about the need for long-term plans while the situation deteriorates.

All in all, this is a sad indictment of the poverty of ambition, application and competence in a body charged by taxpayers with protecting our waterways. Indeed, it is hard to overstate the disappointment of my constituents at the seeming inability of the Environment Agency to deliver results, even against objectives that it or the Secretary of State has set. This is the endless cycle: the most basic promises made to residents, the council or me are jettisoned after months of prevarication; the goals that remain are without measurement or accountability.

I worry from the Minister's letter to me this afternoon that, regrettably, nothing will change, apart from her very kind ask of the Environment Agency to review its enforcement approach and her commitment to strengthening the EA's approach. I am keen to hear how she intends to follow up on those points. I was deeply frustrated that much of the letter repeated what I, my residents and the council have been hearing from the EA for months and years: promises of new plans and more joined-up working, and recognition of past disappointments and the need for change. The Environment Agency says that it wants to regain the trust of my constituents. That trust is at rock bottom. What is needed now is far greater oversight—ministerial if necessary—and accountability against specific and deliverable goals.

I recently attended a public meeting with residents of Hurst Park and Molesey on a Friday night that was packed to the rafters with constituents deeply upset and justifiably angry with the situation. The essence of what people call broken Britain is the sense that the public realm is incapable of solving problems, even the most egregious and obvious ones—those that people and businesses see and feel every single day. The Prime Minister and members of the Government have spoken

repeatedly about the need to rebuild trust in the state, rebuild its capacity, and show the people that systems can work and achieve things. Something that my residents and I have found particularly frustrating is the difficulty of attaching any accountability at all to anyone at any point, despite failure after failure. A failure to act deprives these people who I am privileged to represent—those who play by the rules and pay for public services—of the land, peace and natural beauty that they have always enjoyed.

I ask the Minister to give this matter her personal attention, and to work with me to solve it as a matter of priority. I would like her to work with me to show the people of Esher and Walton that good politics makes things better. Boats listed by the Environment Agency as wrecked or abandoned can, and should, be cleared immediately. Doing so quickly and forcefully, rather than piecemeal, removes one of the permanent risks of those boats—namely, that a change in river conditions could dislodge vessels and transform them into immediate hazards. Clearing overstayed boats requires taking legal steps, and it is vital that this work is consistently and properly resourced. Taking a start-and-stop approach is not an option, because many enforcement mechanisms unlocked by serving initial notices on boats must be completed within a certain period of time. Letting opportunities disappear sets everything back to square one.

The local police and the local council are ready and eager to help, and have put resources aside to do their part. As such, will the Minister commit personally to driving forward meaningful action on this issue through the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; to providing the necessary energy and resources; and to giving me a point of contact with officials in her department to co-ordinate our work? Will she also commit to meeting me, either in this place or in my constituency—where the problem can be seen and believed—to discuss the progress that we can make together? The problem of overstayed and sunken boats should not be intractable; everyone can see the problem, and the solution is obvious. It is time to show that collectively, we can deliver.

7.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) on securing this important debate, and welcome the contributions from the hon. Members for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) and for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) as well. In an Adjournment debate, it is very nice to see cross-party working on an issue of local importance. *[Interruption.]* I also thank the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds).

David Chadwick: The Minister will have heard the points we have made about the lack of supervisory authorities. Will she write to the Welsh Minister responsible and ask him to look into the case of the Brecon canal?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Gentleman is very quick on his feet. I call the Minister.

Emma Hardy: Obviously, water is a devolved matter. I do not want to get into an issue for which power is devolved, or I would be instructing a Welsh Minister about what they should or should not be doing. I encourage the hon. Member to write back to the Welsh Minister, and maybe copy in the Secretary of State for Wales. That might be one way forward, rather than a Minister in this place being seen to tell a Minister in a different Government what they should or should not be doing. That would be stretching the confines of this debate, to which I will now return.

We have heard much this evening about the benefits that our rivers and canals bring to so many people in our constituencies—benefits that have been very eloquently articulated by hon. Members. We have heard about the Vikings, about Olympians and about how important waterways are to everyone in our areas. I was pleased to hear about the enforcement success in the autumn, but obviously disappointed to hear that progress has not been what it should have been. I will come on to that issue later.

Our inland waterways are an asset to our country. They are important to our national heritage and provide many public benefits—people live on them, enjoy being by them and use them for leisure and recreation, as well as their historical value. They form an important part of our natural environment by providing green corridors along which biodiversity can flourish, as well as contributing to the growth of local economies, such as through domestic tourism. We have heard quite a lot about that this evening.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton has eloquently spoken of the beauty and tranquillity of the river in her constituency, and it is indeed one of our most majestic rivers as it winds its way along. Our navigation authorities have an important role to play into the future, and I pay tribute to them all as they maintain our waterways for the benefit of all users. I pay tribute to their staff, who deal with many varied situations on a daily basis, sometimes in difficult circumstances. Those authorities will help to ensure that a significant element of our nation's key infrastructure is resilient to climate change, and they will help us to meet our net zero targets through sustainable transport and energy generation. They will also contribute to water security through flood mitigation measures and water transfers.

The hon. Member has spoken in detail about overstayed boats in Elmbridge and about boats that are illegally moored or derelict, abandoned or sunk. She has drawn particular attention to the adverse impacts that that is having on the use and enjoyment of the river by other waterway users, including those walking along the Thames path. I was concerned to hear accounts of antisocial behaviour and abuse directed at people trying to enjoy the riverways. She has also described her interactions with the Environment Agency as the navigation authority for the non-tidal River Thames and with other local authorities in the area in seeking to find a satisfactory resolution. I was pleased to hear the comments about the willingness of the local council and the police to work together on this issue.

I recognise the seriousness of the issues in Elmbridge and neighbouring constituencies, the understandable strength of feeling locally and the need for co-ordinated action to address them. I assure the hon. Member that the Environment Agency, which I have spoken to, also

[Emma Hardy]

understands that and is looking to develop specific actions towards resolutions. I note the point she made about it having a deliverable plan and being seen to be taking action.

In fairness, let me mention the wider context in which the Environment Agency is working when it comes to enforcement. Any enforcement has to be within the law and careful and proportionate. It has discretionary landowner powers, not statutory duties, creating limitations for action on private land and where enforcement would cause disproportionate harm.

Dr Ben Spencer: I have had countless meetings with the EA linked with Elmbridge and in trying to deal with this problem, particularly in Desborough cut and Weybridge. Does the Minister think that the EA has sufficient powers in statute to be able to tackle this issue? She just mentioned discretionary powers. Do we need to change the law so that this can be dealt with once and for all?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his helpful intervention. I am informed by the Environment Agency that it does have the powers, but I want to take that point away and question the EA about that. Is it a question of needing different powers, or are the powers there through the council and perhaps the police working together?

Monica Harding: I have brought up those points with the Environment Agency and the council. They appear to have the statutory powers to act. Whether they have the will and resourcing to do it is the sticking point.

Emma Hardy: I hope to come on to address some of the things that the EA wants to do. Where a boat is a home, especially in cases of potential vulnerability, the Environment Agency needs to work with local housing and safeguarding teams to assess welfare concerns. That is why it is so important—I welcome the hon. Lady's comments on this—that the council is willing to work together. The question is about whether the powers are available to remove the boat, but if there is a risk of people becoming homeless, the situation becomes more complicated.

Monica Harding: I thank the Minister for giving way again. As I described, when the two largest overstayed boats that had occupants were removed, Elmbridge borough council was there providing support for those people. The police were also there. There was no problem with the manoeuvres that took place on that day.

Emma Hardy: I am really pleased to hear that. I was also pleased when the hon. Lady mentioned that in her speech as an effective example of agencies working together to achieve the same aim. The Environment Agency must use its resources to ensure effective enforcement along the entire 144 mile length of the river—the point has been made about not wanting to move a problem somewhere else—where similar pressures exist, balancing cost and benefit against other priorities. When a removal is necessary, it must be carried out within the safety parameters of the river, and when the river is flowing fast, the removal may be temporarily suspended.

I completely accept the point made this evening that the Environment Agency's progress in taking appropriate action is not as fast as the hon. Lady would like it to be, but it is none the less positive, and looks to the long term rather than a series of short-term measures. The agency has deployed time, staff resources and financial investment in Elmbridge, although, as I have said, I recognise that it has not done so with the speed that the hon. Lady would like. It has used specialist officers, legal teams and contractors, with more than £150,000 spent in 2024-25 on enforcement operations, ongoing legal action and vessel removals in the Elmbridge area. Several derelict or sunken vessels have been removed between Hampton Court and Shepperton, and legal proceedings continue following a court ruling covering part of the Elmbridge bank downstream of Sunbury Lock, which is being appealed against.

Trespass notices have been issued where necessary, and advice has been given to boaters on registration, conduct and waste responsibilities—the hon. Lady gave some examples of awful behaviour, including littering—and the Environment Agency has also removed boater waste accumulations from agency and local authority land. On 1 April it published a strategic framework for enforcement throughout the 144 mile stretch of the river, and it tells me that it has developed an Elmbridge-specific compliance and enforcement plan that has been shared with local partners for the purpose of their input.

However, in the light of the concerns raised by the hon. Lady and her constituents, and by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), the agency is developing a longer-term land management strategy to reduce reliance on enforcement and create more sustainable outcomes instead. It includes the feasibility of additional lawful mooring agreements for registered boaters, supporting local authority duties for homelessness and housing, and biodiversity enhancements to deter trespass in sensitive areas. The agency will be strengthening collaboration with Elmbridge borough council, Surrey police and community partners on necessary enforcement actions, as well as continuing current enforcement deployments over the coming months. In a wider context, it is certainly true that the legislative landscape surrounding navigation management is complex, and that this is a largely historical legacy. With the changing use of waterways over time, new challenges have emerged in relation to, for instance, residential mooring, and they should be taken into account in the shaping of future regulation and planning.

We heard a helpful suggestion about the possibility of Members forming a group to discuss this matter. If such a group were to be convened and if I were to be invited to join it, I would be happy to attend a meeting to discuss what more can be done in this regard.

I hope I have reassured the Members who have attended this debate that we as a Government greatly value our inland waterways and the work that the navigation authorities do to bring so many benefits to so many people. I hope I have also reassured them that the Environment Agency is determined to ensure that its approach to enforcement is fair and proportionate, and will deliver tangible, lasting outcomes where the impact is most acute.

Question put and agreed to.

7.37 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 29 April 2025

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

Criminal Injuries Compensation

9.30 am

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered compensation for criminal injuries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Dr Morrison. At the outset, I thank the members of the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to allocate this debate and all hon. Members, across parties, who supported the application. I also thank those constituents and members of the public who have been in touch in advance of the debate. Criminal injuries are, by their nature, not easy matters to discuss, so I am grateful to all the people who took the time to recount their experiences.

I am also grateful to all the Members present today, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who has already done much in this and the previous Parliament to highlight some of the problems that we will talk about in this debate. It is also good to see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his place. I should make it clear that, I will be talking about the criminal injuries compensation scheme as it operates in Great Britain, but I am aware that different arrangements apply in Northern Ireland, and I am glad that that perspective will be represented today.

It is also important at this early stage to pay tribute to the staff of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. Nothing in the opening of this debate is intended as a criticism of them. They work within parameters that are broadly set by us in Parliament, and with staffing numbers that have fallen by 19% since the current iteration of the scheme was introduced in 2012. The civil service people survey reveals that they take pride and find purpose in their jobs, and I am grateful to them.

The question of how the victims of serious physical and mental criminal injury may be fairly compensated has occupied this House for many decades. We are, to the month, at the 60th anniversary of the introduction for the first full year of the original, non-statutory scheme, which was introduced in recognition of the fact that there will always be cases in which the perpetrators of serious violence cannot be identified or awards cannot be recovered from their assets or incomes.

In preparation for this debate, I was delighted to learn of a local connection: the guiding and determined force behind the original scheme was the Birmingham magistrate and first secretary of the Howard League for Penal Reform, Margery Fry, who up to her death was a tireless campaigner for better support for the victims of crime and for the principle that perpetrators must,

wherever possible, pay the cost of restitution. Those are principles that I am sure Members on both sides of the House will endorse today.

However, there is another, unhappy point of emerging agreement on the criminal injuries compensation scheme: it does not adequately serve the people it is meant to aid. As the Victims' Commissioner put it in 2019, victims of violent crime reported

"delays, uncertainty about next steps and poor communication. To many, fairly or unfairly, the Scheme seemed calculated to frustrate and alienate."

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for tabling an incredibly important debate. I came upon this issue recently in dealing with the case of a 10-year-old boy in my constituency who was shot in a quiet residential street. It has taken five years to get him compensated for the injuries that he suffered, which will be lifelong. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about the sheer length of time that it takes to get victims compensated, the bureaucratic and sometimes impersonal approach, and the inadequacy of the sums being received by people, particularly children, who have received lifelong injury?

Laurence Turner: The hon. Member raises what sounds like a truly shocking case. All my sympathies are with that child and his family. I agree wholeheartedly with the point she makes about timelines and the nature of communication through the scheme, which I—and, I am sure, other Members—will come on to in the course of this debate.

At the time, the Victims' Commissioner further recommended that the Ministry of Justice

"examine the Scheme with a view to making it simpler and accessible to victims wishing to apply on their own behalf, reducing the reliance on legal representatives."

Also in the last Parliament, the all-party parliamentary group for adult survivors of child sexual abuse reported that "almost all survivors" who contributed to its inquiry "had a negative experience of applying to CICA for compensation."

I recognise that some progress has been made in the last six years, which must be welcomed. The last Government retrospectively removed the "under the same roof" rule for crimes committed between 1964 and 1979. It had long been recognised that the rule prevented the awarding of fair compensation to victims of historical domestic abuse and childhood sexual abuse during that period. Progress has also been made more recently on reducing the paper-bound nature of the scheme.

However, we cannot reassure ourselves that the scheme is in good health. As has been said, victims of violent crime can face long delays before they access compensation. For residents in Birmingham, the average time between application and award is still more than a year. That average can be dragged upwards by the most complex cases, but even apparently simple cases can take many months to resolve. Applicants to the scheme are not effectively signposted to wider support or assisted to navigate the processes for accessing services, such as the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder through the NHS.

The reasoning that underpins the tariff system is hard to understand, and the apparently arbitrary limits to the scheme can produce outcomes that are, to the

[Laurence Turner]

layperson's eye, perverse. The two-year normal claim limit is out of line with the three-year limit for civil claims for injury.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is totally inconsistent to have a time limit of three years for ordinary personal injury claims, but a time limit of only two years for Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority claims? There is a reason why there are time limits—memories fade and evidence becomes less reliable—but does he agree that there should be consistency here?

Laurence Turner: My hon. Friend is very learned and experienced in these matters, and I wholeheartedly agree. The discrepancy is hard to explain, especially as the pre-1996 non-statutory scheme explicitly aligned the criminal injuries time limit with that for civil claims.

There is some evidence that victims who have legal representation often receive greater compensation than they would have done had they acted alone. That is not a desirable outcome, especially when people with more limited means are more likely to become the victims of crime. The scheme's tariff has not been updated since 2012, and its upper and lower bounds had been frozen for many years before that, despite inflation. Indeed, the lowest tariff of £1,000 has remained frozen since 1992—a real-terms erosion of 54%.

The process can feel cold and impersonal. As one member of the public with recent experience of the scheme who wrote to me in advance of this debate put it, the lack of “timelines or guidelines” means that

“victims are continually left in limbo and retraumatised by a process that is meant to help.”

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for the way he is setting out the problems with the scheme, which is something of a Cinderella service. As he said, the tariffs have not changed, and the upper limit has not changed for almost 30 years. What gives away the situation even more is the fact that, although the average sum awarded in the last year is about £8,000, the amount increased sixfold on appeal. That, and the fact that only 3% of injured victims of crime actually receive compensation, suggests that there are things wrong with the scheme.

Laurence Turner: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Justice Committee, makes an important point. We must also consider the number of victims of crime who are so exhausted by the process that they choose not to appeal, even though they may have grounds to do so. His scrutiny in this area is very welcome.

Changes made to the scheme have an unhappy history in this House. Some Members may recall the very contentious changes made to it in 2012, with the express intent of reducing expenditure by between £40 million and £60 million a year. At the time, in the face of sustained scrutiny, including from Members on the then Government Benches, the Minister of the day, the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant), announced:

“a hardship fund of £500,000 per year which will provide relief from hardship for very low-paid workers in England and Wales who are temporarily unable to work as a result of being a victim of a crime of violence.” —[*Official Report*, 27 November 2012; Vol. , c. 14WS.]

That concession secured support for the relevant secondary legislation. The fund is still in existence, but its criteria are too tightly drawn. An applicant must be paid no more than £5,700 a year, the equivalent of statutory sick pay, and they must apply to seek it not within two years of an injury, but within two months of an injury, in order to qualify.

Far from the fund supporting low-paid victims of crime by £500,000 a year, the Ministry of Justice told me recently that only £4,100 has ever been paid out of it, and no payments at all were made in the seven years to 2023-24. I suspect that the very few workers who were eligible to apply were unaware that it exists. The hardship fund is a dead letter; it would be better to scrap it than to claim that special support is available to low-paid workers when, in practice, it is not.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): My hon. Friend refers to low-paid workers; we know that retail staff are among the victims who experience a really shocking amount of violent crime within the workplace. Will he join me in paying tribute to the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers for the work it is doing to ensure that its members who are victims of violent crime in the workplace can access the CICA scheme?

Laurence Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I agree with her. USDAW's Freedom From Fear campaign, which has been running for many years and covers a number of important issues, including the importance of fair access to compensation, is to be welcomed, and USDAW should be congratulated on the changes that it has already secured in this House.

Another high-profile change was the tightening of the criteria, so that the scheme only applied to injuries caused by deliberate violence inflicted by a person. That change excluded most dangerous dog attacks, and in practice compensation for such attacks can only be secured if it can be shown that a dog was directed to attack by its owner. It seems to me a serious flaw that a child or postal worker might be mauled by a dog and left with life-changing injuries, and the keeping of that dog may itself be an offence under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, but there would be no route for the victim to claim compensation, especially if the owner of the dog cannot be identified.

The Communication Workers Union continues to campaign on this issue; ahead of this debate, it drew attention to figures showing that each year 200 Royal Mail workers lose a finger or part of a finger after a dog attack. I encourage Ministers to look again at this issue, especially in light of the growing number of animals belonging to new, and now-banned, breeds such as the XL bully since 2012.

As has already been said, compensation for criminal injuries is an important issue for workers in public-facing roles more generally, and I am grateful to USDAW, GMB and Unison, as well as the CWU, for their work to draw attention to the risk of violent assault to their members. And for the avoidance of doubt, I draw attention to the support provided to my constituency party by GMB and Unison.

The changes to the scheme that I have referred to were made under the previous Government, but I wish to press the Minister on two further and more recent points. First, shortly before Easter the Ministry of Justice published its response to the consultations undertaken between 2020 and 2023. In that response, the MOJ said that there would be no immediate changes to the scheme, in part because of resource constraints.

The decision not to accept recommendation 18 of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has understandably caused disappointment and reignited wider criticism of the scheme. The Government cited two factors: protection of universality, which means treating all applicants in the same way, and cost. If the scheme is not to be amended to provide different criteria for victims of childhood sexual abuse, what other steps will the Ministry now take, such as the provision of enhanced guidelines on the circumstances under which an out-of-time application would be accepted, taking into account our modern understanding of the lifelong effects of this horrendous crime?

On resourcing, will the Minister accept that although the nature of the scheme means that expenditure varies year on year, the cost of compensation has actually fallen on average—that is the trend—after inflation is taken into account. Although the number of applications has risen, that appears to have been driven by an increased number of ineligible claimants. The scheme overall costs less than it did before 2012—less in cash terms, I believe, than under the pre-statutory scheme—and, as mentioned, CICA's headcount has fallen.

Reforms are needed, but I am concerned that we seem to be talking again about protecting the sustainability of the scheme. I know the Minister has a strong personal commitment to this issue and to enhancing support for victims of crime more generally. I hope she will be able to reassure us that any future reforms of CICA will seek to improve victim support, including in its compensation elements.

Our constituents expect us to bring our knowledge, our judgment and the benefit of our experiences to this place. Like some other Members of this House, my interest in this matter arises partly through my direct experience of the scheme. By their nature, such matters are difficult to talk about; if I stumble, I ask for Members' patience.

Some six years ago I was on the wrong end of an attempted robbery. I was left concussed, my arm was dislocated and one of the joints in my right hand was shattered. I was physically unable to leave the house for a month, and I had a frozen shoulder for a year. There are long-term physical effects: I have premature arthritis and permanent loss of movement on my right-hand side. By any common-sense judgment they are serious and blameless injuries, arising from violence, but with one minor exception: annex E of the scheme does not recognise them as such.

There was—and is—also a psychological effect. An event of that kind changes a person. I am changed in ways that I still find difficult to talk about. I have learned that recovery is not some happy state that is one day achieved: it is a process that follows its own timetable at an uneven pace, towards a destination that can never be fully reached. In my case, the perpetrators were never identified. I incurred substantial costs because the assault

happened almost on my doorstep. Although I would be unlikely to recognise the perpetrators, they would have recognised me.

At the conclusion of the investigation, the police referred me to the criminal injuries compensation scheme. My experience of the scheme is typical of the delays and impersonal contact that have already been described, and does not require repeating. What I will say is that when a person is compelled to relive their experiences, within a system that they feel they have to fight against, the original injustice is continually visited anew.

At the conclusion of the process I received the lowest tariff award of £1,000. That was given because there was some post-surgical scarring—the only injury that qualified under the scheme. In truth, that aspect was the least consequential effect of the assault. The criteria felt—and still feel—arbitrary. I received an apologetic letter from one of the administrators of the scheme, and I remain grateful for that human touch. The award did not, as it does not for many, cover the costs of travel and accommodation for surgery or physiotherapy—but, three years on from the assault, I was just glad to have some official recognition and did not pursue an appeal.

I do not say any of this to attract attention or sympathy, or to suggest that my experience was in any way exceptional. The point is that it was not. Like many victims of crime, my hope now is that some good might come from adverse experience. In that respect, I agree with the Minister when she wrote:

“The clear message to me is that we need change, and I will be considering how Government can best provide the support that victims need and deserve.”

I hope we will hear more about those plans today.

I am encouraged by the Prime Minister's clear and personal statement of support for victims of crime in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North last week. I am glad to have the opportunity next Tuesday to introduce to the House a ten-minute rule Bill that aims to secure the wholesale review of CICA and the scheme that the Victims' Commissioner called for in 2019. The victims of violent crime deserve better, and I hope the Bill will secure cross-party support.

9.50 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) for setting the scene. Nothing tells a story better than when it is a personal one, as his was, and he did it very well. It is never easy for someone to tell their own story, but well done to him.

This is an important debate. As the hon. Member said at the beginning, the system in Northern Ireland is very different from that in England, Scotland and Wales, but the principle of what the scheme is trying to achieve is the same. I thank him for bringing this issue to Westminster Hall for debate. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in her place, and I very much look forward to her reply to all the questions we will be asking her.

There is no excuse in today's society for crime, especially violent crime, which can devastate lives both physically and mentally. We cannot always see the impact of crimes on somebody when we look at them, because some people hold their emotions in check internally. We often feel that we hear horrific stories every day of

[Jim Shannon]

people who have fallen victim to violent crime. As the hon. Member stated, many will be aware that the legislation for Northern Ireland is slightly different from that for the rest of the United Kingdom. It would be great to add a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate, and I wish to do so.

The scheme provides compensation to victims and, in addition, to the families of loved ones who have since passed away due to the impact of violent crime. The hon. Member talked about the scheme that applies in England, Scotland and Wales; in Northern Ireland we have slightly different credentials for the scheme. According to the latest figures available, roughly 12,000 to 15,000 applications for criminal injuries compensation are received annually in Northern Ireland, so the number of people who go through the process every year is quite large. Historically, around 60% of those claims have been successful, while 40% were declined due to not meeting the eligibility criteria.

It is important to note that victims are often unaware of the grounds on which they can apply. With this speech I wish to raise awareness and ensure that those who do not know their rights or what they can do are able to apply as a result. One of the big issues is that the perpetrator does not actually have to be charged with anything for someone to be able to claim compensation. That is important to note. If someone feels threatened or has been abused visually, even if not physically, a compensation system is in place. Applications can still be made two years after the incident occurred, provided it was not reasonable for an application to be made at the time. It is important to record these elements of the system.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the issue of entitlement, does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that those who feel badly affected by some abuse or attack know and understand the system, but at the same time the system has to bear down on the very small number of people who abuse the system, in deference to those who are quite entitled to and should seek compensation because of the attacks they have suffered?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the point that some people abuse the system. I have to say that I have not come across any, to be fair, so I cannot make a statement about that, but it is in the very nature of any system that there are always those who try to take advantage of it.

There have been ongoing concerns about and issues with the compensation scheme as it is. Many state that there is a complete lack of awareness about the scheme in general, and people are unaware that something like it even exists. I suppose my main question to the Minister is: what will be done to highlight the system to those who qualify, and to encourage those who should apply to do just that? This has to be addressed through raising awareness—“Know your rights” is how I would put it. People who have gone through harm are deserving of something. For those who have lost a loved one as a result of violent crime, no amount of money will take that pain away, but they are deserving, based on the trauma they have experienced.

Many victims may just wish for it all to go away, and I suspect that some may not want to pursue a claim even if they qualify. One of the big issues is that the process is undoubtedly traumatic for many. Having to relive their experience during an application can be retraumatising, as they have to live through the horror—the memories, the trauma and the pain—twice.

I want to talk about sexual or domestic violence crimes, and those reliving the passing of a loved one. In 2023, it was ruled that victims of non-touching sexual abuse are eligible for compensation under the CICS. Many people—especially young people—have fallen victim to that crime and have gone on to feel its effects for years and years. It is inconceivable how those young people deal with what happened to them. I look to the Minister for clarity. She has always been positive in her answers to those who have raised these matters, and I know she is very much on top of this subject, so I look forward to her response. The CICS applies in such cases in England, Scotland and Wales, so will the Minister kindly see whether, through the Department of Justice, our legislation in Northern Ireland can be strengthened along the same lines?

It is a sad reality that so many people are victims of crime that leaves a devastating impact, physically and mentally. The effects are the same for people of all ages. No amount of money can bring back a loved one or remove the mental torment of the past, but something can be done to ease the burden on so many. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s commitment to doing just that—it was never in doubt, by the way, but I look forward to her confirming that—not just here in England but across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

9.57 am

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner)—I am proud to say that he truly is a friend—laid out perfectly the historical context in which the criminal injuries compensation scheme was devised and the economic, moral and financial case for change, given that it has failed to meet its objectives. I am one of the co-sponsors of this debate, and I want to support my hon. Friend’s core argument and lay out an aspect of the scheme that cannot be understood by those for whom it is an abstract point of law or procedure.

Rape and sexual assault have a conviction rate of a pathetic 1.5% or so, so vanishingly few victims ever get justice through the courts. Of course we need to use every lever of Government to bring down the number of offences and drive up the number of perpetrators convicted, but to focus entirely on the criminal justice element is to miss the point when it comes to supporting victims. CICA provides a twofold civil remedy. First, it provides a level of financial restitution for the experience. Secondly, and most importantly, it is state recognition of the person’s experience as a blameless victim of violent crime. That vindication is an important part of the process of closure for people who have been victims of the most hideous crimes, including where a perpetrator has not been apprehended or where a conviction cannot be secured.

A constituent who was a victim of rape told me:

“I’ll probably never know why the jury decided not to convict in my case. The compensation awarded wouldn’t actually cover the cost of a copy of the trial transcript. The process of closure for me began with that letter from CICA, that seeking justice hadn’t been in vain despite the enormous personal cost.

Beyond the nightmares I still have replaying that night, replaying the trial, the court room, replaying every indignity meted out upon me over a truly miserable three year period; it is there. In black and white. On the record. This happened to you. He is a rapist. We believe you. That’s what that piece of paper meant.”

Every victim deserves vindication, but among the largest barriers is the time limit. The Victims’ Commissioner—the indomitable Baroness Newlove, who is incidentally a constituent of mine—recommended to the Government back in 2019 that it be amended in her landmark report “Compensation without re-traumatisation”. We are still waiting.

The time limit pressures victims into choosing between pursuing justice in the courts and a civil remedy—lest the defence infers a financial motive for coming forward—leaving them with a high statistical likelihood of ending up with neither. However, if the expectation is that victims should pursue both at the same time, or even in close succession, that is wildly unrealistic given just how much the criminal justice system retraumatizes a person and puts far too much onus on the victim all at once. That is not a reasonable expectation for us in this place to have of the dozens of constituents I have signposted and supported through this process. It is a huge thing to do, and we can never fully appreciate just how much it grinds a person down unless they have been through it.

The fact that many of those who apply will be turned away because of arbitrary time limits, or that many will be dissuaded from applying at all for the support that they are entitled to in the expectation that that will happen, leaves victims without the ability to get closure. It leaves them frozen. In Warrington, 349 victims have already made a successful CICA claim in the past five years; from the crime statistics for our area alone, I know that there is massive under-claiming. Then there are all the cases that will not show up in those statistics, including those dealt with in the family courts. Currently, no agency is responsible under the victims code for informing victims about the scheme; the expectation is that that falls to the police or local support services.

I know that the Treasury has anxiety about this, but if we get anywhere near our target of halving violence against women and girls, the scheme will pay for itself. Until such time, victims cannot continue to pay the price. While there is no amount that would ever make being a victim of violent crime worth it, surely the least that they deserve is the amount that was intended back in 2012—not a fraction of that, as its value is eroded further each year by inflation.

For all the things that successive Governments have seen fit to spend money on, it breaks my heart that none have thought this scheme worth consideration. While we work to improve victim support services generally, there will always be a role for CICA. Unfortunately, CICA is compensation for state failure to keep people safe and, too often, to deliver justice. That compensation should be significantly uplifted at the comprehensive spending review to ensure that its value is a fairer reflection of the debt that society owes to those victims

that it has let down. Awards must be index-linked to inflation, so we do not end up having the same debate in 15 years’ time.

The time limit should be amended in line with the recommendations of the Victims’ Commissioner, and we should ensure that the framework aligns with the rest of our system, including with our increased understanding of the harms of non-contact sexual offences. I hope that all hon. Members will support the ten-minute rule Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield next week, so that we can start this vital reform. I look forward to the Minister’s response today.

10.2 am

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) on securing this debate, and on his powerful and personal speech. It is an honour to follow the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who was eloquent and forceful.

The criminal injuries compensation scheme is an important fund of last resort for many victims of crime who cannot seek compensation through litigation. In the 17 years that I was a barrister, before I was elected last year, I represented many victims of crime at its tribunal. I saw the difference that it could make, but also the limitations and restrictions imposed on the scheme in 2012, which seemed more about saving money than ensuring that victims got compensation for the harm that they had suffered.

I rise to raise a specific concern related to a feature of the scheme that I think is indefensible, and one that the courts have sought to temper. Ultimately, the scheme itself should be changed so that it has a legally sound and consistent basis, and so that it makes sense. It may come as a surprise to many listening that the criminal injuries compensation scheme applies a different legal test from that applied in our criminal courts when it comes to consent.

Unlike our criminal law, the criminal injuries compensation scheme does not recognise that some people cannot legally consent. According to annex B, paragraph 2(d), only those who does not “in fact” consent can receive compensation. That means that if a victim says yes to sexual activity, even when under the age of 16, they are taken to have consented. A child abused or exploited over many years, who knows no better than to agree when an abuser proposes sexual contact, will not be taken to be a victim of a crime of violence because they consented.

If the House wants to be horrified by a legal principle that is still good law, it should read the decision of the Court of Appeal in a case called August from 2000. In that case, a 13-year-old boy, described by the then Lord Chief Justice in the criminal proceedings as “already corrupt”, was paid for sex by a 53-year-old man, but was held not to have been a victim of a crime of violence because he had allegedly consented.

It is true that in the years since the case of August, the courts and tribunals have sought to narrow the principle a bit. A few years after, the Court of Appeal found—some may consider unsurprisingly—that submission is not “real consent” and, in another case, it directed a focus on the applicant’s “relative vulnerability”, “subservience”

[Catherine Atkinson]

and “lesser responsibility” as relevant factors, though many may be surprised that any responsibility in those circumstances was found. Far more recently, the Court ruled in the case of *RN vs. CICA* that sexual abuse causing non-physical injury is included within the scheme. However, the very fact that these sorts of workarounds have had to be introduced shows the indefensibility of the underlying principle. We cannot, and should not have to, rely on tribunals to apply legal rules creatively to seek to achieve just outcomes.

I understand that the Conservative Government left us with the public finances in tatters and public services on their knees, and I understand the concern about expanding the number of victims who might be eligible for compensation, but I hope that the Government will consider this clearly inconsistent approach between our criminal law and the law when it comes to compensating victims, and fix it.

10.7 am

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) on securing this important debate and on his moving and eloquent speech. The fact that he only received £1,000 compensation for the very significant injuries he sustained is an indicator of the inadequacy of the scheme.

Throughout my career as a personal injury solicitor before I became an MP, and now as an MP, I have tried to be a steadfast advocate for access to justice so that victims of injury, including victims of crimes of violence, can receive suitable redress. Compensation for injury does not just represent a recognition of the harm inflicted upon victims but provides the support and financial redress necessary so that victims of injury can start to rebuild their lives.

I would like to follow on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield said about the criminal injuries compensation scheme. It is a national asset. It is there to compensate people who have been physically or mentally injured due to a violent crime, and those whose loved ones have died as a result of a crime of violence. But the scheme clearly needs reform. Too often, the system is falling short, leaving victims unsupported and failed. Too many are blocked from access to justice by an arbitrary time cap, and many are left behind by the long and confusing claims process.

The tariff system for assessing compensation means that victims are simply not properly compensated, and the compensation that they receive is inadequate in comparison with the injuries that they have suffered. They then have the problem of lodging an appeal, which again is very time-consuming and difficult, and yet another barrier to justice.

Laurence Turner: My hon. Friend is making a very informed speech, as did the hon. Members who spoke before him. Does he agree that, with each year that passes without re-examination of the tariffs, the gap will grow between the award that someone may be able to secure—if a perpetrator is identified and the victim is able to bring a civil case—and the compensation that

they may receive through the scheme? Will that not add to the sense of frustration and injustice that many victims feel?

Warinder Juss: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I remember dealing with criminal injuries compensation claims when they were assessed in the same way as personal injury claims. When the tariff system was introduced, it was apparent to us that it was simply inadequate.

The Government should commit to review the current two-year time limit, for the reasons I have mentioned. Often, police will recommend that victims wait to apply for compensation until after criminal proceedings have concluded so that trial outcomes are not prejudiced. That effectively means that the victim has no time to make a claim for compensation, because they are out of time by the time the criminal proceedings conclude.

The other problem that I hope the Minister will look at is that victims who have suffered traumatic injuries, or abuse such as child sexual abuse, do not come forward with their experiences until many years later, which means that they are automatically excluded from the scheme.

Another point that has not been raised so far in this debate is the requirement for the incident—the crime of violence—to have been reported to the police as soon as possible. In my experience, those working in hospitals and schools often report the violent incident to their line manager and believe that that is adequate for the matter to be reported. I totally understand the purpose of the scheme, in which the victim must co-operate with the police to secure a prosecution, but the requirement for the victim to report the matter to the police when the matter has already been reported elsewhere is a barrier. When I dealt with these claims, I often found that a claim was turned down because somebody working in a hospital or a school had reported the matter to their line manager, but not reported it to the police as soon as possible.

Although the system has an honourable purpose, it is not doing what it is meant to, because people are missing out on their chance to secure justice and redress for their injuries. In 2023-24, only 8% of injured victims of violent crime in the UK applied for compensation. Compensation for criminal injuries must remain an essential part of our justice system, but the current system is inadequate, slow and inaccessible for too many victims. It is clear that we need reform to ensure that those who suffer from violent crime are given the support and financial redress that they deserve so that they can move on and rebuild their lives.

10.13 am

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) for securing this debate.

There is an interesting paradox at the heart of this scheme. The fundamental eligibility requirements are that

“You must apply as soon as it is reasonably practicable”
and that
“this should normally not be later than two years”

after the incident occurred. That is the time limit for adults, which can be extended “due to exceptional circumstances”. If the person was under 18 at the time of the incident, an application must be received by their 20th birthday if the incident was reported to the police before their 18th birthday, or

“within two years of the first report to the police, if the incident was reported to the police on or after”

the person’s 18th birthday.

I was sexually harassed as a teenager—nothing that would have met a criminal standard—and it never occurred to me to apply for these sorts of things. That is not something that enters the head of someone aged 18, 19 or 20, let alone the victims of child rape and sexual abuse. First, we should accept and implement the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. That is a basic moral requirement. Secondly, we should look at the “exceptional circumstances” rules, which allow someone who did not manage to apply as soon as reasonably practicable, or within two years, to apply if

“due to exceptional circumstances an application could not have been made earlier; and the evidence provided in support of the application means that it can be determined without further extensive inquiries by a claims officer.”

That is a much tighter exception than most legal “exceptional circumstances” exception rules. It basically requires that there be no work to do on the part of the agency that would be required to investigate. I do not understand why whether people get compensation is determined by what inquiries a claims officer would be required to make. I do not think that represents justice.

Significant numbers of claims are being refused; in 2023-24, nearly 2,000 were refused because they were not submitted within the time limit, and another 765 were refused because of a failure to report as soon as reasonably practicable. What we do not have statistics on, as far as I am aware, is the number of people who do not apply in the first place because they know that they would not meet the eligibility criteria. I suspect that it is substantial. It seems to me that whether someone hears about the scheme in the first place, or can meet the requirements, is very much an accident of their life chances and various other factors. That is no way to determine whether people should receive compensation.

At the moment, we are listing Crown court cases for more than two years hence. The police can take more than two years to investigate a crime. About 21% of claims under the criminal injuries compensation scheme take more than two years to conclude; in fact, 2.8% of them take more than five years to conclude. We habitually accept, and have done for some time—although we may not like it—that it can take the state more than two years to deal with a crime, but we do not accept that it can take more than two years for a victim to deal with a crime. That seems, to me, a fundamentally irrational and indefensible position.

In this country, we let people make a breach of contract claim six years after the breach of contract occurred, but we will not let them take more than two years to process their trauma. That is not, in my opinion, the right position for the state to take.

10.17 am

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) on securing the debate. I commend him on

behalf of my party, and I am sure everybody in this room, for the bravery that he exhibited in sharing his own story of victimhood and engagement with the criminal injuries compensation scheme.

Victims and survivors in Eastbourne and beyond deserve dignity, respect and meaningful support when someone has violated their safety, their rights, their property and the law that is there to protect them. While no amount of compensation can take away the damage that such acts cause to those victims and survivors, compensation can, as has been described already, represent a powerful acknowledgment from the state about what happened to an individual survivor, and the sum awarded—to be spent on whatever it might be—can contribute towards their healing. Often it is spent on trying to access court transcripts, even though they are extremely expensive, or on therapy to overcome some of mental impacts of the crime.

For too long, victims and survivors of crime have been trapped by not only the trauma of their experiences but a criminal injuries compensation system that fails to recognise their suffering in a fair and humane way, often retraumatising them. The criminal injuries compensation scheme has become a maze of bureaucracy, and is unknown to swathes of victims and those who support them. I think we can all agree that it is in urgent need of reform.

First, the scheme must be simplified in order to make sure that it is as accessible as possible to victims and survivors. When people like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) encourage people to apply if they feel entitled, there should be minimal barriers. Submitting a claim involves a lot of paperwork. According to the Victims’ Commissioner, 40% of victims feel as though they have to secure legal advice to apply for this compensation. That often means giving away a share of their relatively small amount of compensation, which has not been uprated in line with inflation. I would argue that, in cases where there have already been criminal court proceedings, even one additional sheet of paper to fill in is too many.

As a survivor of abuse myself, which I have spoken about in this Chamber, in the House and elsewhere, I personally found the prospect of the criminal injuries compensation scheme process too much to engage with.

Laurence Turner: The hon. Member is making a very informed speech. On his point about the complexity of the application, I recently had cause to see the application form for the pre-statutory scheme, and it was simpler than the form that victims have to fill out today. Does he agree that something has gone quite wrong here down the years, and that we should be looking to make the process as brief as possible, and leave those detailed checks to the Government agencies that have already dealt with the victim and crime?

Josh Babarinde: I could not agree more that the burden of bureaucracy should not be on the victim. Having spent almost two years going through a police process as a victim, and then a very traumatising Crown court trial, the last thing that I wanted to do was rush to fill in application forms for compensation before the imminent two-year deadline from reporting to the police, which the hon. Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) described, was about to be hit, so I did not apply.

[Josh Babarinde]

For exactly the reasons that the hon. Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) described, it takes more than two years to process a crime. In my case, it took many decades, and I still process those crimes today. The system is not conducive to that healing process. A question that I asked was essentially, “Is this system for real? After dragging me through what is a shocking, adversarial and dehumanising criminal process, you’re going to ask me to jump through more hoops just to prove that what has happened to me has happened to me? You can go and take your paperwork and stick it where the sun don’t shine.” The sun shines in Eastbourne a lot, as many folks in this room know, so it did not have to go far.

In scenarios where a court case has happened, and where the evidence has already been presented once, it must be possible for the criminal injuries compensation scheme to access that evidence with the consent of the victim and make some kind of compensation assessment without dragging the victim through another legal ordeal from square one. I would be interested to understand what exploration the Government have undertaken in this area.

Inefficiency costs time, and, to the point made in an intervention by the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), who is no longer in her place, no victim should have to wait years and years for their claim to be assessed, as is too often the case today. Alexis Jay, in her IICSA report, also suggested that, in cases where proceedings have already gone to court, there could be merit in empowering a judge to order the payment of criminal compensation from offender to victim. I would be interested to know what assessment the Government have made regarding the merit of that suggestion too.

Secondly, the scheme must be more visible, because so many victims are unaware of it. Fewer than four in 10 victims recall being told by the police about the scheme, according to the Victims’ Commissioner. Significant numbers of victims and survivors are therefore missing out on the compensation that they need to rebuild their lives. I was not told about the scheme by the police; I was first told about it by an incredible child abuse solicitor, Dino Nocivelli, who I was connected with through a friend of a friend. As has been said already, awareness should not rely on who someone knows. The system is failing victims and survivors by leaving them in the dark.

Thirdly, victims and survivors must receive the support they need to navigate the system. I have touched on some of the complexities, as have other hon. Members. In my case, although I did not end up applying, I discussed the scheme with my ISVA—independent sexual violence adviser—from SurvivorsUK, Alan Robertson, to whom I pay tribute. ISVAs play a critical role in giving survivors the practical guidance and confidence to navigate our justice system, of which the criminal injuries compensation scheme is a part.

One of my key concerns, which I have expressed several times before, is that charities report that their capacity to provide support is being diminished by the national insurance contributions hike and the cut to core funding for police and crime commissioners. Those are debates that the Ministry of Justice will need to have had with the Treasury. Some charities that provide such

guidance and support to victims have told me, and said publicly, that these measures are tantamount to a 7% real-terms funding cut.

Charlotte Nichols: I thank the hon. Member for his speech and particularly for his reference to ISVAs and victim support. In the Warrington area, there is no support available through either the NHS or third sector organisations for people under the age of 18 who have been victims of violence. That is why the CICA scheme is so important: it gives victims the ability to get specialist therapy outside the NHS and the charitable sector. Does he agree that ISVA services need to be far better funded, so that they can offer much more bespoke support to victims throughout the UK, including child victims?

Josh Babarinde: I could not agree more with the hon. Member. As someone who has used an ISVA service myself—I am not sure that I could have gone through the process without it—I think that the value of those services cannot be overestimated. It is of great sadness to me that across our country there are what I would describe as ISVA deserts, where it is very difficult to access those services. This should not come down to a postcode lottery. People should not be victims of these terrible crimes in the first instance, but if they are, then wherever they are in the country, they should be able to access those critical services and support to help them to navigate their trauma, their survival and their recovery beyond.

I welcome the fact that the Government have taken steps to protect funding for organisations tackling violence against women and girls, but we know that there are victims and survivors beyond this cohort who will be left with less support at a time when they need more.

The test of a civilised society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. Right now, we are failing that test. Victims and survivors of crime deserve more than our sympathy; they deserve action. They deserve more than a criminal injuries compensation scheme that retraumatises those it is meant to help; they deserve a scheme that is fair, fast and fighting for them. The Liberal Democrats stand ready to work with the Government as they prepare the update to the victims code and forthcoming legislation, with a view to helping to achieve just that.

10.28 am

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) on securing the debate, and thank him for being willing to share his personal experiences. His doing so has been incredibly valuable. Similarly, I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde).

The criminal injuries compensation scheme is one of the most important parts of our justice system. It does not simply punish wrongdoing but, crucially, offers some measure of direct justice—some attempt to right a wrong for those whose lives have been changed by violence and abuse, as incomplete as that attempt may often be.

In 2020, the previous Conservative Government published the findings of a comprehensive review of the scheme as part of a wider review of a first ever cross-Government victims strategy. It found that overall the

scheme was operating well. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority was dealing with more than 30,000 applications a year and had a high satisfaction rating of 95% from applicants who had been in contact in the preceding period. Those levels of satisfaction had been broadly maintained. Today's debate has already highlighted that, within broad levels of satisfaction, there can often be serious and consistent individual failings, which it is important we do not take for granted.

However, the review also recognised that changes and improvements could be made, and a consultation was launched on a number of areas to make the scheme simpler, more transparent and easier for victims to understand and engage with. Those included the approach to classifying and compensating for disabling mental injuries, overhauling how brain injury is represented and reforming the groupings of other injury types. The review also proposed changes to bereavement awards.

Members may be aware that there was a need to launch a further, targeted consultation on the unspent convictions rule to ensure that it was fully and comprehensively reviewed for possible reform. Under that rule, an applicant's compensation award could be reduced or withheld depending on the sentence imposed for an unspent offence they had committed. The Supreme Court has previously found that the unspent convictions rule was lawful and that the rationale underlying it was legally sound. The judgment also rejected the notion that vulnerability that leads to later offending should require any special exemption from the rule, on the basis that the criminal justice system should already include measures to allow any vulnerability of victims to be taken into account at the time of their prosecution and sentencing.

Following that judgment, there was further impetus to consider change, as the Government rightly sought to respond to the final publication of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, which made further recommendations regarding the scheme, as a number of Members have touched on. The 2023 consultation focused on time limits and the scope of the scheme. It considered the inclusion of online abuse in the definition of a crime of violence. It also looked at whether children who suffered abuse should have longer to apply for compensation. It also raised the question of whether non-contact offences should be brought within the eligibility criteria.

The variety of consultations and additional areas for reform reflects what has been a rapidly evolving area of political and public concern. That has created a greater and greater focus on groups of victims, as our understanding of the nature and impact of sexual abuse, particularly historical sexual abuse, domestic abuse and online harms has broadened. Across the consultations, hundreds of responses were received and difficult questions were explored in detail. However, before a final response could be published, the 2024 general election was called.

Last month, the current Government sought to move forward to resolve those pieces of work and to progress on the basis of this extensive background. However, they have also decided to make no changes at this time to the scheme's scope or time limits or to the unspent convictions rule, and it is important for the Minister today to clearly explain why.

I recognise the concerns about singling out particular categories of offending and about the unintended consequences of such changes. However, concerns arise

when the guidelines that do exist that attempt to allow for exceptionality do not operate as well as they should. If the Government choose not to make formal changes to the rules, there is an even greater emphasis, as the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield said, on ensuring that the guidelines that do exist that operationalise the exceptionality clauses function as they should.

On unspent convictions, the Government have laid out their reasons for not making changes—again, that is on the grounds of not wanting to create unintended consequences for victims. However, a proposal for reform was put forward that would have allowed the Government to maintain an overall bar on people seeking compensation despite their offending, by considering whether lower-level offences, such as community offences, could be removed from the disbarring applications, or where there could be a significant gap between the injury suffered and the nature of the indexed offence. That would be universal, rather than singling out particular types of offending. I would be interested to hear why the Government did not take forward that suggestion.

I would also like the Minister to explain further the Government's failure to provide a comprehensive response to the 2020 consultation, which suggested many reforms. The Government have said, to quote directly from the Minister's foreword to the Government response:

"I have decided not to publish a substantive response to the 2020 consultation as the victim support landscape has changed substantially since 2020. I am concluding that consultation by writing to the Justice Select Committee notifying it of my decision."

Sarah Russell: Does the hon. Gentleman see that there is some irony in his asking why our current Minister has not responded to a 2020 consultation, when his Government, which was in power for another four years, did not do so?

Dr Mullan: I think I have clearly laid out the timetable and the sequence of events, particularly in terms of the courts requiring a further consultation, and the sensible decision to respond further to the inquiry consultation. I am interested in actually getting a response; I appreciate that the hon. Member seeks to make a party political point, but that is fine.

It is slightly disappointing not to see a comprehensive response, notwithstanding the hon. Member's concerns, as I think that the 2020 consultation and the many proposals in it—some of which were implemented on an interim basis—were important. Does that mean that the Government have now entirely rejected some of the other changes I have outlined, or will the letter set out in more detail which changes will or will not be taken forward, and the reasons why? It is important for the Government to do that.

Although the scheme may be working well overall, we should continue to consider where challenges remain operationally. We know that the experience of applicants varies regionally. For example, in Birmingham, which includes the constituency of the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield, the average time for a compensation decision was over 490 days in 2022. While there has been some improvement, wait times are far too long for some individuals, even if the majority receive their compensation in a timely manner.

We have heard from a number of Members today about individual cases and their personal experiences. It is important that we hold the Government to account in

[Dr Mullan]

terms of ensuring that as many people as possible, and as great a ratio of applicants to the scheme as possible, receive an adequate service.

The true measure of our commitment to victims is not the volume of our pronouncements, but the effectiveness of the systems we create to maintain them. I want to finish by saying that the criminal injuries compensation scheme has always been about more than money: it is about recognising harm and restoring dignity. The Conservative Government took that responsibility seriously. We listened, we consulted and we left a clear foundation for action. Now it is for the current Government to build on that foundation, and we will hold them to account, simply because victims deserve nothing less.

10.35 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) for securing this important debate. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part; the strength of feeling is palpable, and I have heard them all.

I was deeply moved by hon. Members' personal stories about being victims of crime and the impact it had on them. I thank them all for their courage in speaking out about their experiences so eloquently. Doing so is powerful, and it illustrates their views on the criminal injuries compensation scheme and on the experience of applying for compensation. I commend their desire to see improvements to the scheme and its operation. I also echo the thanks from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield to the brilliant staff who operate the scheme so tirelessly for the work they do every single day to support victims of crime.

I have a long-standing commitment to supporting victims of crime. Since I took on responsibility for this scheme, I have been struck by the bravery of victims of crime who speak out about what they have been through and how it has affected them. Sometimes I am contacted directly by victims, and sometimes I am contacted by Members of this House. Other times, I listen to and learn from high-profile figures, including the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, and the organisations that work so tirelessly to support victims. Whatever the medium for conveying individual stories, I am constantly reminded of the importance and responsibility of my role as the Minister responsible for victims and for violence against women and girls. This debate has added to my awareness and sense of purpose when it comes to doing all I can to support victims.

The criminal injuries compensation scheme has a long history, with the first non-statutory scheme launching in 1964. It has changed over time, including when it became a statutory scheme in 1996. However, its purpose has remained constant: to recognise the harm experienced by victims injured as a result of violent crime. The scheme is a last resort for compensation, where someone cannot obtain compensation from the perpetrator directly or via a civil claim.

Through the scheme, we meet domestic and international obligations. The scheme for Great Britain remains one of the most generous in Europe and the world. It pays compensation for physical, sexual and mental injuries

and also for things associated with those injuries, such as loss of earnings and special expenses. It also provides compensation to families bereaved by violent crime, to acknowledge their loss and provide support to dependants.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield said, the previous Government announced a review of the scheme in 2018. They held their first consultation in 2020. This was wide ranging, looking at various aspects across the whole scheme. There was a second consultation in 2022 on the scheme's unspent convictions eligibility rule. The third and final consultation was in 2023 and considered the scheme's scope and time limits. The second and third consultations of course included consideration of the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, often referred to as IICSA. The last Government did not respond to any of the three consultations before the election was announced last year.

One of my key priorities when I became Minister was to consider how to conclude the previous Government's review. I saw how many individuals and organisations had taken the time—and, in many cases, expended a great deal of emotional energy—to respond thoughtfully to the issues considered in the consultations. They deserved to know the outcome following their contributions.

At the forefront of my mind as I considered how to respond to the consultations were the IICSA findings and recommendations. There is no doubt that sexual abuse and exploitation of children are the most heinous crimes. It takes a great deal of strength for victims to come forward, seek justice by reporting the crime to the police, and access support and compensation to aid their recovery.

Earlier this month, I published my response to the 2022 and 2023 consultations, which concerned the IICSA recommendations. As has been mentioned, I also wrote to the Justice Committee about the 2020 consultation, concluding that consultation and informing the Committee of my decision not to publish a substantive response to it.

My conclusion was not to amend the scheme at the present time. I have made no secret of the fact that that was a difficult decision to reach. In the same way that I have listened to and learned from hon. Members today, I learned from the respondents to the consultations. I understand and hear their calls for change, and I am considering how we can best support victims with whatever they need through an improved and effective service. Although my decision was difficult, it was the right one for the scheme and the victims of violent crime it supports.

I fully appreciate the basis for IICSA's recommendations that the scheme be amended and expanded for victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation. I also acknowledge that many of the consultation respondents called for change in the way that IICSA recommended. However, it is my belief that all victims can feel a need for their suffering to be recognised, no matter the nature of the violent crime that harmed them. That belief aligns with the core principle of the scheme: that it is universal. That ensures that all victims can equally access the scheme. We cannot have one rule for certain victims and one for others, who have experienced other, often deeply damaging, crimes. Payments are based on injury or bereavement arising from violent crimes, regardless of the nature of the crime. That is why I decided not to amend the scheme as IICSA recommended.

Importantly, the scheme continues to be subject to scrutiny. The Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales recently proposed reform of the scheme's time limits in her report on court backlogs. I responded to the report on 25 April, and I am considering the report of the Women and Equalities Committee, which recommended that the scheme be expanded to enable victims of non-consensual intimate image abuse to access compensation.

That leads me to explain a bit more about why I decided not to respond substantively to the 2020 consultation, which covered all aspects of the scheme as a whole. I appreciate that my decision means that the many people who responded to the consultation will not see change as a result of their contributions, and that the concerns they expressed will not be answered. The key reason for my decision is that the landscape in which the scheme sits has changed significantly since 2020. The questions were asked in a totally different context. Government provision and support for victims has developed, and at the same time demand for that support in all its forms has grown substantively. To put it simply, the context has moved on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield and others spoke eloquently about their experience several years ago, but I am hopeful that some of those challenges would not arise today. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, which administers the scheme, has worked hard since 2020 to improve its service. For instance, all applications can now be made online, so there is no longer the need for the onerous paperwork that hon. Members described. All its staff have undertaken trauma-informed training, and it now has dedicated caseworkers for the most complex cases. It also runs awareness training sessions for stakeholders who support victims, including the police, ISVAs and independent domestic violence advisers. All those measures help to improve victims' experience when applying for compensation.

There are of course other challenges, as we have heard today, and I assure hon. Members that we are not resting on our laurels. We are committed to continuously reviewing and responding to feedback from stakeholders. CICA undertakes user research, cross-agency work and outreach activity. That facilitates sharing experiences, learning and collaboration to improve its service. I also always welcome feedback from hon. Members, their constituents and victims about the service.

We are working hard for victims more generally. The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 aims to improve victims' experience of the criminal justice system. It makes it clear that victims require services under the victims code, and it strengthens agencies' accountability for its delivery. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) and others asked how we raise awareness and ensure people know about the right to access compensation. The victims code includes the right to be told about compensation. We are now implementing the reforms in the Act, and we aim to consult on a revised victims code in due course. We await the report of Sir Brian Leveson's independent review of the criminal courts, where we should be making it easier for victims to seek civil remedies directly from perpetrators.

Sarah Russell: If we create a right to be made aware of the scheme and a claimant can demonstrate that they were not made aware of it, could we amend the rules for exceptional cases reviews so that that automatically counts as an exception?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend's suggestion, which we can of course consider. We will be consulting on a new victims code in due course. The Victims' Commissioner meets me regularly to talk about compliance with the victims code and how we hold agencies accountable for their failure to uphold it, so that can be considered.

As well as compensation, the Ministry of Justice provides funding for vital victim and witness support services, including community-based services, in addition to the funding that we give police and crime commissioners to allocate on the basis of their assessment of local need. Across Government the financial situation is difficult, and we await the outcome of the spending review, but the Government will be considering how we can best provide the support that the victims of crime need and deserve.

As a proud Welsh MP, I reassure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that I am due to meet my counterparts in the devolved nations very soon to discuss how we can best support victims of crime wherever they reside in these isles.

I reassure hon. Members that they have all been heard today, in the same way that I have heard the respondents to the consultation. Their message to me is that we need change, with less consultation and less talk, because we need action. Listening to their experiences, views and suggestions will help me to consider how we can best improve the system, make it effective and workable, and provide victims with the justice that they long for and deserve.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield for his contribution to this important debate and for all his work in supporting victims of crime.

10.47 am

Laurence Turner: I will not detain Members long, but I wish to thank everyone who has spoken in this debate for their informed speeches and for their tone. It is right that we scrutinise and criticise the records of Governments past and present—that is one of our critical functions—but all hon. Members have approached the subject with the seriousness and sensitivity that it deserves. We all share the common aim of having a scheme that delivers more for the victims of crime.

From the Back Benches, we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Although he described some of the differences in Northern Ireland, I was struck by the similarities with the frustrations experienced by victims in England, Wales and Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) made a speech combining powerful empathy with an acute reading of the technical challenges that still exist in the scheme.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) and for Congleton (Sarah Russell), who enriched the debate with their professional experience and expertise. In particular, I was struck by the extremely important issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North highlighted, which needs remedying. It should be a matter of concern to us all that apparent dead letters in the law can be reanimated with a sometimes surprising lack of scrutiny.

[*Laurence Turner*]

From the Front Benches, we heard from the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), who spoke for himself as well as for his party. He has described his own experiences before in this place and has used those experiences to bring forward his own legislation on related matters. I thank him for his speech.

We heard an account from the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), and it was very important that we heard such an account from the Opposition in this debate. He highlighted an issue that perhaps needs further scrutiny, which is the satisfaction rates that have been claimed. I have to say from my own experience of the scheme that I do not recall ever being asked to give a satisfaction rating. I wonder whether there are issues with how people are asked and what the response rate is; I must say that the 95% figure he cited is surprising to me.

The victims Minister set out an overview of the contributions to this debate. I was struck by her comment that changes to the scheme will not be made at the present time. It is important that if changes are made to the scheme, they are not driven by a short-term desire for cost-savings; they must be motivated by the improvement of the service for victims.

Charlotte Nichols: I thank my hon. Friend for his summing up. I want to pick up on that point. When the White Paper on changes to the scheme came out in 1993, more than two Governments back, the then Government said that the changes they wanted to make to the scheme were driven by a desire to “provide a better service” to claimants, although they admitted that the main aim was to cut costs. It is clear from today’s debate that it is important to ensure that change is driven by providing a better service, rather than by cost-saving measures.

Does my hon. Friend agree that that needs to be the core focus, above any other consideration from the Treasury?

Laurence Turner: I am delighted to hear a reference to a White Paper from 1993. I am a great believer in the theory that obscurity is a source of strength, and my hon. Friend has provided some evidence for that.

The Treasury takes a legitimate and necessary interest in annually managed expenditure. On the other hand, there is a real risk that changes made at relatively short notice, with curtailed time for scrutiny in this place, could deliver a worse service. That must be avoided at all costs, as we have seen from some negative experiences with past changes to the scheme.

Building on the Minister’s welcome commitment to continue to work with Members of this House and victims across the course of this Parliament, I hope that we can secure the positive changes that she wants to achieve. I thank all hon. Members who supported the application for the debate, including some who are unavoidably absent, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles (Michael Wheeler) and the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), who gave notice that unfortunately they have been detained by other matters. This is the first debate on the important subject of criminal injuries in this Parliament, but I am sure that it will not be the last. I thank you for your chairship, Dr Murrison, and I thank everyone for their contributions.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Thank you. Contributions are always more powerful when they are rooted in personal experience, as we have heard today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered compensation for criminal injuries.

10.53 am

Sitting suspended.

Recycling of Tyres

11 am

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Tessa Munt will move the motion and then the Minister will respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of recycling end-of-life tyres.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. The Government have placed the circular economy at the heart of their agenda. The circular economy taskforce has been established and is expected to report back later this year. Adopting a focus on the circular economy means changing the way we think about so-called waste. We need to see things currently perceived as waste as a resource—a resource with an economic value that can be recovered and contribute to the economic growth that this Government so seriously seek. We also need to implement policies designed to maximise the economic value from these resources.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My hon. Friend is introducing a really important debate. A company called Tyre Renewals Ltd operates in Castle Cary in my constituency. Founded back in 1967, it specialises in tyre repairs and the shredding and granulation of used tyres to produce recycled rubber products. That prevents tyres from going into landfill and leaking harmful chemicals and microplastics into the environment, including waterways. Does my hon. Friend agree that urgent Government investment in tyre recycling infrastructure is needed to tackle the environmental hazards posed by worn tyres?

Tessa Munt: Yes, indeed; I shall come to that shortly.

The previous Government talked a great deal about the circular economy, had their own circular economy strategy and brought forward consultations on a number of measures to close certain loopholes that created an opening for waste crime. Sadly, despite multiple commitments to taking action, not enough was actually implemented. This Minister knows that it is not sufficient to talk about the circular economy; she and her team need to take action to deliver the changes that have been talked about for far too long.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. We in Northern Ireland had a problem with tyres and bonfires—it is in the nature of what happens—but over the last number of years, councils have had a distinct policy to make sure that that does not happen, and it has not happened. Does the hon. Lady agree that local businesses must not simply take the easy option of sending their tyres to be recycled overseas, which seems to end in fires, and that they should be encouraged to send them to recognised recycling groups in the United Kingdom, where there are guarantees that the tyres will be completely recycled and the rubber, fibre and steel will all be reused?

Tessa Munt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that that should be the case. We need to tighten up the licensing regulation and how the whole process works, so that we can reduce the amount of damage that is done.

According to global trade data, the UK disposes of approximately 600,000 tonnes of end-of-life tyres each year. About 350,000 tonnes of those are currently shipped to India. Of the remaining 250,000, some are exported to markets such as Turkey and Morocco, where they are used in the manufacture of cement. Some are processed in the UK to create materials to produce asphalt, which has many benefits for road safety and for the environment, and which enhances the circular economy. I will return to UK processing shortly.

The fate of the 350,000 tonnes of tyres exported to India raises serious environmental and public health concerns. India, like other non-OECD countries, does not have the same stringent environmental emissions regulations that we have in the UK. However, most tyres exported to India are shipped as “green list waste” under the waste shipments regulations, which are contained in assimilated EU law.

Batches tend to be sent in the form of baled whole tyres, which creates two risks. First, some tyres exported in that way are then sold for refitting in India, leading to road safety issues. Secondly, when exported as whole tyre bales, most of the tyres are sent on to rudimentary batch pyrolysis sites. In Indian batch pyrolysis, tyres are commonly burned to produce a high-sulphur heavy fuel called tyre pyrolysis oil—which is typically burned, causing direct harm to the environment—and low-grade carbon black, which is often unsuitable for reuse. The process involves enormous amounts of energy and the flaring of syngas directly into the atmosphere, without filtering or scrubbing, in conditions that are hazardous to operator health, the local population and the environment.

The use of imported end-of-life tyres in India—both for refitting vehicles and in batch pyrolysis—is illegal under Indian domestic law, but there is a lack of even the most basic enforcement capacity to uphold the law. The reality of the uses of imported end-of-life tyres in India was the subject of a recent BBC documentary and, as the Minister will be aware, additionally the subject of a recent legal challenge against the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by the campaign group Fighting Dirty. The challenge relates to the failure of the agency and the Department to take action to prevent the illegal use of end-of-life tyres exported to India.

It is important to note that this is not a historical waste crime, but one that is ongoing. Every single day, we ship around 1,000 tonnes of UK waste tyres to India. Investigators from the UK and Australia have used GPS tracking devices in several consignments of waste tyres shipped to India over the last few years, and have consistently evidenced that 100% of the tyres tracked do not reach their intended destination, with the majority being diverted to batch pyrolysis plants. What investigations has the Department undertaken to track consignments of waste tyres shipped abroad? Secondly, what conclusions has the Department reached in relation to digital waste tracking?

There has been growing concern that developed countries, such as the UK, are dumping their waste problems on developing countries and have continued to export their

[Tessa Munt]

pollution over many years. International conventions such as the Basel convention seek to better manage waste internationally, and there is domestic law to give effect to such undertakings. What is the Minister's view on a potential producer responsibility scheme for the UK's end of life tyres?

In response to the legal challenge and the BBC documentary, the Government have announced that the Environment Agency will conduct a review into the issue. Today I seek clarification from the Minister about the scope of that review, and I have four questions at this point. Will the review be limited to an assessment of the enforcement of the existing legal provisions contained in the Basel convention and the waste shipments regulations? Will the review enable the Environment Agency to consider policy improvements? Will the review make policy recommendations to Ministers? How and when does the review intend to engage with the industry and interested parties?

The Environment Act 2021 significantly strengthened the powers available to the Government to manage and track waste exports. Section 62 of the Act added to the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 by creating further regulatory powers to better manage and track waste exports and the countries they pass through. It also established additional powers of direction for Ministers. As I understand it, those important new powers have yet to be used.

Will the Minister use her new powers under section 62 of the 2021 Act to take action to address the problems with waste tyre exports? Because end-of-life tyres are currently deemed green list waste under assimilated law through the waste shipments regulations, they are not notifiable and, as a result, are difficult to track. Will the Minister confirm that she will amend the waste shipments regulations to remove end-of-life tyres from the green list category and make such exports notifiable?

Under environmental permitting regulations, there are exemptions from the need to have a permit for a number of treatments. The so-called T8 waste exemption, applying to end-of-life tyres, has long been recognised as a problem. Operators can self-certify that they handle numbers below a certain threshold and are therefore eligible for an exemption. Marking your own homework is never a good idea: often those T8-exempt operators are exactly those who trade in baled tyres to India by undercutting our responsible operators who act within the regulated regime with a permit.

The Environment Agency identified the T8 exemption as a problem that made committing waste crime easier as far back as a decade ago. There were then various calls for evidence. Eventually, around three years ago, there was a consultation on removing this exemption, and the last Government confirmed that they would remove it 18 months ago. Then, nothing happened. Can the Minister confirm whether parliamentary counsel has drafted the necessary regulations and that, unlike her predecessors, she will lay the statutory instrument without further delay so that loophole can finally be closed?

As we seek to identify what makes up a circular economy, we might learn lessons from approaches taken elsewhere in the world. Australia offers a powerful case study to demonstrate what can be achieved through simple legislative tweaks to end-of-life tyre exports. Four years ago, recognising the environmental impact

of allowing those tyres to be exported to countries such as India for use in rudimentary batch pyrolysis plants, the Australian Government introduced a new condition that waste tyres had to be shredded before they could be exported. That Government also created a new system of notification and licensing for exporters. The Act that created the provisions was the Recycling and Waste Reduction Act 2020, which had some similar objectives to parts of the UK Environment Act 2021. Subsequent regulations giving effect to the changes were the Recycling and Waste Reduction (Export—Waste Tyres) Rules 2021.

First, the new Australian provisions required operators to have a waste export licence to export waste tyres at all. Secondly, they required that tyres could be exported only in a form that had been processed to shreds or crumbs of no more than 150 mm—just under 6 inches. Those could be used in modern pyrolysis to create tyre-derived fuel for uses such as sustainable aviation, or for other purposes, but only under a scheme verified by Tyre Stewardship Australia's foreign end market verification programme, so the fate of every export was known.

At a stroke, the export of whole tyres, which could previously be used illegally overseas, was ended. When shredded, tyres cannot be refitted illegally to vehicles, nor can they be used in rudimentary batch pyrolysis plants, since those systems require whole tyres as feedstock. In addition to taking responsibility for the country's waste and removing an environmental hazard from countries such as India, the regulatory changes also created additional feedstock for the domestic recycling industry in Australia. That was a spur to the circular economy, creating confidence for investors to increase capacity in the domestic production of asphalt and to invest in a new generation of modern, continuous-feed pyrolysis plants that can use shredded tyres and have a more positive environmental impact.

Modern continuous-feed pyrolysis plants maintain steady temperatures, and achieve about 250% higher throughput for the same energy input as batch pyrolysis. The syngas is captured and reused to heat the kilns through gas turbines, which removes carbon dioxide emissions. Such plants produce higher grade carbon black, which is pelletised and reused in tyre manufacturing, supporting the circular economy. Finally, the resultant tyre pyrolysis fuel oil is refined, undergoing further processing that would meet stringent UK environmental regulations.

The UK has dormant capacity to shred and process around 150,000 tonnes of end-of-life tyres each year. The reason why the plants are dormant is twofold. First, companies are unable to secure sufficient feedstock for plants because so many tyres are exported to India in baled form. Secondly, tyre collectors receive more money from India than the gate fees paid to companies who could recycle the materials here at home. The UK receives about £13 million in revenue from baled tyres sent abroad. A study by Fluid Ice and Imperial College assessed that if those end-of-life tyres were processed in the UK, even if the resultant products were exported, the revenue would be over £250 million. Several new businesses are seeking to invest in modern continuous-feed pyrolysis plants in the UK but they will do so only if they have confidence in the availability of their UK feedstock. We know that the potential feedstock exists, but it is currently being exported for illegal use abroad.

I have three more questions for the Minister. If we are to adopt the circular economy agenda, should we not support investors who want to recycle end-of-life tyres

here? Does she agree that we should take steps to ensure that UK companies have a domestic feedstock to give them confidence? Finally, does she agree that we should take responsibility for our own waste, process it here in the UK and maximise the economic value of that resource? The Australian model for end-of-use tyres seems good and effective, and we could easily replicate its impact and effect with relatively minor changes.

I recognise that I have asked 13 questions, to which I would like answers, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on stopping the export of whole tyres to India, introducing better regulations and licensing, ensuring enforcement, and adopting a model parallel to that of Australia. I have provided her with a list of my questions, and I am happy to have her responses in writing, in the interest of completeness.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. What a joy it is to be back in Westminster Hall to discuss everybody's favourite subjects: the materials economy, waste crime, and how we are going to tackle waste crime, after a decade and a half of a lot of talk and very little action—as the Elvis Presley song goes. We will have a little more action under this Government. As part of our plan for change, we will clean up Britain, crack down on waste cowboys and close the waste loopholes. I am keen that we all work together on a cross-party basis to achieve that.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Waste cowboys have been a big issue around the villages of my constituency, as I have said previously. I appreciate the Government's focus on the circular economy, particularly from the Minister, because I know that she is incredibly passionate about this issue. Does she agree that the focus on our circular economy is important not only for the environment, but to tackle the criminality around fly tipping and other areas of waste crime?

Mary Creagh: I do indeed. The amount of money and resources allocated to tackling environmental crime was steadily reduced over the term of the previous Government. There has been a sense that these are somehow victimless crimes. I listened to the "File on 4" documentary, and it was deeply upsetting to hear about the fire and the death of local people at that plant. There is always a victim. There is no such place as "away". We have only one world, and we have to stop treating our rivers, lakes and seas as sewers, and stop outsourcing our material problems to other countries.

Sarah Dyke: In 2021, Natural England downgraded the Somerset levels and moors Ramsar area and the water quality there to "unfavourable declining". Somerset Wildlife Trust has attributed the microplastics to worn tyres in the environment. It is obviously a really concerning pollutant. What steps is the Minister taking to make manufacturers take greater responsibility for the contribution that their products make to microplastic pollution on the Somerset levels and moors?

Mary Creagh: That is a really interesting fact, and not one that I have come across. I will take that away and look at it. As with many of these things, I am responsible for waste and materials and my hon. Friend

the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice is the Water Minister, so things often fall between the gaps of segmented policy brief allocations, but we will look into that and get back to her.

I thank the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for securing this debate and other hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions. This Government want to be good stewards of our country and planet's resources, our prosperity, and our economic and environmental resilience, so the loss of any of those resources concerns me greatly.

We have seen the damaging impacts that makeshift furnaces abroad have on people's health and the environment, and the illegal batch pyrolysis of tyres is linked with other criminal activities that cause harm to the environment, people and communities. It is unacceptable that illegal exportation in this country is part of that supply chain.

We take the reports from "File on 4" and others very seriously. The Environment Agency is working with Indian counterparts to ensure that waste, including waste tyres, is recovered and recycled lawfully. That is a joint UK effort, and DEFRA works closely with all four UK regulators to ensure that there is a consistent approach regarding controls on the export of waste across the United Kingdom. Scotland banned the export of whole tyres back in 2018, so there is inconsistency. What has that meant? It means, possibly, that whole tyres in Scotland have come down to England and Wales for export, but who knows? It is hard to say what the flows are doing.

The Environment Agency is conducting an internal review of how it regulates the export of waste tyres. I and my DEFRA colleagues look forward to that review's findings, and we will carefully consider its outcomes when it has been completed.

Tessa Munt: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: Can I just finish this point? The EA is independent. It is important that we do not prejudice the ongoing review. My understanding from officials is that it will report at the end of June, and I look forward to discussing the outcomes of that review with them. I will ask them to write to the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills with detailed answers to her questions on the scope of the review. And on digital waste tracking, we will launch that from April 2026 and will provide further details on the scope of that in due course.

With tyres, as with other waste, our priority must shift from throwing things away to reusing and recycling more. We will do that by breaking the linear "take, make, throw" model and by seizing the opportunity to become leaders in circular design, technology and industry. We will increase the resilience and productivity of the UK's economy, create highly skilled new green jobs up and down the country, and help our economy to keep more of the critical resources on which it depends. In doing so, we will fulfil our manifesto commitment to reduce waste and to accelerate to net zero.

We have a Circular Economy Taskforce that includes experts from industry, academia, civil society and beyond to help us to develop a circular economy strategy for England. That is supported by sectoral road maps detailing the interventions that the Government and

[Mary Creagh]

others will make to drive circular growth and enhance our economic resilience. The Transport Secretary will be responsible for one of those road maps, and the others will concern agrifood, chemicals and plastics, textiles and waste electricals. We have a lot of different sectoral road maps, and I urge the Tyre Recovery Association to feed into that working group.

We have lots of ideas about how to reuse materials for a different purpose and they are all coming to the fore. The problem is that some ideas will win and some will lose, and we are in the stage where we are not quite clear about what is the right thing to do, and there are lots of good counter-arguments.

In the case of tyres, the rubber crumb produced by recycling them has a range of applications. The hon. Member mentioned, for example, that it can be used to produce asphalt, but it can also be used as a surfacing material in children's playgrounds. The hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) mentioned a responsible and long-standing business that is doing the right thing, but is looking around the landscape, thinking, "Hang on, why are we doing the right thing when the cowboys are undercutting us?" The principle of fairness is important, as is enforcement of the law as it stands—before we make new laws, we should look at enforcing the laws we already have.

We have a competitive market in the UK for waste management services. New people and innovators are always welcome to join the field. There are a lot of management options available to waste handling operators; they need to be selected according to market conditions and local needs. Operators need to look at the waste hierarchy and the need to ensure the best available outcome for the waste. I am very interested in the Australian model and the Australian experience. I know that my officials have been in contact with Australian Government officials.

Sarah Dyke: The Minister mentioned Tyre Renewals in Castle Cary. I would very much like to welcome her to Glastonbury and Somerton to meet Tyre Renewals so that the company can show her what it does.

Mary Creagh: I will do a deal: I will come as long as we can go to The Newt, which I understand is the sponsor of this year's Chelsea Flower Show. I have been reading all about The Newt, so I have been looking up Castle Cary and seeing how easy it would be to get to—my private office will not be very happy with me for saying that.

Tessa Munt: Will the Minister also meet Henry Hodge, who is part of Black-Ram Recycling and one of the people who informed me about this particular problem with tyres? That is in the constituency just next door, so it is an easy trip.

Mary Creagh: We can never spend enough time in Wiltshire, Dr Murrison, so we will see what we can do.

On the T8 exemption, we need to ensure that the UK's house is in good order. The impact that waste criminals have on people's lives is terrible, but poor performance in the waste industry is also a massive

problem. It undermines the many excellent operators and responsible waste businesses in the UK, of whom we should be rightly proud.

We are determined to reform the way that the sector is regulated to mitigate environmental impacts, and we are considering plans. The hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills mentioned the review in 2015, and there was a consultation in 2018. I have been pressing my officials as to why, a mere seven years later, nothing has happened. But she will have noticed that I have not followed in my predecessor's footsteps; inertia is not my middle name. I have been very demanding of officials on this issue and I recognise the importance of removing the T8 exemption for the industry and the wider benefits of doing so. I am happy to tell the House that DEFRA's intentions in this area, along with our priorities in the waste and recycling space, will be announced very soon.

I will close by thanking the hon. Member for securing this debate—but let me just check that I have answered her questions. I have covered the review, digital waste tracking and the retention of the circular economy. She asked about the Environment Agency review. The EA is looking at its own regulation. As part of that review, it will check its understanding of its powers and legal duties and ask, "Are we doing the right thing?" It will look at how it manages information and intelligence received from third parties. If people have evidence of waste crime, I encourage them to report it anonymously through Crimestoppers—so people do not have to give their name and address and worry about reprisals. That intelligence sharing is really important.

That review might also make recommendations for amendments to the EA's legal and regulatory powers. The hon. Member can be reassured that I will not sit around twiddling my thumbs when I get that report.

Tessa Munt: It is really helpful of the Minister to ask people to contact Crimestoppers, but I wonder whether the Department can do more to demonstrate how it is prosecuting people who break the law. Enforcement is incredibly important—

Mary Creagh: We are not the regulator; it is for the Environment Agency, as the regulator, to do those prosecutions.

Tessa Munt: We need to tell people when it is doing this stuff.

Mary Creagh: That is a very good point, but that is not the Department's responsibility; we have the regulator and it is its job to do the prosecutions. There is a correct separation of power.

We have engaged with the Indian authorities, including the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, to help to ensure that this waste is recovered and recycled correctly, because small-batch pyrolysis is also illegal in India. There will be a delegation to meet officials in the autumn to strengthen relationships and discuss this matter further—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Black Maternal Health Awareness Week

[GILL FURNISS *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Black Maternal Health Week 2025.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. Before I get to the crux of this debate, I want to begin by saying that the UK is one of the safest countries in the world for a woman to give birth. I say that at the outset not to diminish the importance of this debate, but to move beyond that platitude—because in the sixth largest economy in the world, this should be one of the safest places to give birth. It is important that we move beyond that and focus on the real and persistent inequalities facing black and minority ethnic women in maternity care. While I am sure it is not the intention to focus on that, it can give the impression that, because the UK is broadly safe, the negative experiences of some women are exceptional and not matters that require significant Government attention. When we detail some of the harrowing experiences of women and hear that response, it can feel as though our concerns are being minimised, so I hope the Minister will appreciate that I have got that part out of the way. While the UK is among the safest places to give birth, it is by no means perfect, and for many women it is deadly. As always, it is vital to lay out the current state of affairs.

The disparities in maternity care are evident not only in maternal mortality statistics, which show that black and mixed heritage women are three times more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as white women, and Asian women twice as likely, but in many other areas. Miscarriage rates are 40% higher in black women, and black ethnicity is now regarded as a risk factor for miscarriage. MBRRACE-UK's 2023 comparison of care for black and white women who have experienced stillbirth or neonatal death found that the majority of all significant issues were identified in antenatal care for 83% of black women, compared with 69% of white women; 67% of black mothers and babies had a major or significant issue related to pathology, compared with 46% of white mothers and babies; and 75% of black parents and 66% of white parents had significant issues identified during the follow-up or reviews of their and their baby's care.

Public Health England's 2020 report found that prematurity is a major cause of long-term infant morbidity. Black mothers, particularly those of black Caribbean background, are twice as likely to give birth before 37 weeks. In Five X More's "Black Maternity Experiences Report 2022", 27% of the 1,340 survey respondents felt that they received "poor" or "very poor" care during pregnancy and labour, and postnatally. Forty-two per cent of the standard of care during childbirth was "poor" or "very poor", and I sincerely hope that the findings of Five X More's next survey, which is currently under way, will show some improvement here.

According to Bliss, many babies born to black mothers require specialist care after birth, particularly due to preterm birth or full term complications, yet significant

inequalities persist in neonatal care, admissions, the quality of care received, and outcomes after discharge. Poor care received at such an early stage of life can have critical consequences and lead to long-term health complications for black babies and deepen trauma for their families. Post-natal mental health disparities are also significant; UK studies show that women from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to suffer from common mental health disorders, yet are less likely to access treatment.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): The Caribbean and African Health Network CIC report reveals that the perinatal mental health services lack spaces where black women can feel safe, seen and supported. Does my hon. Friend, and indeed the Minister, agree that more inclusive, high quality and personalised care is required to meet the needs of all women in maternity care?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; he is absolutely right. I re-emphasise the point that black, Asian and minority ethnic women are more likely to suffer from common mental health disorders, yet are less likely to access treatment. According to MBRRACE-UK's "Saving Lives, Improving Mothers' Care" report from last October, deaths from mental health-related causes accounted for 34% of deaths occurring between six weeks and a year after the end of pregnancy. It is vital that all those who experience pregnancy and childbirth receive mental health support, even if they do not necessarily present as struggling with their mental health; but that is especially true of black, Asian and minority ethnic women, who are more likely to have a negative experience during pregnancy and childbirth. Some of these women's experiences are deeply traumatic and scarring, and can lead to several mental health problems. Despite that, they are less likely to access mental health support, so they are left to try to recover mentally from the experience on their own.

That disparity exists beyond pregnancy and childbirth, and even before conception. According to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, black women are 25 times less likely to access fertility treatment, and NHS-funded in vitro fertilisation cycles among black patients decreased from 60% in 2019 to 41% in 2021. Black and Asian patients aged 18 to 37 had the lowest IVF success rates compared with white patients in 2020-21, and non-white groups also struggled to access donor eggs, with 89% of egg donors being white, 4% Asian, 3% of mixed heritage and only 3% black.

During the International Women's Day debate, I highlighted the latest MBRRACE-UK data, which showed a statistically significant increase in the UK's maternal death rate in the years 2020 to 2022, even when excluding deaths caused by covid-19. Put plainly, more women and babies of all races are dying in the UK now than in the past two decades. This is incredibly worrying, and it means that black women, who often face the worst care, are likely to experience even further deterioration.

When I was researching the latest statistics and figures for this debate, it became increasingly apparent that the data on racial disparities in maternity care is limited and scattered. The data I have cited comes from a collection of reports by various medical bodies and

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

advocacy organisations. Racial disparities are often identified as part of broader studies but, as far as I know, to date there has been no comprehensive medical study dedicated exclusively to racial disparities in maternity care and outcomes, despite the statistics consistently showing how bad things are becoming.

The Lancet's recent study on maternal mortality and MBRACE-UK's reports do include racial breakdowns, but they are based on the data that they have, not the data that they need. A single, dedicated study is yet to be conducted. The lack of comprehensive research makes it incredibly difficult to see a full picture of what is happening, so I hope that the Minister will address that point and highlight what the Government are doing to get a clearer picture of the state of maternity care.

There is no one driver of the racial disparities in maternity care and outcomes. The causes are multifaceted, but overwhelmingly they are the result of a combination of structural racism, unconscious bias, gaps in culturally competent care and socioeconomic inequalities. The first two are incredibly important to highlight. Without acknowledging that the NHS has an issue with institutional racism and unconscious bias, we cannot address the problem. Those issues feed into the quality of care being delivered for black mothers and their babies. The inaccurate and dog-whistle assumptions around black women's pain tolerance, for example, can lead to women being denied pain medication during childbirth, or misbelieved when raising concerns about pain felt that signals a severe medical condition. Those beliefs are not taught in medical school or during training, yet so many black women have come across a nurse, midwife or doctor who holds them. They are a direct result of institutional racism in the NHS and have a direct impact on the care that women receive.

It is important to note that, although racial disparities in maternity care are experienced regardless of class, occupation, education or geography, socioeconomic inequalities are still a very important factor in determining health outcomes and experiences. Women living in the most deprived areas have a maternal mortality rate more than twice that of women living in the least deprived areas. Black and minority ethnic people are 2.5 times more likely to be in relative poverty and 2.2 times more likely to live in deep poverty.

The combination of socioeconomic inequalities and institutional racism in the NHS is having a dual impact on black mothers' experiences of maternity care and health outcomes. Much of the previous Government's work to improve maternity care was focused on comorbidities and socioeconomic drivers of poor health. Indeed, it is crucial that those areas are addressed, but without looking at the structural racism and unconscious bias in the NHS, the problems will persist.

I want to recognise the campaign groups that are pushing the issue up the political agenda. In the absence of concrete Government or NHS action, advocacy groups have stepped in to offer their solutions and recommendations. Where they can, they also offer alternative care and training. First—always first—I commend Five X More, which established Black Maternal Health Awareness Week in 2019. Its work empowers black women to make informed decisions during pregnancy,

and it advocates for systemic change. It is currently conducting its second national survey, building on its impactful 2022 research.

Five X More is calling for a measurable Government target to end racial disparities in maternal death, a commitment that the Labour Government support but have yet to implement. I hope that the Minister will confirm today whether such a target will be set, how it will be measured and when we can expect it. Five X More also advocates for mandatory annual maternity surveys focused on black women's experiences, compulsory anti-racism and cultural competence training for all maternity professionals, and improved data collection on ethnicity and outcomes.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Given the complexities and interchangeable disparities that affect maternal health for black women, does she agree that without a national target or framework we are doomed to make the same mistakes again and again? This travesty needs to end, because no mother or child's health outcome should be determined by the colour of their skin.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. These figures have been circulating for decades, but it was only after a successful parliamentary petition launched by Five X More that we first debated them in the House. We are now five or six years on and we are still in the same situation. Things have to change.

I will continue to pay tribute to the amazing groups that have been pushing for decades to put the issue on the agenda. Mimosa Midwives is another remarkable group that offers culturally safe, continuous maternity care. It campaigns for a culturally appropriate care model in the NHS and for inclusive training in midwifery education to reflect diverse maternal experiences, because much of our medical training remains centred on white women.

The Motherhood Group is a social enterprise supporting black mothers with peer-led services, training workshops and national campaigns. Its annual black maternal health conference brings together researchers, clinicians and service users to tackle disparities. It also launched the Blackmums app to connect mothers navigating similar challenges.

Other charities such as Bliss, Tommy's, Birthrights and the Royal College of Midwives also highlight racial disparities in their broader efforts to improve maternity care. Where the Government and the NHS have fallen short, they have taken the time to campaign and to step in.

I will, however, acknowledge the positive steps that the new Government and the NHS have taken. In response to my written parliamentary questions last month, the Government outlined some ongoing measures. Every local maternity system must now publish an equity and equality action plan that sets out tailored actions to reduce disparities, especially for ethnic minority women and those in deprived areas. I welcome the roll-out of version 3 of the Saving Babies' Lives care bundle, which aims to reduce stillbirth, neonatal death, pre-term birth and brain injury.

Maternal medicine networks are being established to ensure equitable access to specialist care for women at heightened risk. Those efforts are supported by the NHS equality, diversity and inclusion improvement plan,

which was launched in 2023. That plan requires NHS organisations to tackle workforce discrimination, improve leadership accountability and foster an inclusive, harassment-free environment. I am also pleased to note that NHS England is developing a respectful and inclusive maternity care toolkit to support inclusive and culturally competent practice. Those are all really welcome developments, but much more is needed.

I will close with four questions for the Minister. First, will the Government commit to a statutory inquiry into racial disparities in maternity care, including testimony from affected families and frontline providers? Secondly, will the Government fund dedicated research into the medical complications disproportionately affecting black women during pregnancy and childbirth? Thirdly, will the Government commission a review of maternity training across all medical professions, to better equip practitioners in recognising complications and symptoms in black women and babies? Finally, do the Government acknowledge the presence of systemic racism within the NHS? If so, what steps are being taken to confront and eliminate it? It is good that in the past few years, the House has taken the time to acknowledge these issues and allow us to debate them, but even though the Government stated in their manifesto that a target will be set, we now need to see action. We cannot continue to see gaping inequalities in maternal outcomes.

2.45 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on securing today's important debate. She has highlighted that black women often receive a worse standard of care and that their risk of maternal death is three times higher than for white women.

The situation in Nottinghamshire demonstrates why change must happen quickly. As some in the Chamber will know, there is currently an independent review into maternity services at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS trust, led by Donna Ockenden. I first called for this review when I was a councillor after my experience of giving birth to my son in 2020. I knew then, as I know now, that women accessing services at NUH do not always receive the care they deserve, nor are they listened to when they raise concerns. Ahead of today's debate, I reached out to Donna Ockenden and her team for their perspective on black maternal health in Nottinghamshire so that I could highlight it here today.

When the Donna Ockenden review was established in Nottingham two years ago, the Nottingham University Hospitals trust could not share a single named contact within the black community, nor did the trust have any meaningful engagement with the many groups across Nottinghamshire. It had no way of reaching into groups of black women who might have been affected by poor maternity care. The translated resources provided by the trust were also very limited. It is therefore unsurprising that trust between black communities and Nottingham University Hospitals trust was at an all-time low.

As Donna Ockenden rightly emphasised to me, that only increased the risk that women and their families would disengage from vital health services and be unable to give informed consent to treatment through their

maternity programme. I am pleased to say that the review's work so far is leading to some improvements in the NHS, and I believe it is important to acknowledge that progress even if there is still so much further to go.

Since the review began, Donna and her team have met many community groups across Nottinghamshire and attended numerous church services and meetings in the majority black-led churches. They have also appeared on the famous Kemet FM, a local community radio station that focuses on the music, wellbeing and culture of Nottingham's African and Caribbean communities, broadcasting across the east midlands and the Caribbean.

Following that outreach, many black families have come forward to the review, and community engagement has strengthened as the review has progressed. I am pleased to report that these learnings are shared with the trust in bimonthly learning and improvement meetings, although it has taken years to build that relationship with local communities and to establish trust. That is essential not only in providing safe care that is reflective of the population's needs, but in ensuring that the voices of black women are no longer ignored. It is clear that there had been little or no communication for so long.

However, it is important to acknowledge that not every trust has a Donna Ockenden. They do not have somebody reaching out to black communities and black women to find out what is happening and how they are affected by health services.

I know that the last 14 years have had a hugely detrimental impact on maternity services across the country. The only way we can begin to fix them is by tackling the underlying issues in the culture of the NHS. It is important to note, as I have just said, that not every NHS trust has a Donna Ockenden and the level of scrutiny that happened in Nottingham.

As the newly elected chair of the all-party parliamentary group on maternity, I am committed to working with the Government on a health strategy for maternity services that recognises how inequalities have a huge impact on the care that people receive. I therefore urge the Minister to ensure that the experiences of black women are at the heart of any forthcoming maternity strategy, and that trusts are strongly encouraged to engage with communities so that their voices are no longer ignored. If inequalities are to be addressed, we require a national framework and a maternity strategy that is fit for the future.

2.50 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on securing today's important and timely debate, following Black Maternal Health Awareness Week earlier this month. Her opening remarks were comprehensive and thoughtful. I am always pleased to hear from the hon. Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh), who is a passionate advocate for improved maternity services in Nottingham and across the UK; I am pleased to serve on the APPG with her at the helm.

Women are at their most vulnerable during pregnancy, as they carry another human life, and they deserve the very best care. They have more touchpoints with the NHS than they will have for most of their lives. We engage with the NHS when we are born and when we

[Jess Brown-Fuller]

need to access care at the end of our lives. When we are carrying a child, we have more moments in front of medical professionals than for the majority of our lives.

Following its inspection of 131 maternity units, the Care Quality Commission found that 65% were not safe for women to give birth, 47% required improvement on safety, and 18% were inadequate. The commission warned that it is concerned about the potential normalising of serious harm in maternity care. Those risks are particularly stark for women of colour in this country, for whom pregnancy continues to carry an unacceptable level of danger. As the Darzi report highlighted, black women are almost three times as likely as white women to die during childbirth, while neonatal mortality among the most deprived quintile is more than double that among the least deprived. That is nothing less than a national scandal.

Maternity care is an issue close to my heart, having had two very different experiences giving birth in my local hospital in Chichester. I tabled an early-day motion on maternity care and secured a Backbench Business debate in this Chamber on that subject just two months ago. Like the hon. Member for Sherwood Forest, I am in regular contact with Donna Ockenden, who produced the Ockenden report. Her findings, along with those of Dr Bill Kirkup, show that the problems identified at the Shrewsbury and Telford trust and the East Kent trust are not isolated incidents. The same issues are systemic and widespread across many NHS trusts up and down the country.

In preparation for the previous debate on maternity services as a whole, I spoke to families across the country who had experienced devastating failures in the system. They went into hospital expecting the joyful outcome of going home with a child, but instead they had to return without their baby, carrying the trauma of that experience for the rest of their lives.

As the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill mentioned, the MBRRACE-UK report for 2021 to 2023 confirms that inequalities in maternal mortality rates persist, with a nearly threefold difference among women from black ethnic backgrounds, and an almost twofold difference among women from Asian ethnic backgrounds, compared with white women. Women living in the most deprived areas continue to experience maternal mortality rates that are twice those in the least deprived areas. Care for black women who experience stillbirth or neonatal death is often inadequate.

Ethnicity is still not routinely recognised as a risk factor in, for example, the screening and prevention of conditions such as gestational diabetes. Births to black mothers are almost twice as likely to be investigated for NHS safety failings, and black mothers are twice as likely to suffer from perinatal mental illness compared with their white counterparts.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who has long talked about these disparities. She introduced the Miscarriage and Stillbirth (Black and Asian Women) Bill in 2022, which sought to require the Secretary of State to lay annual reports before Parliament on efforts to reduce miscarriage and stillbirth rates among black and Asian women, but unfortunately it was not carried over into the next Session.

When so many of our conversations in this House and in the other place are about the economic pressure we are under as a country, it is worth reflecting that, on top of the enormous human toll of this issue, failure also has a financial cost. Obstetric claims make up just 13% of clinical negligence cases handled by NHS Resolution, but they cost more than £1 billion a year, which is nearly 60% of the total cost.

Across the country, families face unbearable grief and trauma because of failures in maternity care, and that burden is falling disproportionately on black women and families. We Liberal Democrats are committed to transforming maternity services to make the UK the safest place in the world to have a baby, and we fully support the work of Black Maternal Health Awareness Week in drawing attention to these critical issues. Our general election manifesto pledged to revolutionise perinatal mental health support, not only for those currently pregnant and for new mothers but for those who have endured miscarriage or stillbirth.

We have been clear that the Government must, as a priority of the highest urgency, implement all the immediate and essential actions recommended by the Ockenden report. It is deeply concerning that, years after the tragedies at the Shrewsbury and Telford trust and the East Kent trust, failures are still widespread and efforts to address them appear piecemeal.

When my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) recently questioned the Department on the implementation of the Ockenden recommendations, it was alarming that it could not confirm whether the actions had been implemented, nor did it appear to have a system for centrally monitoring the progress. The Minister pointed to the three-year delivery plan for maternity and neonatal services as the Department's main response.

Deeper analysis shows serious shortcomings. Many measures in the plan have no meaningful numerical targets, which makes real accountability for the difference made by the plan very hard to track. Targets for expanding access to perinatal mental health support are being missed, even as some improvement is noted, and staff satisfaction indicators remain worryingly low, with some measures still recording fewer than half of staff expressing confidence in educational opportunities or in their management's response to unsafe practices.

The target set in 2010 to halve maternal mortality looks increasingly out of reach. Maternal mortality rates did not fall for a decade, and they actually increased between 2021 and 2023. Worse still, no updated data has been published for the last two years on the rates of serious brain injury, stillbirth, neonatal mortality or preterm birth. Without transparency and accountability, women will continue to be failed, and black women, who already bear the brunt of the disparities, will continue to be disproportionately harmed. That is why I ask the Minister to commit to reviewing these issues urgently, to meet me and my colleagues from the Liberal Democrat health team to discuss a more effective plan to improve maternity safety, and to set out a clear path to address the deep disparities in black maternal health.

Alongside that, the Liberal Democrats are calling for a cross-Government strategy, led by the Department of Health and Social Care, with annual progress reports on reducing miscarriage and stillbirth rates among ethnic minorities. We also call for increased funding for public

health initiatives, with a portion earmarked to allow communities facing the worst health inequalities to co-produce solutions tailored to their specific needs. We propose the establishment of a health creation unit in the Cabinet Office to lead work across Government to improve health and tackle inequalities.

Black women have waited too long for their concerns to be heard, for the system to change and for justice to be done. We owe it to them and to every woman, family and baby in this country to get maternity services right. No woman should fear for her life or her child's life because of the colour of her skin or the postcode that she lives in. We have to do better.

2.59 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on securing this important debate today. As she said in her opening speech, the UK enjoys some of the best outcomes in the world when it comes to maternity health, but there is always more work to be done to improve our outcomes further. I hope we can all agree that equal access to the best care, for all across our society, should always be our target. That should be based on excellence across the board as standard.

We are considering Black Maternal Health Awareness Week, which is part of National Minority Health Month, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss this topic and exchange views with colleagues from across the House. Colleagues will know that as a clinician myself, I am always guided by data when assessing current healthcare practices and new policy proposals. A 2023 report by the maternal, newborn and infant clinical outcome review programme found that in the period from 2019 to 2021, 241 UK women died during pregnancy or up to six weeks after the end of pregnancy. That equates to a rate of 11.7 women per 100,000 giving birth. Each of those cases represents a tragedy for the woman and baby involved and their family and loved ones, and we must do all we can to prevent them.

The data does, as has been mentioned, also show that women from black backgrounds face a mortality rate much higher than the average; it is equal to 37.2 per 100,000. Women from Asian backgrounds also face a higher rate, at 17.6 per 100,000. Clearly, those figures present a pretty stark picture, but we must exercise care in the interventions that we make, and balance our desire to solve the problem with ensuring that we do that in a way that resolves the problem without risking creating others.

At the outset, it is crucial to ask what the Government are doing to understand the specific causes of these outcome disparities, because if we understand the causes, we will be better able to manage and treat them. The Kirkup and Ockenden reports have already been mentioned. What are the Government doing to ensure that those recommendations are fully implemented, and to develop a strategy to ensure that all women have the opportunity for a safe pregnancy and birth? What kinds of data held by the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care might cast light on other demographic, economic or geographical patterns that contribute to these numbers, which we may be able to help to resolve?

We know that the most significant factor in predicting death during the maternity period is a pre-existing medical condition, and we know that disparities exist in the incidence of some pre-existing conditions that are relevant between some ethnic groups in the wider population. For example, a 2018 research paper in the *American Journal of Kidney Diseases* found that rates of heart disease were 20% higher among the black community than those from white backgrounds, and rates of stroke were a remarkable 40% higher. Do the Government know how the rates of pre-existing conditions among ethnic groups are influencing the figures on maternal health, and how are they going to work to reduce the risks of such conditions among these groups to try to improve the care not just during maternity, but during the whole of black ladies' or ethnic minority ladies' lives?

Maternal mortality itself arises from a number of conditions and causes. In the period from 2019 to 2021, for example, 14% of maternal deaths were attributed to cardiac disease, 14% to blood clots, 10% to sepsis and 9% to epilepsy or stroke. What are the Government doing to understand the prevalence of those conditions among ethnic groups, how the conditions can be prevented, how they can be identified in black women—indeed, in all women—how they can be better treated to save lives, how they can be better managed to save lives, and what research can be done to ensure that they are, if possible, prevented?

Socioeconomic deprivation has also been mentioned, and it is important to consider the impact of deprivation. In the period from 2019 to 2021, 12% of women who died during pregnancy or in the year afterwards were at severe and multiple disadvantage. That included, in particular, women who had suffered mental health conditions or domestic abuse, or had a history of substance abuse. How do the Government understand these factors and their influence on mortality rates, and what are they doing to help to resolve those issues?

Closer to home, in February 2022 the NHS Race and Health Observatory published “Ethnic Inequalities in Healthcare: A Rapid Evidence Review”. The authors of that report noted:

“Tackling poorer care and outcomes among ethnic minority women and babies continues to be a focus within the...NHS England and NHS Improvement Maternity Transformation Programme Equity Strategy, which includes pledges to improve equity for mothers and babies and race equality for staff.”

The Government's abolition of NHS England risks placing that ongoing programme of work, like many others, in jeopardy. Will the Minister tell us the current status of the maternity transformation programme and the implementation of the equity strategy under the NHSE and DHSC reorganisation? How is that work being prioritised, given the many other demands on the Department's time and resources—not least from the reorganisation—that might previously have been spent on improving care?

The previous Government improved the number of midwives per baby and made progress towards the national maternity safety ambition of halving the 2010 rate of stillbirths, neonatal maternal deaths and brain injuries in newborn babies. When will the Government set out their ambition for the next decade? The Labour Government promised more than 1,000 new midwives

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

in their manifesto last year. Will the Minister update us on how many of those 1,000 midwives are now working for the NHS?

The Minister for Care recently stated that the 41 maternal mental health services are now live and will be active in every integrated care system by the end of 2025-26. How will the Government ensure that access to those services can continue when ICSs face such high cuts in funding?

Colleagues have mentioned the possible influence of systemic racism or unconscious bias in maternal outcomes. The NHS has an employed population of 1 million, and it is likely that some bad apples will be found within that overwhelmingly brilliant staff cohort, but I dispute that the NHS overall is a racist organisation. I work in the NHS—I should declare that interest—and I have not seen evidence of structural racism.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists reported that, as of 2024, 45% of obstetric and gynaecological doctors identify as of a black, Asian or minority ethnic background, and 26% of births were to women of black or other minority ethnic backgrounds. Figures for midwives are harder to assert, because they are collated with nursing staff, but the proportion among nurses is 22%.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I just want to check whether the hon. Lady understands that structural racism is about not the number of people within an organisation, but the way the organisation is set up and treats different people. Does she understand that having a high proportion of ethnic minority people does not necessarily mean that an organisation such as the NHS—which, I might add, in its senior levels is run by people mostly not from ethnic minorities—does not discriminate against people in a certain way?

Dr Johnson: I understand the hon. Lady's point. I do not dispute that some women, men, boys or children have awful experiences at the hands of bad apples. That will happen within any organisation of that size—the NHS employs more than 1 million people. That is wrong and should be rooted out; it is absolutely clear that that should stop. However, I work in the national health service, and I think the vast majority of people who go to work in it do so to care for the patients in front of them as best they possibly can. Care should be provided on the basis of clinical need and should not be affected by the ability to pay or by any other socioeconomic, ethnic or other demographic data. Although I accept the point that some individuals will have experienced poor care, which is reprehensible, I do not think that is the majority situation by quite some margin. I think most people receive extremely good care in the NHS, and care that is delivered on the basis of their clinical need, not the colour of their skin.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Does the hon. Lady accept that, given that she is not of an ethnic minority and has not looked at the information given by a number of women from ethnic minority backgrounds who have experienced this, she is not really in a position to say that what they say they experienced does not exist?

Dr Johnson: That is not what I said.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I am just challenging her point. Just because for one or two reasons she may not have seen any institutional racism in the NHS, that does not mean it does not exist. Further, the figures for black maternal mortality are the same in the United States, which has a completely different healthcare system from ours, but they are not the same in countries in Africa or the Caribbean, where black women are the majority. Does she see why that can point only to institutional racism? It is a completely different healthcare system in United States. The only difference is that we are both living in societies where institutional racism is known to be a problem.

Dr Johnson: I think we can both agree that any examples of racism are reprehensible and should be rooted out and that, in the examples given, people are speaking truthfully of their perceptions and what they have experienced. No one is denying the experiences of individuals or groups who have experienced poor care and that that poor care should stop. I just do not think that that suggests the NHS itself is a racist organisation, because I do not believe that it is. That is our point of difference. I think the staff who work in the NHS are overwhelmingly not racist. They want to care for people on the basis of clinical need to the very best of their ability, regardless of any ethnic minority status.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I did not say that the people in the NHS are racist; I said the NHS has a problem with institutional racism. I hope the hon. Member will accept that there are distinctions between those two things.

Dr Johnson: I think we have both made our positions clear. I accept that some people will have received poor care and that the people who delivered that poor care need to be hauled over the coals. They need to be called out for what they have done and we must ensure that such care does not happen again. But I do not accept that the NHS is a racist organisation.

Another issue is language barriers. It is well recognised that it is difficult for people who have a language barrier to access health services. Can the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to help with that? In recent years in my medical career I have seen improvements in the delivery of language services, but when I was a more junior doctor an appointment needed to be booked in advance and an interpreter had to attend in person. Sometimes they were available and sometimes they were not. Sometimes other members of staff or family members would be used to interpret, which is a poor standard of care, relatively speaking.

Michelle Welsh: Is it possible for the hon. Member to highlight what part of the NHS she worked in? The reported experiences of interpretation and translation nationally are very different from what she is describing, which does not reflect the factual accounts and certainly does not reflect what has been happening in Nottinghamshire.

Dr Johnson: I did the junior part of my medical career in Nottinghamshire. I am describing what happened in the junior part of my career, which is about 20 years ago now. My experience 20 years ago was that it was very difficult to get interpreters, and that the people used to interpret were not proper interpreters and not the appropriate people. That should not be happening.

The service is still not perfect, but over time we have seen translation services improve. Many hospitals have instituted new iPad systems where one can choose a country of origin or the language that the person speaks, and a dial-up system of interpreters working from home is used to provide an interpreting system. That is much better—it is more available to the patient than the services we had in the past, which required someone in person—but it is still not perfect. We still see areas across the country where those services and that interpretation are unavailable to people. How will the Minister ensure that women who have difficulties with the English language are able to access interpreters when they need them—not just for appointments, but for out-of-hours emergencies? That is when interpreters are most difficult to obtain, particularly for languages spoken by fewer people in the United Kingdom.

I want to ask about the Government's plans. The previous Government instituted a three-year plan, which comes to an end next year. When will the Government produce the plan? They talked about their 10-year NHS plan, which they said they would produce in the spring. I believe we are in the spring now—if we look outside, it is a beautiful day; the flowers are out and the lambs have been born. Where is the plan that the Government promised? What targets are they going to set, and when, to improve maternity care for all women, and specifically for black women?

3.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. Before I begin, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for securing this important debate during Black Maternal Health Awareness Week. It is so important that we raise awareness of the disproportionate challenges faced by black mothers during pregnancy and after childbirth; debates in weeks such as this are critical to that.

I want to pay tribute to the charities that do so much vital work in this space: the Motherhood Group, Five X More, Black Mums Upfront, which is part of Bliss, and Ebony Bonds, to name just a few. I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister for women's health and patient safety, Baroness Merron. I also want to thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this debate. I will seek to pick up and answer all their queries, but if they feel I have not done so by the end of the debate, I ask them to please get in touch and I can ensure we respond.

I want to thank the charity Sands for shining a spotlight on some of the most heartbreaking cases of baby loss in the UK, and for giving a voice to so many black and Asian women who have gone through the nightmare of losing a child. One such case was Amber Lincoln from Woolwich in south-east London. She was miscategorised as low risk when she was pregnant, and nearly died from undetected complications after her delivery. A series of individual and systemic failings led to cancellations and delays, and her twins, Anaya and Mael, were born and died at 22 weeks in November 2022, before she could access the care she needed. Amber said:

"If the NHS just listened to me. And just put my appointment through when I was constantly asking. If they had the notes there properly I wouldn't have been treated that way."

She said the fact she was mixed race led midwives to focus on diabetes and high blood pressure rather than other high-risk indicators. I wish I could stand here and say that Amber was an isolated case, but her story will sound familiar to black women up and down the country, and it shows in the figures. The latest data from MBRRACE-UK shows maternal mortality rates for women from black ethnic backgrounds are more than double those for white women. Black women and their babies are also at higher risk of stillbirth, neonatal death and miscarriage. That should shame us in modern Britain.

Tackling inequalities and racism in maternity services is an absolute priority for this Government. Our manifesto committed to setting an explicit target to close the black and Asian maternal mortality gaps. That commitment has not wavered—we are working hard not only to set a target but to set the actions that will help deliver it. It is crucial we set the right targets and ensure the system is supported to achieve them, which is why the Government are currently considering the action needed that would drive change on the ground, ensuring that targets set are evidence-based, and women and baby-centred.

Our ambition is not just to improve maternal outcomes; we want to improve black women's experiences of maternity care too. We know that too often black women are not listened to and experience racism and bias. That is completely unacceptable. Importantly, our ambition must also extend beyond maternity services, so that we can tackle wider health inequalities, including the determinants of ill health. I know that health inequalities do not start at the door of maternity services, and nor do they end when women go home.

Here is what we are doing and where we need to go further. We are aware of calls for a national inquiry into maternity care, which we will carefully consider. There have been a number of reviews, inquiries and wider research in recent years that have provided a shared and clear sense of the issues in maternity and neonatal care. The most important priority must remain for us to target resources and efforts to address the existing issues identified and avoid any further delays. The focus must be to address inequalities and the action taken to do so for women and babies.

NHS England is now in the final year of delivering its three-year plan to improve maternity and neonatal services. Central to the plan is the objective to reduce inequalities for all in maternity access, experience and outcomes, and taking steps to tackle and address inequalities for black women. To achieve this objective, all local areas now have in place and are implementing their equity and equality action plans. Those plans detail local interventions tailored to population needs, in order to tackle inequalities for women and babies from ethnic minorities and those living in the most deprived areas. There have been some great examples of local best practice within those plans, ranging from targeted pre-conception health support to tailored support to ensure equitable access to care, and bespoke communications for pregnant asylum seekers and refugees.

As part of the three-year delivery plan, all local areas are working to implement version three of the Saving Babies' Lives care bundle, which provides maternity units with guidance and interventions to reduce and tackle the inequalities in stillbirths, neonatal deaths, brain injuries and pre-term births. Those local and national interventions are essential steps to improving equity and equality in maternity care.

[Ashley Dalton]

In parallel, however, it is vital that we continue to work to foster a culture of safety, compassion, honesty and one that is actively anti-racist, which must be led by outstanding leadership. I am pleased that all 150 maternity and neonatal units in England have signed up to the perinatal culture and leadership programme.

For clarity, and I think particularly for the shadow Minister, we recognise that racism and unconscious bias need to be tackled, that they are unacceptable and must be tackled in the NHS.

Dr Johnson: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Ashley Dalton: I will finish what I am saying and then I will give the shadow Minister an opportunity to come back to me.

To clarify, this work is not only about the behaviours that we must tackle in the NHS; it is also about the systems that we create in the NHS and ensuring that those systems do not consciously or subconsciously discriminate against people on the grounds of their race. That is what we mean and that is why we are putting in place training for leaders in our maternity units. We will ensure that they are signed up to the perinatal culture and leadership programme, to ensure that those systems are as equitable as they possibly can be.

Dr Johnson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I think we all agree that racism is wrong and must be weeded out wherever it happens. Could she say, in answer to the question posed by the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) at the beginning of her speech, whether she believes that the NHS is structurally racist?

Ashley Dalton: The shadow Minister will know that that is not actually the question that my hon. Friend asked. She asked about systemic racism. We recognise that racism and unconscious bias can play a part both in the behaviours of some people, which must be tackled, and in the way that systems are structured. That is why the training that we are introducing will help to tackle racism. It is not necessarily the case that there is racism throughout the NHS, but we must do everything we possibly can to make sure that NHS systems are as equitable as they can be.

Dr Johnson: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I confess that I thought I heard the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill say “structural”. However, if the word she used was “systemic”, does the Minister think the NHS is systemically racist?

Ashley Dalton: I think that we have to do everything possible to make sure that all the systems in the NHS are as equitable as possible.

We have set clear expectations for escalation and accountability through the three-year plan, and all 150 maternity and neonatal units in England have signed up to the perinatal culture and leadership programme. We are supporting staff to hold up their hands when things go wrong through the Freedom to Speak Up initiative. Our approach to tackling inequalities in maternity and neonatal care must be underpinned by evidence, research and—critically—working with women and their

families. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) pointed out, it is crucial that women’s voices, including black women’s voices, are heard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill mentioned funding for research. The National Institute for Health and Care Research has launched a £500 million funding call that challenges researchers and policymakers to come up with new ways of tackling maternity inequalities and poor pregnancy outcomes. The NIHR has also invited applications for funding of up to £500,000 for a research project to understand how biases in medical devices used during the pregnancy and neonatal period might be contributing to inequalities for women and babies.

NHSE is working closely with the NHS Race and Health Observatory on the outputs of the learning and action network programme, which aims to address inequalities for women and babies from black, Asian and other ethnic minority backgrounds. Local maternity and neonatal voices partnerships bring together the voices and experiences of women and families to improve maternity and neonatal care. More than a quarter of the partnership leads are from ethnic minority groups. Women’s voices must continue to be at the heart of our improvements to care.

I will be frank with colleagues: although the measures I have set out are important, I do not believe they will be enough to meet the scale of our ambitions. The Government are committed to ensuring that all women and babies, regardless of their ethnicity, background or location, receive the high-quality, equitable care they deserve. Many of these initiatives began under the previous Government, and although there has been some progress across maternity and neonatal care—for example, good progress has been made in reducing the number of stillbirths and neonatal deaths—we have much further to go to improve care and tackle inequalities.

Looking forward, we are clear that we want to see high-impact actions to tackle inequalities and racism in maternity services. Baroness Merron and the Secretary of State are working closely across the sector to identify the right actions and interventions to deliver the required change.

The shadow Minister asked about data collection. Data on women’s ethnic background is routinely collected by services at multiple points throughout maternity care. The data is used to disaggregate reporting of adverse outcomes, such as maternal mortality, by ethnicity. Differences by ethnicity are also reported as part of the Care Quality Commission’s annual survey, which asks a sample of pregnant women and new mothers about their experiences of NHS maternity services. NHS trusts are incentivised to collect this information through the maternity incentive scheme, which is a financial incentive programme that is designed to enhance maternity safety in NHS trusts. Safety action 2 of the maternity incentive scheme incentivises trusts to submit digital information, including ethnicity data, to the maternity services dataset.

Some of our processes will take time to implement, but we need to understand the immediate actions that can begin to deliver change here and now. I therefore reiterate our commitment to setting an explicit target to close the black and Asian maternal mortality gap. We must get this right. Targets must be evidence based, and that is why it is so important that the data is collected,

as I have said, that our targets are women and baby-centred and, crucially, that the system is supported to meet the targets that are set. To this end, NHS England has undertaken a review of the evidence base and conducted extensive stakeholder engagement to identify the key drivers of inequalities for black and Asian women and babies—again ensuring that black women's voices are heard.

Dr Johnson: The Minister talks about the importance of setting an achievable target and working on how it will be delivered, but the Government have now been at this for 10 months, and it was a manifesto commitment. Will she at least commit to a date by which it is likely to be set? Nothing will happen until there is a target and a plan. The Government are spending time deciding when to make a target, and all the while women are waiting.

Ashley Dalton: We are working at pace, ensuring that what we do is right and that it is achievable. The shadow Minister will be aware that the Government are developing a 10-year plan for health, and women's health, including maternity health, will be at the centre of it. We want to ensure that whatever we put in place dovetails with all the other interventions and actions that the Government are putting forward.

The areas identified for intervention so far include the improper management of existing conditions, racism and discrimination, and access to care. We are clear that we want to see innovative and high-impact ideas that will shift the dial. We want to make sure not just that we are coming up with some sort of plan, but that it can be delivered and will be impactful.

Let me assure my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill that this issue keeps us up at night. I know that she will continue to hold us to account. I began my speech by referencing Amber's story. She asked how she could put her trust in a system that let her down so badly, and I completely understand why she felt that way. It is our duty to make sure that women like Amber can trust the system with something as precious as their children, and to prevent what should be one of the most joyful days in their lives from becoming a tragedy.

3.30 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I thank all Members present in this afternoon's debate for their thoughtful and balanced contributions. It is not very often in the House that we are generally in agreement, so I am heartened to be joined by Members from different political backgrounds calling for us to improve the state of maternity care.

I was grateful for the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Rusholme (Afzal Khan), who talked about the lack of spaces where black women feel supported and the importance of increasing those for all women in maternity care. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) pointed out the need for a national target and framework to challenge these issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh), the chair of the APPG on maternity, gave a fantastic speech on the significant concerns about the quality and safety of maternity services in the Nottingham University Hospitals Trust. She made very important points on tackling the underlying issues of culture within the NHS. I was also

pleased to hear the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), rightly pointing out that this disparity is a national scandal. We are at risk of normalising these issues, and it is so important that we continue to challenge them. Although I do not agree with the shadow Minister on much, she made a very good point about language services.

I thank the Minister for her response and for detailing the steps that the Government are taking to tackle this. I know that the Government have committed to setting a target to end racial disparities in maternity care, and I was pleased to see it as a manifesto commitment, but at times, it can feel as though the issue is being kicked into the long grass, as the target has not yet been set. We are looking forward to that, and there are several campaigns watching the debate this afternoon that will have rejoiced when they heard that the Government have committed to setting a target. Like me, however, they continue to wait in eager anticipation to hear what it is. I hope the Minister will take that on board, and that we will not wait too much longer for the target to be announced.

Should there be a national inquiry into maternity services, we would hope that black maternal health would be considered as a clear element of the problem, with stand-alone recommendations on what should be done to tackle the disparities. That would be extremely important. I also thank the Minister for acknowledging the need for anti-racism training, that systemic racism exists, and that there are various things that we must do to tackle it. One of the worst things that can happen to women in this situation is being gaslit into thinking that their experiences did not happen. Women not being listened to purely because of what they look like, where they are from and their ethnic origin, is causing so many problems and even leading to deaths. We must acknowledge them and, instead of burying our heads in the sand, tackle issues of racism and discrimination in our health service.

Finally, I thank all the campaigners listening to the debate today again for their hard work and tireless campaigning. Many of the women in the campaign are involved because of their own experience in maternity care or that of a loved one. Many who have dedicated their time to campaigning on the issue do so because they do not want anybody else to go through what they did. It can be exhausting to re-live past traumas and continue to push the cause, but it is through their hard work that we are having the debate today and that we have a Government willing to address the issues.

In my opening remarks, I mentioned the worrying findings from the recent MBRRACE-UK report, which revealed that the overall maternal death rate is increasing. That is outrageous. That should be alarming to all of us and should spur us into action. I say this each time we have this debate: improving the state of maternity care for black and ethnic minority women and babies will improve the overall quality of maternity care for all mothers and babies. I hope we can agree that that is certainly worth doing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Black Maternal Health Week 2025.

3.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Antisocial Behaviour: Dudley

4 pm

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I will call Sonia Kumar to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make only a very short speech with the prior permission of the Member in charge and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for a 30-minute debate.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of anti-social behaviour in Dudley.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss; I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate on antisocial behaviour in Dudley.

Antisocial behaviour strikes at the heart of every community in the UK. In Dudley, residents are increasingly concerned about vandalism, intimidation, dangerous driving, off-road bikes, groups engaging in persistent disorder, theft, drug dealing and—my pet hate—fly-tipping. Antisocial behaviour erodes community confidence and makes people feel unsafe. It not only undermines trust among neighbours but hinders our local businesses and tarnishes our towns' reputations as vibrant, welcoming places to work and live.

The impact on our high streets and businesses is significant. Some estimates show that the cost to businesses and individuals of the heightened fear of crime is in excess of £70 billion a year. That is simply unacceptable. We must be better at reducing the cost and consequences of antisocial behaviour.

Why do we have antisocial behaviour? It is a complex issue with social, psychological and economic factors. Poverty and deprivation are consistently identified as primary root causes. High levels of poor mental health, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress, especially among teenagers, can contribute to it.

This issue is not just for the Minister here today; it should be tackled cross-departmentally. If people in my constituency thought that they had a genuine say in their community and equal opportunity for jobs, housing and a better quality of life, they may feel differently.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I recently spoke to one of my Halesowen constituents who faced problems with antisocial behaviour. Somebody frequently smoked cannabis outside her property, and although she reported it to Dudley council and the police, little was done. In fact, it was only after my office became involved that something happened. Does my hon. Friend agree that although that might seem a minor incident to the authorities, it is really important for our constituents, and it is absolutely imperative that they strive to tackle antisocial behaviour?

Sonia Kumar: I agree. Many people have said to me that the smoking of cannabis and drug dealing across the constituency is causing them not to want to go out, and they are really worried about their children. It is also just wrong, and we need better rehabilitation services.

A question we should reflect on is why people have such high levels of antisocial behaviour. I would like to highlight the crucial role of prevention in tackling antisocial

behaviour. Effective prevention is about not just responding to incidents after they occur but addressing the root causes and stopping them before they start.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We all have, in our constituencies, the antisocial behaviour issues to which the hon. Lady refers. Does she agree that the prevalence of antisocial behaviour throughout this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland suggests that we need to do more to engage with the youth and give them a stake in the community? I believe that that is the thrust of her ideas. In my constituency, church organisations such as the Boys' Brigade, the Girls' Brigade, campaigners and other church youth groups have given young people routes to greater support to ensure that more young people are taught skills, thereby improving social cohesion. Churches have a role, and if we let them play it, we will all benefit.

Sonia Kumar: I agree. Engagement in all aspects of the community is important, whether we are talking about the church, the gurdwara, the mosque or the synagogue. It does not matter what the community forum is—it could just be the youth centre—but if youth are engaged in that, we should pursue those routes to get them to take a more active role in society.

Early engagement with young people in schools to address adverse behaviour before it escalates is paramount. We should look particularly at regular, high-visibility foot and vehicle patrols in hotspots to deter offenders. Close collaboration with local businesses and residents to identify persistent offenders and intervene early is essential. It is about building community cohesion and providing job opportunities and rehabilitation for people who have committed antisocial behaviour offences. Too often, there is a lack of outlets where our youth can enjoy safe and entertaining activities, including participating in sport.

Without sports, youth or activity centres, young people are left with limited options, which can lead to antisocial behaviour. This is why I am fighting to bring back Dudley Town football club and why community assets such as Sedgley library must be saved. These assets are essential for our community, and that is also why I oppose the closure of Meadow Road youth centre in my constituency.

I am hugely grateful to the Mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, for securing the west midlands as a youth guarantee trailblazer area, focusing on supporting young people who are not in education, employment or training. That programme is just part of the solution and will reduce antisocial behaviour over the long term. This is why I am fighting for it to be in Dudley.

There are other reasons why antisocial crime has proliferated in Dudley. Like much of the west midlands, Dudley has seen crime increase dramatically over the past decade. We have witnessed a 76% increase in crime locally, while the west midlands as a whole has seen an increase of 79%. That trend is deeply worrying. Chronic underfunding and a significant cut to police numbers over the past 14 years have hampered our police forces, with 700 fewer deployed police officers in the west midlands compared with 2010.

Despite these challenges, our police officers continue to do a fantastic job, and I want to take this moment to thank them for their unwavering commitment to keeping

us safe, even under the most challenging circumstances. I firmly believe that by supporting our local police, we can turn those troubling statistics around.

Alex Ballinger: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is delivering an excellent speech. Does she welcome the fact that 150 extra neighbourhood police officers are coming to the west midlands as part of the Labour party's commitment to providing 13,000 extra neighbourhood police officers? Will that not help us to tackle the antisocial behaviour we are seeing across Dudley?

Sonia Kumar: I thank my hon. Friend. That is why I welcomed the Government's announcement of £200 million for neighbourhood policing as part of the wider £1 billion boost. This investment will reassure communities as they once again see local police officers patrolling our streets. By supporting our local police forces, we will turn around the worrying trend in crime statistics.

I was delighted to see locally that our police and crime commissioner, Simon Foster, secured an extra 150 neighbourhood police officers for the west midlands, alongside a further 139 officers redeployed into neighbourhood policing. Neighbourhood policing must be at the heart of our approach. The actions taken by the PCC are exactly what we need to ensure policing once again serves our community. That is part of the PCC's new police and crime plan, which I wholeheartedly support, but we can and must go further.

We in this House must demonstrate that we take the concerns of our constituents seriously when it comes to antisocial behaviour and tackling crime in the 21st century. That is why I was delighted to support the Crime and Policing Bill on Second Reading earlier this year. The Bill introduces respect orders, which will allow police and local authorities to target persistent offenders through tougher restrictions. It extends closure powers to help to shut down premises that are a magnet for crime and disorder, and increases the penalties for repeat offenders, ensuring that those responsible for making people's lives a misery are held to account.

Crucially, the Bill ensures that victims' voices are at the heart of the process and are heard. When reporting incidents, victims can feel confident that authorities will act and take their voices seriously with the introduction of new reviews of antisocial behaviour complaints. That is particularly important for housing estates and high streets in Dudley, where persistent disorder can drive businesses away and disrupt families trying to go about their daily lives. The Bill will also support local authorities to search and seize vehicles linked to fly-tipping.

Antisocial behaviour in Dudley is an issue that I receive emails about every single day. One case that stuck with me happened on Oak Street, where a resident wrote to me about drug dealing, vandalism and threatening behaviour by gangs who frequently gather near Silver Jubilee Park. Residents became so worried that they remained in their homes, frightened to go out and complain for fear of retaliation. Sadly, when those issues were raised with the council, it refused to reinstall temporary CCTV. That was incredibly frustrating and disappointing. I hope that my Conservative council is listening and will change its decision.

Regrettably, that is not an isolated issue. In Upper Gornal, there are repeated incidents of joyriding on motorbikes late at night around the green, disrupting

local residents and making roads too dangerous to use in case of an accident. Fly-tipping is also a constant issue for my constituents, with Kates Hill in Dudley singled out to me as a significant problem area for residents.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. This issue affects not just Dudley but the whole of Dudley borough, an area that covers the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) and my Stourbridge constituency. Fly-tipping is absolutely prolific in the Lye ward of my constituency, and the council is really struggling to enforce against much of it because a lot of it associated with organised crime. Does she agree that we need to support and resource councils to tackle this antisocial environmental crime in collaboration with stakeholders?

Sonia Kumar: I agree with my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. We need to ensure that the local council is engaging with residents in community forums and working with local police, and that we have more police on our streets.

Car theft is another serious issue. In my area in particular, I am too often told by email about cases of car theft and burglary. People send me emails and Facebook messages saying that, time and again, those issues are not being properly reviewed. Constituents are frightened, and it adds unnecessary stress for local residents.

I could go on and list the issues that residents have raised with me through email and social media, whether that is racial slurs being shouted, public urination, vandalism of public gardens, drug dealing or roads covered by litter. It is entirely unacceptable, and that behaviour is a blight on the communities of Dudley. It causes terror, particularly for elderly and vulnerable residents, causes damage to our communities, undermines pride of place and breeds a culture and perception of lawlessness, which ultimately leads only one way.

I am grateful for the work that the Government have already done and their plans to increase police numbers and tackle antisocial behaviour. My concern, however, is that when announcements are made about resources being allocated to the west midlands, Dudley often does not get its fair share. Can the Minister reassure me that any extra police officers, resources for youth centres, and support for young people that are directed to the west midlands are fairly shared with towns such as Dudley? We can reassure residents that not just big cities, but our towns, get the funding, and that they will not miss out. Can she also reassure me that Dudley will have the opportunity to be home to a youth trailblazer?

Antisocial behaviour is a multifaceted issue that demands a comprehensive response. We must invest in prevention, support our police, ensure the fair distribution of resources and give our young people hope and opportunities. Only then can we restore pride, safety and confidence in Dudley's communities.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss—I always

[*Jess Phillips*]

say that, but it actually is a pleasure. Let me start by thanking all the Members who have come today and contributed. I am especially grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for securing the debate. As a fellow midlands MP, I am delighted that her constituents have someone fighting so diligently on their behalf.

Just because I have a bit of time, I have a good Dudley-related antisocial behaviour story from my childhood—or rather, from the '70s, before I was born. My mum and dad lived in the Black Country at the time. When the younger of my two older brothers bit my elder brother, my mum said that if he was going to behave like an animal, he would have to go with them, and she drove him to Dudley zoo and left him there. It was the '70s, Ms Furniss—things were different in the '70s. He is fine, to be clear, but I like my mother's direct action with antisocial behaviour, doling out immediate action to prevent it. I do not think he ever bit my brother again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley and others have powerfully set out how antisocial behaviour remains a constant menace in communities around the country. Whether in Dudley or anywhere else, it has a damaging effect on people and places, which is why we are pushing strongly to tackle it. I know this is an area of focus for the Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson). My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley mentioned her support for some of the efforts in the Crime and Policing Bill; the Policing Minister will currently be on her feet in that Bill Committee, which is why I am here today and not her—it is not just because it is a midlands matter.

Antisocial behaviour has a strong local dimension, which came through in various contributions from my hon. Friend and colleagues in neighbouring areas, and it manifests itself in different ways. I will come to specific points shortly, but before I do, I want to set out the national context, because it is such a widespread problem. We heard, as we so often do, from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, that this is a problem in Northern Ireland, as it is in Wales, the west midlands and everywhere. We all know from our interactions with constituents that antisocial behaviour causes distress, concern and fear among residents, communities and businesses. It plagues town centres and neighbourhoods. It spoils people's enjoyment of parks and other spaces.

Let us get it right: antisocial behaviour is not low level, trivial or minor. To minimise it in that way is an insult to the many people who suffer every day as a result of the selfish actions of others. As a constituency Member of Parliament, I am not sure that anything is brought to me as much as antisocial behaviour. It could come from a neighbour—I especially like it when both neighbours come to me, although that is tricky to deal with at times—or from other people in the local community. This is genuinely a problem that can make people move out of their family homes. This not low level: it is incredibly serious. Antisocial behaviour eats away at people's sense of security and local pride, and it needs to be dealt with as the serious threat that it is.

For too long, the response has been weak and ineffective, and this Government are putting that right. The Prime Minister has placed safer streets at the heart of his plan for change. Through that mission, we are determined to address the scourge of antisocial behaviour. We are backing up our words with action, including by restoring and strengthening neighbourhood policing, which has been badly eroded in recent years. We are also introducing the respect orders mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) mentioned cannabis. I am sure that everybody here has heard the same complaints about kids and adults constantly smoking cannabis outside their houses. That is why tackling illegal drugs is key to delivering the Government's mission to make our streets safer, to halve knife crime, to crack down on antisocial behaviour and to go after the gangs who are luring young people into violence and crime.

We know from the crime survey for England and Wales that people using or dealing drugs is among the top three antisocial behaviour issues that people most commonly think is a problem in their area. I have been door-knocking in streets not too far away from Dudley where people were openly dealing drugs. For quite some time it has felt like there is no deterrent, and that has to change. Half of crimes such as shoplifting and burglary are driven by drugs, which is why the Government are determined to crack down on ASB and drug misuse.

The police have a critical role to play in cracking down on drug misuse and antisocial behaviour, and when individuals are found in possession of drugs, they must face appropriate sanctions. We are working with the police and the National Police Chiefs' Council to support and increase voluntary referrals into treatment. We firmly believe that diverting those who use illegal drugs into interventions such as drug treatment services is the key to reducing drug misuse, drug-related crimes and reoffending.

We support the use of drug testing on arrest and out-of-court resolutions, to ensure that individuals who commit drug-related offences are given the opportunity to change their behaviour by diverting them to meaningful and appropriate interventions. The whole tone of the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley was not about demonising some of those who might perpetrate such crimes, but about recognising that this is a societal problem that requires a multifaceted approach. Through the Crime and Policing Bill, we are taking forward proposals to expand both the trigger offences that can lead to a drugs test and the range of drugs that can be tested for—I was in the Bill Committee as we discussed that this morning.

Beyond enforcement, we know that treatment works to reduce reoffending. Giving offenders greater access to treatment services helps to break the underlying cause of their reoffending and increases public safety. We are committed to ensuring that anyone with a drug problem can access the help and support they need, and we recognise the need for evidence-based, high-quality treatment. The prevention of drug and alcohol-related harm is vital for saving lives and making our streets safer. As my hon. Friend said, this work will not be done by just the Home Office—it has to be a cross-Government endeavour—and the Department of Health and Social Care continues to invest in improvements to

local treatment services for children and young people, and for adults with drug or alcohol problems, to ensure that those in need can access high-quality help and support.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the need for hotspot policing. If we are to make preventing crime and antisocial behaviour a top priority, we have to put our money where our mouth is. That is why I was very impressed to hear about the great work being done through the hotspot action funding, such as deploying police and other uniformed presence to target areas with the hottest crimes in order to clamp down on antisocial behaviour and serious violence. As part of the Government's plan for change, and to support making the country's streets safer, £66.3 million has been available for hotspot policing action in 2025-26, and West Midlands police have been allocated £3.7 million of that funding. This will ensure an enhanced uniformed presence in the town centres and neighbourhoods across the country with the densest concentration of knife crime and ASB.

Young people were mentioned a number of times. I used to do some youth work in Upper Gornal, and I got really good at table tennis—I have lost the skills now, I am afraid to say. We understand that no single agency holds all the levers to tackle antisocial behaviour, and that effective multi-agency working is crucial. We are committed to intervening earlier to stop young people being drawn into crime, and an essential part of achieving that will be carried out through the Young Futures programme. We will establish a network of Young Futures hubs and prevention partnerships across England and Wales, to intervene earlier and to ensure that children and young people are offered support in a more systematic way, as well as creating more opportunities for young people in their communities through the provision of open access to mental health and careers support.

My hon. Friend mentioned the trailblazers scheme. I, too, hope that it will come to Dudley and that the west midlands will be able to exhaust all the support we can. I cannot make her any promises about Sedgley library from the Dispatch Box, but I am with her in her campaign to maintain the library.

My hon. Friend also talked about respect orders. We recognise that the powers in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 do not currently go far enough, so we are putting that right by introducing respect orders in the Crime and Policing Bill, to help to ensure that our communities are free from harm. Under

the new measures, persistent adult perpetrators of antisocial behaviour will face tough restrictions, including bans on entering the areas where they have behaved antisocially, such as town centres or other public places.

On the questions my hon. Friend asked towards the end of her speech, in expecting the Policing Minister to respond to the debate and not me, I suspect she might have been more explicit in stating that Birmingham gets all the money in the west midlands. *[Interruption.]* I hear from a sedentary position that that feels true to other people. I appreciate my hon. Friend's diligent diplomacy because I am the Minister. It is funny: I spend a lot of time in my day job bashing London for getting all the money, so it is nice to get some just deserts. When it comes to the metrics that get used to ensure that funding is given out fairly, I can imagine what it feels like in a town next to a large city. When there is a behemoth like Birmingham next door, I imagine it can feel as though Birmingham gets the money.

While I am in the Home Office, I will always use my voice to stand up for extra resources for the whole of the West Midlands police force area. It is safe to say that the Home Secretary, a Member of Parliament who represents towns that surround a big city, is only too aware of the plight of towns. I absolutely hear the calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, although obviously I also think Birmingham should get some money for services. I am not suggesting we should get rid of all of our resources and give them to Dudley, but I am happy to share.

I will wrap up by thanking everyone who has contributed to the debate, which has been yet another reminder of the strength of feeling around this issue and the harm that antisocial behaviour causes in communities across the country. It has been a pleasure for me to be among those who sound like me, which is not an experience I often get; it has been a pleasure to take part in this wholly west midlands-related debate. Whether in Dudley or anywhere else, decent, law-abiding people rightly want this problem gripped. The Government agree with them and we are determined to deliver the safer streets that they want and deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Staffordshire: Cultural Contribution

4.30 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cultural contribution of Staffordshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss, and I thank everyone for their interest in attending this Westminster Hall debate. Staffordshire is a county where culture is carved in clay, sung on local stages and carried proudly in the stories of its people. Its legacy is rich and alive, and today I rise to champion our region and its contribution.

Our future links us to our past, but we are not bound by it. That future speaks to the potential of every single one of Staffordshire's communities—from Stafford, my proud county town, and the vibrant city of Stoke-on-Trent to the quieter, more rural parts of the county such as Eccleshall, Derrington and Church Eaton. Much like our county symbol, the 15th-century Stafford knot, we are all interlinked.

I secured this debate to celebrate Staffordshire's legacy and to mark Staffordshire Day on Thursday 1 May, which is another important day to vote Labour and champion our community's future. The debate is an opportunity to discuss tapping into our heritage, building on our creativity and ensuring that our proud traditions and culture continue to be a force for positive change in Staffordshire and beyond.

Staffordshire is known for many things. It is perhaps best known for its ceramics, which I will leave to my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) to discuss in detail, and for its brewing, which I am confident that my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) will discuss at great length.

Those are just the most famous examples of Staffordshire's skilled craftspeople and their impact on our country's industrial and creative landscape. As a pioneering industrial county, many of our more modern organisations—such as Bostik, which makes adhesives; Perkins, which makes engines; and GE Vernova, which makes transformers—have grown from roots in more traditional work with metal, clay, leather or textiles.

Much of Staffordshire's history, which is encapsulated in archives, can be found at the new Staffordshire History Centre in my constituency. At that amazing new facility, over a thousand years of Staffordshire's history have been brought to life in some fascinating displays. The archives include rare items such as Anglo-Saxon charters confirming the foundation of Burton abbey and a letter written on the eve of the American revolution. A key part of the centre's collection is the rare books and manuscripts collected by William Salt. For anyone looking for more information about Staffordshire's past after this debate, the centre is a very good place to start.

As a proud county town, Stafford has a key story to tell in Staffordshire's cultural history, and it echoes through to today. In its town centre, people can stop for coffee and cake at the Soup Kitchen, which dates to the 16th century, enter the historic churches of St Mary's and St Chad's, and take in the interior and exterior of the Ancient High House, which is haunted by a ghost called George and is known for being the largest surviving

timber-framed townhouse in England. We also have Stafford castle, which has dominated the skyline in Stafford for over 900 years.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for theatre, I will also talk about theatres. There is the Stafford Gatehouse theatre, famous for its Shakespeare festival and for its hilarious pantomimes every Christmas, which bring audiences from across the county to Stafford. The Gatehouse also provides a space for actors, artists and writers to hone their craft with its hugely popular youth theatre. I was lucky enough to meet some of those actors, artists and writers last Friday before the opening night of "Carrie: The Musical".

Across the county, we have other wonderful theatres such as the New Vic in Newcastle. It stands out as a theatre in the round and creates an innovative, immersive style of theatre that makes audiences feel as if they are part of the performance. There are also the Regent theatre and the Garrick theatre, which is in Lichfield. They host productions by flagship companies from around the country.

Of course, theatre is not always confined to traditional stages. The Claybody theatre company is based at the former Spode pottery works in Stoke-on-Trent Central. That is a brilliant example of how our county's cultural history can inspire its present. Its work is fuelled by the stories of the area, and it regularly integrates members of its community company into its productions alongside professional actors. As well as performing in its current historic home, it uses found spaces such as Fenton town hall, which hosted its production of "The Card", based on the novel by one of Stoke's most famous sons, Arnold Bennett.

The connection with our past does not extend just to the theatre. Many of our communities come together to celebrate our history, with the Gnosall canal festival being a really good example. Centred on the historic canal boats, that event tells the stories of the village's past, while bringing people together for live music, entertainment and more.

I also want to talk about the future. Although our past and heritage are a source of pride, Staffordshire's culture is far from static. It is living, breathing and evolving every single day. Staffordshire remains a county of skilled tradespeople and of artists, and it is vital that we nurture and develop that talent. We must ensure that arts and culture are part of our everyday lives, because that is where we find connection, community and identity.

Last weekend, I spoke with Johny Todd, whose business in Woodings Yard Studios stands as a proud reminder of Stafford's history in the leather industry. We discussed how artists today face many challenges and the opportunity that this Labour Government have to support our creative industries as a way of building community and supporting our local economies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for putting such a shine on Staffordshire, and she is right about the creative industries. It is important that those skills of our forefathers—our grandfathers and fathers—are passed on, but I feel that they are being lost. Does she agree that the Government should step in to ensure that a training system is in place so that those skills are not lost?

Leigh Ingham: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point: it is important to pass that skilled heritage on to new generations. That is exactly what Johnny was talking to me about at the weekend—making sure that artists have the spaces to develop those skills, because without those spaces, as the hon. Gentleman says, the skills would be lost. We must continue to support the creation of new spaces, new opportunities and new partnerships that can nurture the next generation of artists, performers and thinkers.

Finally, I want to mention Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group, which is based in my constituency as well as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee). It is rated outstanding and is crucial to our local talent pipeline; Members will know how often I raise its excellent work for all our constituents. Very recently, I celebrated the news that Stafford college has been allocated £2.6 million of funding by the Government, which will be used to restore its Tenterbanks building in Stafford town centre. As I mentioned, we must look not only to our history but to our future, and it is by investing in our young people and restoring the crumbling buildings in which they will be doing their learning that we will build their future.

We have an opportunity to build on the strengths of Staffordshire's past and invest in our cultural infrastructure for generations to come. I urge the Minister to stand behind our county, believe in our culture and invest in it.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

4.39 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss, and a pleasure to see so many of my county neighbours, not least those who border my constituency: my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner). I say “neighbours” because “everybody needs good neighbours”, as the song from the hit—[*Laughter.*] Hold on: there is a link. Those words were in fact written by Jackie Trent, who was born in Newcastle-under-Lyme and lived in Stoke-on-Trent. She penned the famous words that were on our television screens for so many of our childhood memories.

That sums up the diversity of cultural and creative activities that we have in Staffordshire. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) pointed out, we have a plethora of things to offer. I will not go into the territory of my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) on breweries, but I will make special mention of Titanic Brewery, a brewery in Stoke-on-Trent with pubs across the area. It is named, of course, because one of the famous sons of Stoke-on-Trent was the captain of the Titanic. We do not necessarily want to parade that around too much, but it is a link to a historic event. More importantly, the tableware on the Titanic was also made in Stoke-on-Trent, and that has a much better story. The backstamps can still be seen at the Spode Museum in Stoke.

It would be remiss of me not to briefly mention ceramics. We in this House talk a lot about ceramics—well, I certainly do—and they are part of who we are. In

many parts of the country, if people go to a high-end restaurant or a big hotel—or if Members go to the Tea Room—and turn over the plate, they will probably see something that was made by artisans in Staffordshire, most likely in Stoke-on-Trent, but also in parts of Staffordshire Moorlands, Stone and Stafford.

Those delicate pieces of tableware, the bricks that we see in our buildings, and the tiles on our roofs—indeed, the tiles in the Central Lobby of this Palace—have all been made from the sweat, toil and tears of Staffordshire artisans. It is those things of beauty, made from dirty clay, that I often think demonstrate the power and the ability that we have in-county.

We are more than a city and a county of ceramics, and we are more than just the sum of our parts and our pottery. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, the well-known author Arnold Bennett very pithily and wittily accounted for parts of public life in north Staffordshire through his books. One of his most famous works is “The Card”, which I saw when it was on at the New Vic in a wonderful adaptation. The fact that it had local people in the cast telling the stories of our history made it special.

One of Arnold Bennett's other most famous works is “Anna of the Five Towns”, but of course everyone knows that Stoke-on-Trent has six towns. I do not want to mislead the House, but it is potentially true—I believe it to be true, so I am comfortable saying it—that Arnold Bennett's mother-in-law lived in Fenton and apparently he was not a great fan of his mother-in-law, so when he wrote “Anna of the Five Towns”, he left out one of the towns as a long-lasting snub to her. I would not suggest any of us recreate that—I happen to be quite fond of my future mother-in-law—but those small bits of our history permeate through different literary and cultural activities. Many people around the country will not realise that they come from Staffordshire.

I want to talk about a couple of smaller things that are not ceramics. One of the things that I am most proud of relates to a name not well known to history. There was a gentleman called Oliver Lodge. He was from Penkhull, a beautiful part of my constituency, and he was a physicist. Long before it was publicly accepted, and long before Hertz, he discovered electromagnetic radiation. He was a pioneering physicist and scientist who, through his work in north Staffordshire, was able to identify some of the fundamental energy sources of our universe. Sadly, his name is lost to history in a way that Hertz is not. There is a Lodge Road and an Oliver Road in my constituency, which are of course testament to him. He is another Staffordshire-rooted individual who made a rich contribution to our scientific and cultural understanding.

On the other side, we have Thomas Twyford, who was born in Stoke-on-Trent. His contribution to our public life is somewhat more comical, some might say—he invented the first single-piece ceramic flush toilet, which revolutionised public hygiene in this country. It is a toilet, but it revolutionised the way that people lived their lives and the way they looked after themselves. It was a huge contribution to the reduction of unsanitary conditions in public areas and brought down disease rates. Again, it is something that happened in Staffordshire that changed the world, but sadly is now a bit lost to history.

[Gareth Snell]

Finally, not to test the patience of the House too much, I want to make a pitch for what comes next. Our contribution has not ended with the history of the things we have done. It is not about the litany of wonderful collective stories that we will all share about the great things that have happened in our county, but about what is coming next.

I want to highlight the fascinating and brilliant work that the University of Staffordshire is doing around gaming and game design. According to The Independent Games Developers Association it is the No.1 destination in the country for students who want to learn game design. I was told that one in five of those who now work in the industry in the UK are graduates of the University of Staffordshire. It is a huge piece of our creative history becoming our creative future, turning real-life ambition into good quality jobs for people, mainly from my city and my county.

While I know there will be more contributions to this debate, the fact that we have been able to come together in the spirit of comradeship and collegiality two days before Staffordshire Day is a wonderful thing. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford on securing a debate that allows us to talk about the place that we love and call home.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I will have to limit speeches to three minutes, as so many Members have asked to speak.

4.46 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): It is an honour to stand before you, Ms Furniss, ahead of Staffordshire Day on Thursday, to talk about the hidden gems that make South Staffordshire such a unique and culturally rich area.

I will begin with Codsall, where the past and present meet beautifully. The charming high street lined with historical buildings offers a snapshot of centuries gone by. It is not just about history, however; Codsall has a lively arts scene, with the Codsall community arts festival buzzing with local performances and workshops. It is a place whose creativity flows just as freely as its heritage.

Next door, the village of Bilbrook offers a different kind of charm. It is a village where modern industry and natural beauty co-exist. The partnership between Jaguar Land Rover and the local community to protect Jubilee wood is a perfect example of how local heritage and industry can work hand in hand. A commitment to environmental conservation is a core part of the village's identity and a fantastic backdrop for many of the cultural activities.

Swindon may seem small, but its contribution to our cultural heritage is anything but. Chasepool in Swindon was mentioned in the Domesday Book, and is now an important part of that industrial heritage. Swindon forge—originally a fulling mill and then a corn mill—was converted into a finery forge in the 1620s, producing the wrought iron that drove the early industrial revolution.

Then there is Himley—a village with a story to tell, which boasts the beautiful and culturally significant Himley Hall and Park, and holds a fascinating piece of

British history: on the dark night of 5 November 1605, the gunpowder plot conspirators fled through Himley woods. In Kinver, we have something truly unique: rock-cut houses that have stood the test of time. These homes, carved into sandstone, are a testament to the resourcefulness of past generations and are now a major tourist attraction, with thousands visiting to step inside a piece of living history.

Enville is a quiet, yet rich corner of South Staffordshire. Known for the impressive Enville Hall and the Enville Brewery, this village blends rural charm with modern industry. The brewery's award-winning ales are a nod to the past, while its ongoing role in the community keeps Enville firmly in the present. The village of Pattingham exemplifies how culture and nature can co-exist beautifully. Patshull Park was designed by Capability Brown. Trysull might be small, but its legacy is enormous. This village is home to the arts and crafts-inspired Trysull Manor, a reminder of the region's creative spirit.

Then we have Bobbington, a village with a fascinating industrial past, and Lower Penn, with its surrounding areas offering a tranquil setting for outdoor enthusiasts. Perton is a village that has grown rapidly in recent years, but it has not lost sight of its roots. Finally, the village of Wombourne bridges past and present in the most remarkable way. Its roots go back to the middle ages, and it is home to some of South Staffordshire's most iconic landmarks, such as the Bratch locks and the Victorian-era Bratch pumping station.

4.49 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages (Leigh Ingham) for securing the debate.

In my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South and the villages, we are proud of our heritage. My constituency links the city of Stoke-on-Trent with the rural villages of north Staffordshire. Staffordshire's cultural contribution cannot be truly understood without recognising the leadership role that Stoke-on-Trent has played, not just as the beating heart of the county's industrial past, but as a city of craft, creativity and resilience that is still shaping culture across the region and beyond.

Stoke-on-Trent is a city forged in clay and coal. Our pottery industry ships British products all over the world, and our famous tableware names have been household staples for centuries: from Duchess China, Wedgwood and Aynsley China, which sits in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), to the mills in the villages of Moddershall and Checkley, which ground flint and bone for the Potteries, the cultural links between town and country in my constituency reveal deep ties.

In Longton in my constituency, our iconic potbanks now form beautiful heritage sites; with the right investment, they could be repurposed as community spaces. Obviously, I must mention Gladstone Pottery museum, a working monument to our industrial history and now home to "The Great Pottery Throw Down". Urban Wilderness is reviving and regenerating Longton town centre with art, and also runs the Longton Pig Walk parade, which I recently led as a white swan. Today, Launch It Stoke-on-Trent has opened in Longton town hall. It will help entrepreneurs and young makers and creators continue to harness Longton's creative energy.

In 2024, Stoke-on-Trent was awarded world craft city status, a sign that our city is recognised globally for its pottery. That is why today I ask the Minister to support our ambition for Stoke-on-Trent to be recognised as a UNESCO creative city for craft—or for design; there are options. Only one city in the midlands holds that prestigious title, and Stoke-on-Trent is uniquely placed to join it. UNESCO recognises cities that put culture and creativity at the heart of local development; with greater local powers and investment, Stoke-on-Trent can lead Staffordshire's cultural and economic renewal.

I must also mention that our cultural legacy includes Belstaff, the Longton-born fashion house, and the famous Shelley's Laserdome nightclub, which helped to define an era of British dance music in the late '80s and early '90s; it would be remiss of me not to mention Lemmy and Robbie as well. Thank you to everyone for listening to me—I will cut my speech short there because I am running out of time.

4.52 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I congratulate my neighbour the hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham). It is a real insult for you to try to restrict us to three minutes, Ms Furniss—how can we get all the beauty of Staffordshire into three minutes?

Staffordshire is a proper county. It is not like the west midlands, Merseyside or Humberside, which is a late '70s creation. It was forged in the Anglo-Saxon era when Queen Æthelflæd, the Lady of the Mercians, created the forts in Tamworth and Stafford. We forget that that was part of Staffordshire, as was Wednesbury, because what we see as the Black Country was all part of a great historical county of Staffordshire.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I have heard reports that the Staffordshire bull terrier may not be from Staffordshire because it is from Wednesbury. Can we confirm that Wednesbury has always been in the historical county of Staffordshire?

Sir Gavin Williamson: I can absolutely confirm that Wednesbury has always been in the great historical county of Staffordshire, and of course the Staffordshire knot comes from that great Queen of Mercia, although there is sometimes speculation that it actually comes from the hangman at Stafford castle: there were three prisoners and there was an argument over who to hang first, and to find a compromise he hanged all three at once. However, I think we all take the view that it is much more beautiful to think that it is part of the Queen of Mercia's insignia that is used on our county flag.

We have a great cultural heritage in Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge. I always say that we have got the very best of everything in Staffordshire in my constituency, not the other constituencies that make up the lesser parts of Staffordshire. We have so much: Dunoon pottery, which makes some of the finest mugs to be found, and wonderful breweries—we draw our water from the great River Trent, River Penk or River Sow, so we have great brewers in my part of Staffordshire.

We have great cultural events and institutions. For me, Christmas is not Christmas if I do not go to the Wyrley Pretenders pantomime to see the amazing work

that the volunteers do every year to entertain and bring the community together for Christmas. We have the newly opened Crown Wharf theatre in Stone, which is going to be there for generations to enjoy productions that I have no doubt will be far better than anything else put on in other people's constituencies.

We are a source of inspiration to artists, such as Peter De Wint, who was born and grew up in Staffordshire. The Great Wyrley outrages inspired Arthur Conan Doyle to write his famous book about them. If I invade my former constituency, the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), and go down to Kinver, there are the Kinver rock houses, which he mentioned and which were the inspiration for the Shire in Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings". We have so much to offer.

On 9, 10 and 11 May, people can come to the Stone food and drink festival. Stone is the food capital of Staffordshire, and people can truly appreciate that and enjoy an amazing day out there. I look forward to welcoming hon. Members to the great constituency of Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge, and to welcoming so many people from around the country to our great county of Staffordshire.

4.56 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate on the cultural contribution of Staffordshire to our economy and country. I am probably the only hon. Member present who has a constituent sitting in the Public Gallery, so I shall be on my very best behaviour. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham)—the county town, where my mother was born—on her excellent speech. She set herself up nicely to be the first honorary patron of the Staffordshire tourist board—run a close second by the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson).

On Thursday 1 May, people across Staffordshire will be marking Staffordshire Day, and I look forward to being back home in Newcastle-under-Lyme to mark this important day in our collective calendar with a nice cold drink at one of our wonderful local public houses—there are plenty to choose from—as well as getting out the vote with our excellent Labour candidates. In my maiden speech last July, I said:

"While some might look north of the Watford Gap and see a cultural desert, I see vibrancy."—[*Official Report*, 29 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1120.]

I went on to champion the wonderful New Vic Theatre, which attracts locals from far and wide, including hon. Members who have been seen walking through its doors. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford about how wonderful the New Vic is. We have the wonderful Apedale museum and the light railway, which is an excellent day out. We have the fantastic Brompton museum, which tells the story of our ancient and royal borough. We have the award-winning Newcastle College, which has many brilliant young people engaging with arts and culture, as my hon. Friend said—we do share it, but I have the headquarters in my constituency.

Just a few weeks ago, I was at the Philip Astley Centre, which is in our town centre—a great community asset, dedicated to the memory of the creator of the modern circus, Phillip Astley, who was born and raised

[Adam Jogee]

in God's own community of Newcastle-under-Lyme. From eating to horse riding, and from walking to a brilliant higher education institution in Keele University, Newcastle-under-Lyme packs a punch.

This is an important year for the 1st Newcastle Brownies and Guides. The 1st Newcastle Guides is one of the oldest surviving units in the country, and the oldest in the midlands. The Brownie unit turns 105 years old this year and the Guide unit turns 110. As part of the celebrations, they are fundraising so that both units can open the eyes and ears of their young women.

Our faith groups do much for the arts. Just on Saturday, St Mark's Basford, which is not far from my house, had a fundraising barn dance—I did not dance. Father Tommy, the vicar, is moving on to pastures new; we wish him well and thank him for his service to our community.

As we address the cultural contribution of Staffordshire, however, we must rededicate ourselves to the fight for our fair share of investment in housing, transport and, yes, the arts and culture. There is so much good happening in all parts of Staffordshire, as we have heard already, and today is an opportunity to touch briefly on that in the House.

I could speak about Newcastle-under-Lyme all day, and at times since my election I have tried to do just that, but I will not test hon. Members' patience this afternoon, and will simply say this: Staffordshire is at the heart of our country, and Newcastle-under-Lyme is at the heart of our county. Long may that continue, and a happy Staffordshire Day to all.

4.59 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) on securing this important debate in the week of Staffordshire Day. As a proud resident of Arnold Bennett's Axe and the representative of the head of the River Trent, which gives my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) and others such wonderful beer, it is an honour to take part in the debate.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who I will call my hon. Friend, talk about the contribution of the Minton tiles to Parliament, but I want to mention two other contributions that Staffordshire Moorlands has made to this Parliament. The first is a very obvious one: a big family that lives in Staffordshire Moorlands, the Talbots—including the Earl of Shrewsbury—had this very nice house at Alton Towers, and they had a house architect called Augustus Pugin, who designed and created many buildings in that area that are still standing today, including schools and the marvellous St Giles church in Cheadle. Anyone who visits them can see that they are the forerunners for what we see in Central Lobby and across Parliament.

Perhaps slightly lesser known is that Richard Norman Shaw—we know that name—is an architect who also operated in Staffordshire Moorlands. He was the architect of the All Saints church, Spout Hall on St Edward Street and, as we all know, Norman Shaw North and Norman

Shaw South. We can all celebrate the fact that Staffordshire Moorlands, and Staffordshire, have played such an important role.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Of course, the Capitol building in the US has tiles made not in Maryland or New Jersey but in Staffordshire, here in the United Kingdom.

Dame Karen Bradley: Hear, hear—my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have contributed not just to this Parliament but to Parliaments across the world.

Staffordshire Moorlands also contributed to much of our décor. The arts and crafts movement started at Leek college. William Morris lived and studied in Leek, and came up with many of his original designs there. We have the canals, because James Brindley, the creator and architect of the canals, was a resident of Leek, and it was the canals that allowed our pottery to get to market. If pots are put on the back of a horse and cart, quite a lot of them break, but the canals allow them to be transported to market. The very fine quality pottery that Staffordshire is famous for was possible only because of the canals that James Brindley created.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge said, three minutes is simply not enough time to talk about the whole of the cultural impact that Staffordshire Moorlands and Staffordshire have had in the United Kingdom. Culture is so important. I was a big advocate for Stoke-on-Trent when it was running to be the capital of culture, and it was a great disappointment to me that it was not chosen. I had to recuse myself from the decision. I was then the Minister who would have taken the decision, so I had to step aside and allow my deputy to take it.

I hope we can come together and build something more around culture. The cultural heritage and the feeling of place and belonging are incredibly important to us. That is why I was really pleased last year to run a year of reasons to visit Staffordshire Moorlands—not just Alton Towers, the biggest tourist attraction outside London, or the Peak Wildlife Park, with our fantastic polar bear residents, but the many artists, writers, food producers and others who contribute so much to our fantastic culture. That is why on 1 June I will be starting a year of the Moorlands village. I will not be doing 52 reasons; I will be focusing on a village and a parish every week. This week alone, I visited the Scrumbles cake shop up in Brown Edge, and then went up to one of our nature reserves. I went to see St Luke's church in Endon, which has an incredible Burne-Jones stained glass window—a source of light of a kind that would not be seen elsewhere. We have so much to offer, and I want everyone to come and visit, not just to go on our rollercoasters, but to see the fantastic industrial heritage and the cultural impact that Staffordshire Moorlands has had. Happy Staffordshire Day.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I will now limit speeches to two and a half minutes.

5.4 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) on securing this important debate. This week, we are celebrating Staffordshire Day, which gives us the perfect

opportunity to reflect on the cultural contributions of our towns and cities. In my constituency of Tamworth and the villages, we are incredibly proud of our rich heritage—from its origin as the ancient capital of Mercia and the home of the iconic Tamworth castle to its pivotal role in the industrial revolution and the development of the modern midlands. We can all agree that Staffordshire is at the centre of the universe.

Tamworth stands as testament to centuries of resilience, innovation and historic significance. Cultural contributions from arts and heritage in Tamworth and across Staffordshire are essential in shaping our country's identity, enriching our communities and supporting local economic growth.

As an arts graduate, I am proud that nationally the cultural sector contributed £35 billion to the UK economy in 2023 and supported around 700,000 jobs. I was saddened that under the previous Government, grants for the arts were cut in real terms, which made decisions challenging for arts organisations and cultural places. Despite those challenges, the sector has shown a remarkable resilience. Between 2019 and 2022, the arts and culture sector grew by 5% in real terms, which is more than double the growth rate for the UK economy.

The cultural sector also plays a really important role in promoting community cohesion, education and wellbeing across Staffordshire. In Tamworth, we launched a programme that focused on social cohesion with community-led initiatives, arts projects and educational programmes. Some took place at Tamworth castle alongside Community Together CIC, with heritage-focused workshops and a festival last year celebrating “Athelstan 1100”, which had arts exhibitions, live performances and heritage trails.

In conclusion, let me say how proud I am that Tamworth castle museum was awarded £1.7 million; as a museum, it needs funding to support it and the great work that it does. I am really proud to celebrate Staffordshire Day alongside my colleagues here in the House.

5.6 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I refer the House to my entry in the register of interests.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for securing this debate. In my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter we have given, and continue to give, so much to the world. When His Majesty the King visited in February, he saw two of our greatest exports to the world: beer and yellow diggers. Burton is, of course, the brewing capital of Britain, and my constituency employs more people in brewing jobs than any other in the country. Burton ales are famous around the world, and those words “Burton Ales”, or the iconic red triangle of Bass, can be spotted all around the world.

Following the closure of the National Brewery Centre in 2022, I am working with the council and the National Brewery Heritage Trust as they bring life to plans for a new brewery centre and experience that will open up the Washlands area, and allow us to tell that story of Burton's importance as the brewing capital of the world once more. Not only do we have the global brewers of Molson Coors and Marston's, but also important independent brewers such as Tower Brewery, Burton Bridge, Outwoods Brewing, Gates, and the Uttoxeter Brewing Company. Our local club, Burton Albion, is

better known as the Brewers, because of our brewing heritage. We are home to pub companies Punch and Greene King, both of which support pubs and hospitality across the country. Pubs and hospitality are in desperate need of support and I hope the Government will move forward at pace with business rate reform.

Uttoxeter is where Joseph Cyril Bamford made his very first tipping trailer, which would go on to become the iconic global brand of JCB, that is headquartered in Rocester. We have the racecourse in Uttoxeter, where the Midlands grand national takes place in March. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the many charities and voluntary organisations in my constituency. In particular, I want to highlight Burton Addiction Centre, which leads not only Staffordshire but the country for drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Whenever I visit, I am amazed by the lifesaving work that takes place there.

Finally, I close by asking all of us to carry the motto of our county with us: “The knot unites”. Within our county and country there is so much hatred and division and, like today, we should remember the things that bind us together. Happy Staffordshire Day.

5.9 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for securing the debate. It has been a real pleasure to hear colleagues pay tribute to Staffordshire, from our world renowned pottery to our vibrant theatres, diverse festivals and creative talent.

Although I might be a little biased, Cannock Chase, my own perfectly formed slice of Staffordshire, stands out as one of our cultural gems. Not only are we fortunate enough to have the chase itself, but we also have countless fantastic businesses, landmarks, museums, theatres and schools. I have had the privilege of visiting many of our fantastic schools, which are nurturing future artists and performers who will go on to contribute to Staffordshire's cultural landscape. Despite the disadvantage of the national funding formula, we must support a broad, inclusive curriculum that includes the arts, music, drama and design: such a culturally rich education is open to young people in many parts of our country but not as open as it should be to our constituents.

Cannock Chase has raised renowned talent such as the hilarious Steve Edge, and our Oscar-winning film-maker Chris Overton, who scooped the Academy award for the beautiful short film “The Silent Child”. In more recent news, Jenii Luperi, the vocal coach of this year's Eurovision entry, also hails from Cannock. It is clear that Staffordshire has always punched well above its weight culturally, and we must ensure that it has the support and resources to do so for generations to come.

Young performers who are just starting out, seasoned performers, and Oscar winners all need venues to support them. The Prince of Wales theatre in Cannock, a cornerstone of our local cultural life, had its final curtain call on Saturday night, though it is hopefully not closing for good. The emotional evening involved eight fantastic local musical theatre and amateur dramatics companies, who all managed to get to the theatre safely despite Staffordshire's notoriously potholed roads.

[Josh Newbury]

We have also, with great sadness, seen the Museum of Cannock Chase close its doors. Such venues are not just buildings but homes for local talent, heritage and the collective memory of our communities. Thousands of schoolchildren have come through their doors to experience the rich heritage of our area; they leave with a sense of pride in where they are from, inspired to shape its future. I am supporting two incredible charitable groups who have been working non-stop for the last six months to reopen those venues. We are exploring what support might be available to them from the Arts Everywhere fund. That fund was announced in the inaugural Jennie Lee lecture, named for our first Arts Minister, in whose footsteps as an MP I am privileged to follow. Staffordshire's cultural contributions are about not just the past but the future that we want to build: a future where our children can grow their creativity in schools, local groups, grassroots museums, and on stages big and small.

5.12 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for securing this important debate. Think of Robbie Williams, Josiah Wedgwood, Arnold Bennett, Alton Towers, "The Great Pottery Throw Down" and Rory Delap's throw-ins, the Peak district, mile upon mile of canals, the area's fascinating industrial past and present, and—who could forget it—the commentator's favourite: "But can they do it on a cold night in Stoke?" The last is a cultural reference as old as some Members of Parliament in the 2024 intake. It dates to the bygone era of Tony Pulis, whose cultural contribution is perhaps best summed up by the descriptive Goldie Lookin Chain lyric in tribute to the man himself:

"Tony Pulis, one hell of a bloke;
Tony Pulis, he manages Stoke."

Football hard men aside, Staffordshire has shaped the cultural texture of Britain for centuries, and not just with its famous ceramics, although I will start there. In the 18th century, visionary potters like Josiah Wedgwood revolutionised pottery, making Stoke-on-Trent a world-famous centre of excellence. Wedgwood was so good that he became known as the Queen's potter, proof that even back then Staffordshire knew how to make a good royal impression. In literature, Hanley-born Arnold Bennett captured the working-class life of industrial Britain in a way that still resonates with readers. In the post-industrial era, Staffordshire has continued to enrich our culture. I am sure that Take That would never have reached such heights of success in the 1990s and 2000s were it not for Staffordshire's own Robbie Williams.

Staffordshire's cultural scene is alive and well today. The Lichfield festival continues to bring together music, theatre and literature in the county. Each year it draws crowds to historic venues such as Lichfield cathedral with world-class performances. Liberal Democrats are arguing for investment in extracurricular activities for children, such as sport, music and drama. Without that, we cannot expect the next Robbie Williams or Josiah Wedgwood to pursue a career in arts and crafts. Where will the next throw-in specialist come from if sports facilities in Staffordshire do not receive the necessary investment? We must recognise that much of our cultural

sector is supported by local authority funding. Discretionary spending on culture is often the first spending to be cut, but that trend must cease if Staffordshire, and everywhere else, is to thrive culturally. We would protect the independence of arts funding so that it can no longer be exposed to political interference, as we have seen over the last few years, and we would introduce cultural creative enterprise zones to stimulate growth. Local authorities must be given the tools to protect their cherished heritage. In Staffordshire, that would mean protecting the county's beautiful manor houses, mills, castles and so much more.

That brings me to tourism. Staffordshire's theme parks offer a host of rollercoasters, including at Alton Towers and Drayton Manor, where my wife tells me she spent the best birthday of her life when she was seven. Thanks to Staffordshire, my annual efforts will never, ever be quite good enough. I am told that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) is particularly thankful for the contribution of theme parks to public life, although I understand that he has yet to visit Alton Towers—it is time to invite him.

These facilities are a major source of tourism for Staffordshire, and they support a considerable number of jobs in the local economy. The tourism industry needs and deserves proper support, so the Liberal Democrats would upgrade the Government's tourism function with a dedicated Minister for tourism and hospitality. That would give a bigger voice in government to a sector that not only supports our global soft power, but contributes £58 billion to the economy each year.

With your indulgence, Ms Furniss, I will touch briefly on one telling contribution made by Staffordshire to the last general election. The Liberal Democrats are extremely thankful for the role played by the staff at Yarnfield Park, where we hosted a series of secret training briefings for our candidates between the pandemic lockdown and our successful 2024 general election campaign. If nothing else, that is surely a testament to how truly inspiring the culture of Staffordshire can be.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I call the Opposition spokesperson.

5.15 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I wish you and every Member a very happy Staffordshire Day in advance.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) on securing the debate, and I thank her for her opening remarks. She took us on an engaging tour of Staffordshire, as did a lot of Members from across the House. I particularly want to highlight the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) and, of course, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), who was certainly not shy about his passion for his constituency.

It is vital that we recognise the cultural contributions that the many counties of Britain have to offer, and Staffordshire has made a wealth of contributions to our

industrial, artistic and sporting heritage. It is therefore a privilege to have the opportunity to bring attention to a number of those contributions.

As we have heard, Staffordshire's recorded history can be traced back to the early medieval period, when the area was first settled by the Anglo-Saxons. With Tamworth as the capital of the ancient kingdom of Mercia, the area quickly rose to prominence as a frequent battleground between the Anglo-Saxons and the invading Danes, before being settled by the conquering Normans. Tamworth castle was built on top of the remnants of this royal residence, and it continues to stand to this day, having seen nearly 1,000 years of the county's history pass through its halls.

It would be remiss of me not to mention one of Staffordshire's most recognisable cultural contributions, which we have heard a lot about today: the Potteries. As the largest producer of ceramics in Britain, Staffordshire housed hundreds of family businesses making all kinds of pottery, from humble tableware to the most intricate of decorative pieces, many of which still remain to this day. Although the industry may not quite be at the heights that it once was, local people have worked tirelessly to keep the heritage of Staffordshire's Potteries alive through the many museums and art galleries dedicated to ceramics.

Equally historic is the county's brewery industry, particularly the many breweries of Burton-upon-Trent. The town's brewing industry dates back to the founding of Burton abbey in the 11th century and the early efforts of local monks to brew beer. Burton ales grew over the centuries into a thriving export and a global phenomenon, with even the Empress of Russia, Catherine the Great, said to have been "immoderately fond" of beer brewed in Burton. The industry went from strength to strength in the industrial age, with one of the town's largest beer makers, Samuel Allsopp & Sons, becoming the first company to export Burton pale ale to India in 1822.

Although ceramics and brewing are two of Staffordshire's most famous cultural contributions, there remains a wealth of other historical treasures that the county can be proud of. Chief among these is the court of minstrels, a medieval institution dating back to the royal court of John of Gaunt in the 14th century that brought together travelling musicians from across the region. This musical legacy can still be seen in the county to this day, with Friends of Staffordshire's Young Musicians and other organisations continuing to promote local musical talent. Of course, Stoke-on-Trent was the birthplace of the iconic Robbie Williams.

In sports, Staffordshire has a living history of cultural contributions. Two of the country's oldest professional football clubs, Stoke City and Port Vale, were founded in Staffordshire, with Stoke City having been one of the founding members of the football league in 1888. The two clubs continue to uphold a healthy rivalry.

My staff member Greg Ellis, who is in the Public Gallery today and who helped me to write my speech, is a disgruntled Stoke City fan. He wanted me to put on record that, although Stoke City's recent performances leave much to be desired—by contrast with those of Port Vale, who have just been promoted to League One—I can offer no opinion on such matters as a tortured Manchester United fan. Staffordshire can boast an equally

impressive record in cricket, as Staffordshire county cricket club has won the National Counties Cricket Championship more times than any other county.

All these contributions, and many more, are valuable additions to our cultural heritage. Culture is a living thing and requires the care and dedication of local communities to keep it thriving, so I pay tribute to some of the local elected representatives who in recent years have made significant contributions to the regeneration of this historic county.

We see this in the £17 million secured for the regeneration of Leek town centre by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands in the £56 million secured for the regeneration of Stoke-on-Trent by former MPs Jonathan Gullis, Jack Brereton and Jo Gideon, and delivered under the leadership of Councillor Abi Brown; and in the delivery of over £50 million of regeneration in Newcastle-under-Lyme under the leadership of Councillor Simon Tagg. And that is to name only a few. I also pay tribute to the outstanding work of Councillor Alan White and his Conservative administration in leading Staffordshire county council to deliver efficient services without the eye-watering levels of taxation that we see in other local authorities.

However, it is not only the inhabitants of Staffordshire who recognise the county's cultural heritage; it is also recognised by the millions of tourists who visit Staffordshire each year. The most recent data available shows that 2023 was the county's busiest year since the pandemic, with 37 million domestic and international tourists visiting the area. Tourism generated £2.3 billion for the local economy—

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): Order. I call the Minister to respond to the debate.

5.21 pm

The Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury (Vicky Foxcroft): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss.

I am pleased to respond to this debate on behalf of the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant). I warned him that I might have to commit him to some stuff in responding to this debate. *[Laughter.]* At the moment, I am only committing him to writing to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) about Stoke's bid to be a UNESCO city of crafts and folk art. I will make sure the Minister responds to her.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) on securing this debate and delivering a powerful speech that highlighted the wonders of Staffordshire. The number of contributors to this debate has also been extremely impressive.

Staffordshire is responsible for some truly significant contributions to the culture of Britain and beyond, both historically and in the present day. My hon. Friend gave a number of wonderful examples, and I will add to her reflections. The Staffordshire hoard, discovered in 2009, is the largest hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold and metalwork ever found, which shows the region's historical importance even in early medieval times.

Samuel Johnson, the influential lexicographer and writer, was born in Lichfield. His dictionary of the English language, the first ever compiled, was a foundational work. He also rewrote the plays of William Shakespeare

[*Vicky Foxcroft*]

to ensure that all discrepancies were written out, which I find extremely interesting as somebody who studied performing arts at college, and drama and business at university.

Staffordshire is world famous for its ceramics industry, as my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) so eloquently described. Josiah Wedgwood revolutionised pottery in the 18th century with industrial methods and high-quality wares. His legacy is celebrated today at the Wedgwood Collection in Barlaston, which is operated by the V&A, one of our great national museums.

Perhaps more than anywhere else, Staffordshire, with its pottery, is a compelling example of how culture and creativity go hand in hand. This Government are committed to supporting culture and to making sure that arts and cultural activities are no longer the preserve of a privileged few. As part of our plan for change, we are committed to ensuring that the arts and culture thrive in every part of the country, with more opportunities for more people to engage with, benefit from and work in the arts and culture where they live.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Will the Minister give way?

Vicky Foxcroft: I cannot get through the speech if I do; I am sorry.

That is why this Government are proud to support the arts and culture. Only recently, we announced more than £270 million of investment for our arts venues, museums, libraries and heritage sector via the Arts Everywhere fund. And the £85 million Creative Foundations fund, which was announced earlier this year, will help arts and cultural organisations with varying scales of need to resolve urgent issues with their infrastructure.

Sir Gavin Williamson: The Minister makes a very important point about ensuring that areas outside London are able to get an important slice of cultural contributions. As the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism is not here, would she go back with representations on how we can bring some of those cultural institutions out of London to places such as Staffordshire—not just to Stone, Great Wyrley or Penkridge, but to many other communities across the county?

Vicky Foxcroft: The right hon. Member makes a really good point, and I will feed that back. I am missing out some of my speech and jumping ahead because I want my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford to have the opportunity to respond.

After preparing for and listening to this debate, I am tempted to ditch my beach holiday and instead take a trip to Staffordshire. I could join my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central for a pint at the Titanic brewery or the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) to learn about the origins of the gunpowder plot. I could join my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South at the Longton Pig Walk before watching a pantomime with the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson). I could then join my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for some horse riding—maybe with the Father who is retiring.

Adam Jogee: When the Minister comes to Staffordshire, she will meet some very wise people, not least the folk who elected nine Labour MPs out of 12 at the general election. Many hon. Members had to scribble away half their speeches, so when the Minister goes back to her colleagues, will she encourage them to find Government time for a debate on these issues?

Vicky Foxcroft: I will make sure I raise that point, and good on hon. and right hon. Members for pressing me to get the Minister to commit to many things.

I will then join the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) for a history lesson in architecture. She also mentioned Alton Towers, where I have very fond memories of going as a child. And who does not love a castle? I will also join my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) in visiting Tamworth castle. By that stage, I will probably be ready for another beer, so I had better pay a visit to the brewing capital of the world—Burton and Uttoxeter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) convinced me that we need to secure funding for our theatres. I feel very strongly and passionately about theatres, and I know the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism does too. I am certain there is nowhere else we need to be on 1 May, but if there were, it would be Staffordshire. I wish everyone a happy Staffordshire Day.

5.27 pm

Leigh Ingham: I thank all Members for attending and participating in this debate. I did not know everything about all their constituencies, so it was wonderful to hear about them.

I thank the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier), and the right hon. Members for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), and for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson).

We are missing only two MPs, so today we have had great representation for Staffordshire from across the county. I think we have represented well the breadth of what is taking place, and our optimism for the future—for investing in our creative sector and our creative industries—has come through clearly. It is important that we nurture that talent and ensure that those of us based outside London, who have creative hubs in our constituencies, are able to cultivate it.

I thank the Minister for her response, and I appreciate the further responses she will provide. As I said, 1 May is Staffordshire Day—a day to celebrate. There are lots of things to do that day across Staffordshire, including going to the polling station. Thank you very much, everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cultural contribution of Staffordshire.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 29 April 2025

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

BBC's Workplace Culture: Independent Review

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): On Monday the BBC published the outcome of the independent review it commissioned from Change Associates into workplace culture. The review concluded that the BBC does not have a toxic culture. While the review observed that the majority of people working at the BBC enjoy their work and uphold its values, it also said there are still examples of workplace misconduct by a minority, with damaging impacts for the whole BBC. Despite progress having been made in recent years, there remain significant challenges in relation to workplace misconduct that the BBC must address in order to build the trust of those working for the BBC, and the wider public.

The success of the BBC and the wider creative industries depends on the people that work in them—those who drive and shape all of its content and the services it delivers. Safety for all those working in the creative industries, as in any workplace, is of the utmost importance, and this Government consider it a moral imperative for employers to get this right.

BBC staff and the public rightly deserve the highest standards from their national broadcaster. As the report shows, there have been too many examples of a culture of silence in the BBC, with staff feeling unable to raise concerns or reporting that complaints are not dealt with quickly, effectively, or with the necessary transparency and communication about the process. This cannot continue.

Last Friday, I met with the BBC director general to discuss the findings of the review and stressed the importance of the BBC leadership taking action to address the findings at pace. The director general agreed. As the report also highlights, in order for staff and the public to have confidence in the BBC, transparency on BBC processes and progress is critical. I have also asked the BBC to share further information on how it will report on its progress.

The Government welcome that the BBC has publicly accepted the findings and recommendations of the report in full and has set out an action plan to address them with both immediate steps and further measures aimed at driving the long-term change that is clearly needed. Given its central role in the sector, this is now an opportunity for the BBC to show clear leadership and accountability in this area by learning from the findings, acting at pace across the corporation and working to drive change more broadly throughout the creative industries.

Of course workplace misconduct is not confined to the BBC; it is unfortunately an issue that is too prevalent across the sector, and due to the complexity of the creative labour market is not something the BBC can tackle alone. I recently met with the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority to discuss how the

Government and industry can work together to improve workplace standards and behaviour in the creative industries. CIISA was established by the industry to create consistently safe and inclusive workplaces, and the Government believe that this is the best vehicle to address these issues. In order for CIISA to succeed, it needs proper buy-in, support and championing from across the sector. The Government are prepared to challenge the sector if this is not forthcoming.

The Government now look to the BBC to act on the recommendations of the workplace culture review in a focused, timely and transparent way. Together with and on behalf of licence fee payers and the wider public, the Government will closely monitor the BBC's progress. We will also continue to work closely with CIISA and other relevant Government Departments to explore how best to ensure that the issues we have seen are not allowed to be repeated in future.

[HCWS609]

DEFENCE

Service Complaints Ombudsman: 2024 Annual Report

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I am pleased to lay before Parliament today the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces annual report for 2024, on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system.

This report is published by Mariette Hughes and covers the operation of the service complaints system and the work of her office in her fourth year as the ombudsman.

The findings of the report will now be considered fully by the Ministry of Defence, and a formal response to the ombudsman will follow once that work is complete.

The Government commitment to supporting members of the armed forces to come forward to raise complaints, and to improve the way they are dealt with, is unwavering. That is why the Government are establishing the new independent armed forces commissioner, who will have the power to investigate any issues raised directly by serving personnel and their families.

[HCWS610]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Prescription Charges

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): The Prime Minister, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), has announced that NHS prescription charges in England will be frozen for the first time in three years. This builds on wider Government action as part of the plan for change to tackle the cost of living crisis, and will save patients around £18 million in 2025-26.

The single charge for prescriptions in England will remain at £9.90. The cost of prescription prepayment certificates will also remain the same, with three-month PPCs staying at £32.05, 12-month PPCs at £114.50, and the hormone replacement therapy PPC staying at £19.80.

The charges freeze will also apply to NHS wigs and fabric supports; these prices will remain at current levels:

Surgical brassiere £32.50

Abdominal or spinal support £49.05

Stock modacrylic wig £80.15

Partial human hair wig £212.35

Full bespoke human hair wig £310.55

Around 89% of prescription items in England are already dispensed free of charge to children, over-60s, pregnant women, and those with certain medical conditions. This freeze will not impact current exemptions. All working-age adults who would normally pay for their prescriptions, which is estimated to be around 40% of the population, could benefit from the freeze.

In addition to the freeze on charges, the NHS low income scheme offers help with prescription payments; there are free prescriptions for eligible people in certain groups, such as pensioners, students, and those who receive state benefits or live in care homes.

The prescription charge freeze builds on wider government action to tackle the cost of living, including the roll-out of free breakfast clubs, expanded childcare through 300 new school-based nurseries, lowering the cost of school uniforms, and extending the fuel duty freeze—all aimed at easing financial pressures on families across the country.

This announcement also follows news last month of the Government agreeing funding with Community Pharmacy England worth an extra £617 million over two years. The investment comes alongside reforms to deliver a raft of patient benefits, as part of the Government's agenda to shift the focus of care from hospitals into the community, so that people can more easily access care and support on their high streets.

Alongside action to rebuild the NHS, the Government's plan for change is focused on growing the economy to improve living standards across the country. The charges freeze will help contribute to this.

[HCWS611]

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