

**Thursday
15 May 2025**

**Volume 767
No. 138**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 15 May 2025

House of Commons

Thursday 15 May 2025

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Economic Growth

1. **Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the transport system supports economic growth. [904106]

2. **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the transport system supports economic growth. [904107]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Economic growth is this Government's top priority, and a reliable, well-connected transport network is critical to driving prosperity. That means delivering local priorities in places such as Huddersfield and Hyndburn, including through West Yorkshire's £830 million city region sustainable transport settlement and the local transport grant for Lancashire combined county authority.

Sarah Smith: The Government have rightly prioritised rail as a key factor in the future viability of our transport infrastructure. There exists in Hyndburn an outstanding opportunity to create a freight rail terminal that would fit with the Department for Transport's targets for increasing rail freight capacity by 75%. The proposal also adds value in increasing east-west rail freight capacity, which must currently pass through Manchester. Sadly, no progress was made on this under the last Government. Does the Secretary of State agree that a north-west freight strategy should be a priority, and will she meet me to explore the potential of this as a priority project in the north-west?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of rail freight, and I am clear that with a reformed railway, we must do more to shift freight from the roads to rail. I am keen that Network Rail works collaboratively with industry to develop terminals where there is either current demand or the potential for future growth. If there is viable interest in developing this land, my officials and Network Rail would be happy to engage with interested parties.

Harpreet Uppal: I welcome the funding commitments for transport in Huddersfield, including rail upgrades to the Penistone line and the trans-Pennine route, which are very much needed. However, during a coffee morning with residents last week, the main issue discussed was the reliability of bus services and the need for integrated transport. Can the Minister outline how she is supporting our West Yorkshire Mayor in ensuring that transport-led economic growth includes bus services and is felt across all neighbourhoods and communities in Huddersfield?

Heidi Alexander: I am not surprised to hear that buses are top of the agenda for my hon. Friend's constituents. Reliable, affordable bus services will be essential for so many of those she represents, and I was particularly delighted to see the successful launch this week of Mayor Tracy Brabin's Weaver bus network. The Government are investing £36 million in West Yorkshire's buses. That is in addition to the £830 million we are spending in the region to improve local transport infrastructure and the rail investment we are making as part of the trans-Pennine route upgrade.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that High Speed 2's central purpose is to deliver economic growth, but she knows, too, that it is taking far longer and costing far more to deliver than anyone expected. Given that projects of the scale of HS2 require parliamentary approval, is it not important that Parliament has accurate estimates of how much the project will cost and how long it will take to deliver? Will she commission a properly independent and thorough review of why the budget for HS2 has increased so often and the timetable has expanded so often?

Heidi Alexander: I will be providing updates to the House on the emerging cost position and opening window. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman will know, this Government have appointed a new chief executive of HS2, Mark Wild, who is conducting an ongoing review. We have also reintroduced ministerial oversight, which was sorely lacking under the Conservative party's leadership. I recognise that this is an important issue, and we are doing all we can to deliver the rest of this railway at the lowest reasonable cost to the taxpayer, so that people can enjoy excellent rail services in the future.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The Transport Secretary recently refused to commit to keeping the £3 cap on bus fares outside London beyond the end of this year, leaving many in rural areas worried about how much more they will end up having to pay to get to work. Residents across my constituency have already seen vital routes scrapped or scaled back, holding back economic growth. Can the Transport Secretary explain what support will be made available to not only keep rural fares down but restore lost services?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Lady will know that this Government stepped in to prevent soaring bus fare increases, given the last Government's decision to only fund a bus fare cap until the end of last year. [Interruption.] Opposition Members can chunter, but the truth of the matter is that it was fantasy money, and the money was not allocated to fund that bus fare cap. We are in an ongoing process, through the spending review. I appreciate

the importance of affordable, reliable bus services, and we will do all we can to ensure that people can continue to enjoy the bus network that they need.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Greater Anglia supports economic growth in the east of England with modern, quiet, fast trains, paid for by £2 billion of private sector investment. Its service is the most punctual in the country, it is popular with its passengers, and it is run so efficiently that instead of costing the taxpayer, it pays money into the Treasury. It is currently train operator of the year. Greater Anglia knows that nationalisation is coming, and it has offered to extend its operations to allow the Government to focus on the worst performing operators first. Why did the Government refuse? Is the Secretary of State focused on improving the lives of passengers, or is it an ideological determination to put the unions back in charge of the railways?

Heidi Alexander: I really do not know how many times I have to say this to the hon. Gentleman. I met him a couple of days ago, and I explained that our process for bringing train operating companies into public ownership is designed to offer best value for money to the taxpayer. We will not be buying out failing private sector operators by breaking contracts early. He is right to say that Greater Anglia provides an excellent service, and I am confident we will build on that when it comes into public ownership in October.

Jerome Mayhew: Perhaps the Secretary of State did not understand the nature of the offer from Greater Anglia. It was not expecting to be bought out; it was offering to continue its current arrangements for a couple of years.

In a previous answer, the Secretary of State said to me that the benefit of rail nationalisation will be the £150 million of efficiency savings. Let's see how that is going. Her first nationalisation will be South Western Railway in two weeks' time. That new service will need trains, yet *The Telegraph* has revealed that inept contract negotiations by her Department, where there was no effective competition, mean that the cost of re-leasing the same trains is increasing by £250 million over five years. Are those the efficiency savings she had in mind?

Heidi Alexander: The up to £150 million of savings that the taxpayer can enjoy as a result of train operating companies coming back into public ownership are the saved management fees that we are currently paying to private sector operators, and efficiencies will be delivered on top of that.

On the substantive issue that the hon. Gentleman raises about South Western Railway, the cost of renewing rolling stock leases has been fully and properly budgeted for, with successful commercial negotiations recently concluded. The franchising process under his Government saw some "buy now, pay later" deals done on rolling stock, where costs were always expected to increase. I think that approach was deeply dubious, but that was the short-termist, ill-thought-through approach of his Government, and we are now having to clear up that mess.

Rail Sector: Skills

3. **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure that workers have necessary skills for the rail sector. [904108]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): A skilled workforce is key to delivering the railways that passengers need, and I am working closely with colleagues across Government to ensure that we train up the right people in the right way for the jobs of the future. As my hon. Friend will know from our visit to Derby last week, we are also taking action to ensure that we attract younger talent into the industry, by lowering the age at which someone can become a train driver to 18.

Catherine Atkinson: Derby is the centre of the largest rail cluster in Europe—an east midlands cluster employing 45,000 people. There is an incredible range of roles in the sector, from engineering to driving, digital to welding, advanced manufacturing to customer services, and many more. However, with a third of workers in the rail sector aged 50 or over, it faces a significant shortage of rail skills in the future. What role can Great British Railways, with its headquarters in Derby, play in ensuring that we have the skills we need for the future?

Heidi Alexander: Developing an industry workforce plan will be a key priority for Great British Railways, and I am confident that we will be making the most of the expertise that already exists in places such as Derby. The fact that Derby will soon become the new national headquarters of GBR will mean more high-skilled jobs for a city that is already brimming with rail industry talent. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and local leaders on maximising the opportunities that the creation of GBR presents.

Maritime Sector

4. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to support the maritime sector. [904109]

14. **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support sustainability in the maritime sector. [904121]

21. **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the maritime sector. [904128]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): The recently published maritime decarbonisation strategy supports sustainable growth, working with industry to reach zero emissions by 2050, supported by £30 million for clean maritime research and development. The Government have also allocated £850,000 to maritime clusters to support skills and training programmes, boosting growth and improving our coastal communities.

Jayne Kirkham: Cornwall has a thriving maritime sector, particularly in Falmouth, that is well-served by training establishments, such as Cornwall Marine Network and Falmouth marine school, as well as leading apprenticeship programmes across Falmouth. Much of

that centres around our Port of Falmouth. Will the Ports Minister meet me and officials from the Treasury to ensure that Government support reaches Falmouth port and that Cornwall can take advantage of the new green jobs that will be provided by the port's upgrade?

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend is a fierce advocate for the maritime community in her constituency. This Government are committed to unlocking investment in UK ports, and I was delighted by the announcement just yesterday by LS Eco Advanced Cables that it will be investing £1 billion into the Port of Tyne, which will be the first of many such investments over the months and years ahead. We are streamlining regulatory and planning processes, updating our national policy statement for ports, which is long overdue, and we will make targeted investments through the national wealth fund. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that.

Mike Tapp: The Port of Dover has ambitious targets to be the first green shipping corridor. What are the Government's plans to ensure sufficient power supplies to the port for ships to plug into?

Mike Kane: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that infrastructure, which is so important to our nation. I was pleased to meet Doug Bannister, the chief executive officer of the Port of Dover, just the other day to talk about these matters. This Government are implementing a new strategic planning process and reforming connections to ensure that electricity meets future demands. If we do that right, we can have the greenest shipping corridors in the world.

Lorraine Beavers: Fleetwood, in my constituency, has a proud fishing industry, but our port is currently massively underused. The Government's clean power mission is a huge opportunity for ports like Fleetwood to take advantage of jobs and investment brought by offshore wind projects. Will the Minister meet me to ensure that the Port of Fleetwood gets the investment it needs to take advantage of those projects, so that my community can start to rebuild after the last 14 years of austerity inflicted on it by the previous Conservative Government?

Mike Kane: That is so true. I was delighted to join my hon. Friend on a recent visit to Fleetwood nautical campus in her constituency, where I saw the excellent facilities and what a fantastic advocate she is for the people of Fleetwood and its port. I briefly met with the soon-to-be new owners of that port. Once that deal is finalised and they have plans to progress, I will sit down with my hon. Friend and the new owners to look at the potential for what we can achieve there.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Isle of Wight ferry company, Red Funnel, is controlled by Canadian pension funds. It is unregulated and charges Isle of Wight residents up to £400 to take a return car ferry crossing. Does the Minister support that ownership model and pricing structure for a lifeline transport connection in the UK?

Mike Kane: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Avanti up to Manchester can cost more, but that does not help his constituents in the Isle of Wight, who have

been struggling for some time. That is why I went to the Isle of Wight to meet the hon. Member and representatives from the council. We are establishing an local transport forum, and we have agreed a number of ways forward, looking at ticketing, pricing and the reliability of those ferries to the Island. I promise to continue to be engaged, but I will need the hon. Member's help with this as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In common with the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers), I have concerns about the fishing sector. In terms of maritime needs and co-ordination with the drive towards net zero, and with the push towards marine-based renewable energy, what discussion has taken place with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero to ensure that the needs of the fishing industry are considered, weighted and fully evaluated?

Mike Kane: This is a huge opportunity for the UK. Our mission to have clean energy by 2030 is an incredible target, and we are getting on with it. That means making big decisions with the Crown Estate, our fisheries, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Transport and Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. We are working together at pace, and we are beginning to see some of the fruits of that, such as the investment in the Port of Tyne that I just mentioned, but the work is ongoing.

Rail Services: North Wales

5. **Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the performance of rail services operating from north Wales. [904110]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Despite recent improvements, the performance of Avanti West Coast's services in north Wales is still not good enough. Poor Network Rail infrastructure reliability also remains an issue. North Wales and its surrounding regions have such huge potential, so I am actively engaged with the Welsh Government on plans to create a transport system that meets the needs of all our communities and delivers economic growth.

Andrew Ranger: Rail plays a vital role in the north Wales economy, so I welcome the recent announcement of 12 additional services per week between Holyhead and London. However, that remains a shadow of the pre-covid timetable, which saw up to 14 daily direct services. The north Wales line regularly sees more cancellations and poorer reliability than other parts of the west coast franchise. It is vital that with economic growth, tourism and access to employment across north Wales and beyond, we see a return to a more frequent and reliable service pattern. What measures is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that that happens?

Heidi Alexander: The uplift in service levels between London and Holyhead from this Sunday is indeed welcome, and I agree that a reliable service being delivered for the passengers of north Wales is vital for economic growth. I recognise that Wales has not seen its fair share of funding historically, and I am committed to continued rail infrastructure investment in Wales to release capacity and improve reliability.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The midlands rail hub was backed by the previous Government. It will unlock and drive economic growth across the west midlands and beyond, including into Wales, and improve the performance of existing rail services. When will the Secretary of State make an announcement in her review of that project, or is this just another example of the Treasury reversing or holding up investment in our region?

Heidi Alexander: I can see that Mr Speaker is smiling; I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her ingenuity in working in a question about the midlands. She is right to talk about the benefits of the midlands rail hub. She will be aware that a spending review process is under way, and I anticipate being able to say more on that project in due course.

Brighton Main Line: Capacity

6. **Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): Whether she plans to increase rail capacity on the Brighton main line. [904111]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): Officials in my Department are in regular discussions with Network Rail and train operators on opportunities to improve services across the Brighton main line, taking account of changes to commuter travel since the pandemic. Decisions about the Department's capital portfolio will be announced after completion of the 2025 spending review, ensuring that every penny spent supports our missions and our plan for growth.

Peter Lamb: Network Rail has identified that if the Croydon area remodelling scheme is not undertaken, capacity through East Croydon will be exhausted by 2030, preventing passengers from across much of southern England from being able to travel to London. Given that the Department for Transport has outlined that it is minded to approve Gatwick airport's capacity increase, almost doubling the overall numbers, so long as 54% of passengers travel by public transport—that is in addition to the 2030 figure—will the Minister outline how it is possible to achieve that without the works being undertaken?

Lilian Greenwood: I appreciate the work that my hon. Friend is doing to stand up for his constituents, who rely so much on rail services. As he acknowledges, plans for a major upgrade to the Brighton main line were cancelled by the previous Government in the 2021 spending review, and they did not even acknowledge that that had happened. Network Rail is funded to progress automatic route-setting signalling technology to further enhance performance across the Brighton main line. Further decisions will be made after the spending review.

Aviation Sector

7. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to support the aviation sector. [904112]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): We are unlocking growth by progressing airport planning decisions and inviting third runway

proposals for Heathrow by the summer. A new UK airspace design service and support fund will drive airspace modernisation. We introduced the sustainable aviation fuel mandate, and yesterday we proposed a revenue certainty mechanism to support UK production.

Alice Macdonald: SaxonAir, Norwich airport and Norfolk and Suffolk county councils recently launched Aviation East, a call to make East Anglia the heart of aviation innovation. We are already leading in the development of electric aircraft and the early availability of sustainable aviation fuel, but we could do so much more to unlock growth and deliver jobs. Will the Minister outline how this Government will support aviation in the east? I am due to meet him soon, but will he also come to Norwich, take a flight in an electric plane and see what innovation is under way?

Mike Kane: This Government want to see the UK maximise the benefits of the future of flight technologies, including flying taxis, both for the economy and for communities. We recently announced over £20 million of Government funding for the Civil Aviation Authority and the future flight challenge to deliver the future flight programme this year. That joint programme between industry, Government and the CAA will enhance drone capability by 2027, with flying taxis in the UK's skies by 2028. I would be delighted to visit Norwich and the airport in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): As the Minister is well aware, the Government have supported and signed off on the development consent order for Manston airport in my constituency. It is hoped and expected that the final private funding for that package will be in place and that work will start in the very near future. Will the Minister now reaffirm his support for the contribution that Manston can and will make to freight and growth in the United Kingdom, and can he also seek to expedite the necessary licences at the appropriate time?

Mike Kane: I was delighted to spend my Easter holiday in the right hon. Member's constituency, cycling the Cantii way. I stopped and took a look at Manston airport—and a sip of water from my bottle, because it was a hot day. I am looking forward to the outcome of the talks and the funding, and at that point I will be happy to look at the proposals from Manston and sit down with the right hon. Member to unlock that capacity.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be as aware as I am that the air passenger duty, which was introduced by a Conservative Chancellor more than 30 years ago, has been studied intensively. Every study shows that the revenue generated by that tax is much less than the benefit of abolishing it. Will my hon. Friend and the Secretary of State try to talk some sense into the Chancellor of the Exchequer and her officials, to get rid of this tax and benefit both aviation and the economy?

Mike Kane: I would never disagree with the former leader of my council, but on this occasion, I might have to. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend as somebody who was chairman of the airport that delivered the only international runway in this country in 80 years. Air

passenger duty is part of the rich mix of the aviation tapestry; however, last month in April, Heathrow had 7.1 million passengers through its doors, the largest number ever. Most airports and airlines are seeing demand go through the roof. We are modernising the airspace, decarbonising the fuel and unlocking the constraints on our airports, which is why we are seeing record passenger numbers.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I recognise the vital importance of the aviation sector, but any airport expansion—including at Bristol airport—should reflect the cumulative impact of emissions and our legal commitment to net zero. Does the Minister support the Climate Change Committee’s advice, published last year, that no airport expansion should proceed without a UK-wide capacity management framework?

Mike Kane: First, I congratulate Bristol on the excellent job it is doing and the growth it is seeing. We have strict criteria on carbon emissions, noise, growth and pollution at our airports. That is our guiding principle as a Government, but we also want to see local ambition in terms of growth. Those carbon budgets are fixed; we still want to reach net zero by 2050, even with the growth in our air markets that is expected over the next few years.

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

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): As we approach the summer holidays, we know that many families are looking forward to the opportunity to get away. However, in what may come as concerning news, Labour’s Employment Rights Bill could threaten passengers’ ability to travel without disruption or additional costs. This is because in existing passenger rights legislation, under article 5(1)(c)(i) of Regulation 261, passengers are entitled to compensation if they are informed of cancellations less than two weeks before their flight. The Employment Rights Bill reduces the required notice period for strike action in any industry from 14 days to 10 days, increasing the risk of last-minute cancellations. That could in theory cost airlines tens of millions of pounds, which could in turn lead to higher costs for passengers as airlines pass the expenses on to the travelling public. Does the Minister agree that the Government should maintain the 14-day notice period in aviation, putting the interests of passengers ahead of those of their union friends?

Mike Kane: The shadow Secretary of State will forgive me if I have not read that sub-paragraph that trips off the tongue. This Government will always put passengers first. That is why more passengers than ever are flying in our skies and leaving our airports. The Department is fully engaged with the aviation sector at all stages, including on this issue.

Driving Test Backlog

8. **Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to reduce the backlog for driving tests. [904113]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): Last month, the Secretary of State announced further measures to tackle the unacceptable

driving test backlog, including doubling training capacity for driving test examiners and offering overtime pay incentives to provide extra tests. That will create up to 10,000 extra tests a month. We are determined to get Britain’s drivers moving.

Juliet Campbell: I thank the Minister for her efforts towards improving access to driving tests. However, in my constituency of Broxtowe, I continually get emails saying that people are struggling to book tests due to a shortage of examiners. Will she provide us with an update following the instruction made last year to the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency to double the number of examiners being trained?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. We are holding the DVSA to account for successfully implementing the measures in last December’s seven-point plan. Some 165 new driving examiners have already passed their training and are working in driving test centres, and last year the DVSA provided 1.95 million tests. This month, it will launch an accelerated consultation on improvements to the test booking system to end the reselling of tests and the exploitation of learners, which is completely unacceptable.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does the Minister acknowledge that part of what has happened as a result of the pressure tests has been a displacement of learner drivers to test centres in rural areas, where they perceive that there might be less waiting time? That is prejudicing against local applicants. Will she do everything she can to ensure that local applicants for tests get priority?

Lilian Greenwood: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We know that people are booking tests in parts of the country where they have no intention of taking a test, because they can swap that for a test in another driving test centre. That is one of the issues addressed in the call for evidence that was launched in December. We have heard that evidence, and we will consult on further changes to the booking system that might address the issue that he raises.

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

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): At the Transport Committee in April, the Secretary of State admitted that under Labour’s watch, “waiting times for access to driving tests hit new highs.”

For all the talk of a new plan, she then admitted that the Government only aim to reduce driving test waiting times to seven weeks by “summer next year”. That is no good for young people waiting, needing the freedom to drive to get to college or work now, is it? When will the Government see the real urgency for real people and pick up the pace?

Lilian Greenwood: We are acting to fix the mess that the shadow Minister’s Government left behind. Our seven-point plan is being implemented, and last month, the Secretary of State announced additional measures. We are determined to succeed where the last Government failed.

Greg Smith: I do not think the Minister has got the memo that she is in charge now. The Government cannot hide behind the same old excuses and try to blame others, as average test volumes are now lower—on a month-by-month basis—than they were in the previous two years. In quarter 1 alone, nearly 100,000 fewer tests were conducted than in the same period in 2024. The average waiting time for a driving test in the UK sits at 22 weeks—over five months. That is up from 17.1 weeks in July 2024 and 20.4 weeks in February 2025. For all the Government's promises, there has been no actual delivery. Why has capacity not increased or, at the very least, stayed the same as when we were in charge?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is not listening. We are implementing the seven-point plan, but turning around the mess and the problems that the Conservatives left us takes time. I am determined that we will see the results, that waiting times will come down and that we will support learner drivers. It cannot be done overnight when we are trying to fix 14 years of mess.

Pavement Parking

9. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with local authorities on pavement parking regulations. [904114]

12. **Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): When she plans to respond to the consultation entitled "Pavement parking: options for change", published on 31 August 2020. [904117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): This Government are committed to publishing a formal response to the consultation and announcing the next steps for pavement parking as soon as possible. We are currently considering the consultation outcome, including the views of many local authorities, and the options for tackling this nuisance.

Liz Twist: Back in 2018, I had an Adjournment debate on pavement parking after meeting my then constituents Margaret and Laurel, who are both visually impaired. They told me—in fact, they demonstrated to me—that pavement parking prevented them from using pavements safely, which undermined their independence and confidence, and put them at risk of injury. My Blaydon and Consett constituents continue to raise this issue, but we saw little action under the last Government. What progress has the Minister's Department made on responding to the consultation and on providing guidance to local authorities?

Lilian Greenwood: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. The previous Government failed to act and, like her, I am determined to tackle pavement parking. That is why I have met representatives of Guide Dogs, Living Streets, Sustrans and Transport for All to discuss this very important issue, which is absolutely fundamental to the safety and accessibility of our public realm. I can assure my hon. Friend that I am on the case, and I look forward to setting out the way forward very soon.

Rebecca Paul: I thank the Minister for her response, and I am really pleased to see that she is committed to addressing pavement parking. It is absolutely essential

that it is addressed for my constituents in Redhill, where it is a real problem. As the Minister will know, Guide Dogs has been running a campaign for many years on addressing pavement parking, given the impact it has on those who are visually impaired. Given the Minister's enthusiasm for solving this problem, can she please give us an idea of the timescale for delivering a solution—not the recommendations, but a solution—so that those with visual impairments and my constituents can navigate pavements safely?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Lady for her support in acting to tackle what is a nuisance not just for disabled people, but for children walking on the pavement and for parents pushing buggies and prams. It is really important that we get this right. I am working speedily with my officials to do so, and I look forward to being able to announce the outcome of the consultation and our next steps shortly.

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

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the Minister for her answers and for all she did on this issue in her previous role as Chair of the Transport Committee. Regulations prohibiting pavement parking already exist in London, but that alone will not solve the problem. At All Saints' primary school in south Wimbledon, for example, pavement parking is a long-running issue, forcing parents and children into the road and obvious danger, and it is proving very difficult to solve. Has the Minister considered how the public can be better educated and restrictions enforced? Are the Government planning to create a new offence of obstructive parking, as the Minister recommended in her previous role?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Member for his question, and he is right to raise the impact that pavement parking has on the ability of children to walk safely to school, which we want to encourage. There are many things we can do, and he is right to say that part of the mix is communication and publicity to explain the dangers that pavement parking poses to pedestrians.

Vehicle Registration: Compliance

10. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve compliance with vehicle registration regulations by drivers. [904115]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): My hon. Friend has rightly identified the importance of holding the correct information to identify the keeper of every vehicle operating on our roads. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency works closely with the police, who have the power to seize non-compliant vehicles.

Sarah Coombes: I recently spoke to a roads policing officer about drivers who use illegal number plates, such as ghost number plates that cannot be read by police and speed cameras. He told me:

"The scale at which this problem now exists is frightening. These plates are on every street, in every town and they are being used to openly commit offences and evade capture, in the knowledge

there's very little we can do about it. The problem is only getting worse, posing huge danger on our roads. We need to toughen up the law urgently".

Will the Minister set out the action she is taking to increase the penalties for using these ghost plates to at least £1,000 and six penalty points, and put an end to this number plate wild west that is endangering our streets?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is a great campaigner, and she is right to continue to highlight this issue. It is already illegal to sell and display that type of number plate, but I recognise that there is more to do. The DVLA is working with the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Home Office, various police forces and trading standards on the supply and use of these illegal number plates, and implementing stricter penalties and fines will be considered as part of our work on the new road safety strategy.

Condition of Local Roads

11. **Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [904116]

19. **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [904126]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): We are determined to end the pothole plague on our roads, which is the result of a decade of under-investment by the previous Government. We have provided an extra £500 million for councils this year to allow them to make an immediate start on this.

Laurence Turner: In Birmingham, people are fed up, as they are in other parts of the country, of potholes and drains that go uncleared, after years of underfunding and short-term budgets, but unlike in other parts of the country, those services are provided under a historical private finance initiative contract. Will the Minister update the House on when a decision will be made about the future of that contract, and what steps she will take with the local authority so that Birmingham's roads get better?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend has been dogged in raising this issue with me and the Department, and I assure him that we will make an announcement on the way forward as soon as possible. Following a consultation with the council, we have been carefully considering its formal representations on this matter, and we are committed to working together in the best interests of his constituents, the people of Birmingham and the taxpayer.

Baggy Shanker: Motorists and cyclists across the country are still facing the Tory pothole plague. In Derby, 17% of our roads are in a poor condition due to Tory austerity. It is not right that drivers have to fork out hard-earned cash to the tune of a whopping £460 for repairs that are more severe than a puncture. Can the Minister please outline how her Department plans to crack on with protecting drivers and fixing potholes in Derby, the east midlands and across the UK?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. This year, we are providing local authorities in England with £1.6 billion of funding for roads maintenance, including more than £75 million for the East Midlands combined authority, of which over £4.3 million is for Derbyshire. Those councils can now get on with the job. We have also introduced new reporting requirements, meaning that from next month people will be able to see exactly what their councils are doing with that money. We will end Britain's pothole plague.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): On-street parking has an effect on our local roads. In Kings Langley, my local high street is suffering significantly from the Liberal Democrat-led council imposing parking restrictions in a way that has caused confusion not just to businesses but to local residents. Can the Minister give any guidance to Dacorum council on how to communicate better with residents to ensure that on-street parking is properly adhered to, but not to the detriment of our high streets?

Lilian Greenwood: I understand how important it is for people to access their high streets. That issue obviously relates to parking, but it is also about the availability of active travel and public transport. I am not going to dictate how local authorities should implement parking restrictions in their area; that is for them to decide. We provide them with the powers and the resources, and it is for local people to decide what is right for their area.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The previous Government spent £250,000 on a study of the A259 coast road in my constituency, yet residents have seen no improvement whatever to the road. The town of Newhaven is particularly badly affected; daily gridlock is affecting businesses and residents, to the detriment of the condition of the road. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we might work together to resolve the traffic crisis on the A259 in my constituency?

Lilian Greenwood: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to hear more about the issues affecting his constituents and to discuss what we may be able to do to support them so that they have an enhanced road network.

Rail Access: Grimsby and Cleethorpes

13. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve rail access to Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituency. [904118]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Subject to final industry planning, East Midlands Railway plans to introduce an all-day direct Nottingham-Cleethorpes service in December, improving connections at Lincoln for journeys to London. The Rail Minister has been looking closely into possible direct trains between London and Cleethorpes, and looks forward to discussing that with my hon. Friend at their upcoming meeting.

Melanie Onn: Local analysis shows that a direct service from Cleethorpes to London could deliver growth of over £30 million a year to our region. As well as LNER, Grand Central has launched an application to

operate that service. The project is backed by local businesses, industry and constituents. Will the Minister work with me to ensure that this train definitely leaves the station?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend is a huge advocate for her constituency. Any additional services will be dependent on funding from the spending review. The Rail Minister will meet my hon. Friend to discuss the proposals further, following the conclusion of the spending review. The Department continues to review the application from Grand Central to introduce open-access services between London and Cleethorpes, and will provide its views to the regulator in due course. Access to the rail network, however, is ultimately a decision for the regulator.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): As the House will know, I have been raising the prospect of a direct service from Cleethorpes and Grimsby to King's Cross since 2011. Will the Minister give an absolute assurance that he and the Rail Minister will seriously consider the importance of that and actually deliver a service? We do not mind whether it is run by LNER or Grand Central; we just want a direct service to boost the local economy.

Simon Lightwood: As I said, a decision is ultimately a matter for the regulator. Open access can provide benefits such as improved connectivity and choice for passengers, but it can also increase costs to taxpayers and create additional performance pressures on an already constrained network. The Department will always look at applications on a case-by-case basis and feed into the regulator's decision.

Lower Thames Crossing

15. **Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on constructing the lower Thames crossing. [904122]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): In March, we took the decision to approve National Highways' planning application for the lower Thames crossing, which is a big step forward for the project and ends decades of inaction by previous Governments. Ahead of construction, my officials and National Highways are exploring all funding options, including private finance. As with all capital projects, spending decisions are subject to the spending review process.

Tristan Osborne: I welcome that response, the certainty the decision has provided to people living in the Thames estuary, and the visit yesterday to supply-chain businesses by our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. Will the Secretary of State for Transport confirm that she will meet me and a delegation of Kent and south-east London MPs to discuss how we can ensure that investment and skills are secured for local supply chains and the development of further education colleges?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to have that meeting with my hon. Friend and his colleagues.

Topical Questions

T1. [904131] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

After years of dither and delay, we are taking bold action to take the brakes off growth, create jobs and get Britain moving. Last week, we announced a lower minimum age for train drivers to future-proof our railways and prevent frustrating cancellations, and we have granted planning permission for the lower Thames crossing, a strategic freight route between the south-east and the rest of the country.

We are also strengthening our aviation industry. Planning approval has been given for the expansion of Luton airport, a final decision on Gatwick will be made as soon as possible, following the airport's submission of further information, and we look forward to receiving proposals for a third runway at Heathrow later this summer. Finally, we introduced the Sustainable Aviation Fuel Bill yesterday, giving confidence to the industry as it charts a green future.

These measures show how we are delivering on our plan for change: driving opportunity, creating better journeys and improving living standards up and down the country.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for setting out those positive opportunities for the future. Air passenger duty adversely impacts economic opportunity for companies in Northern Ireland. To continue the positivity from the Secretary of State, would she commit to asking Cabinet colleagues to adjust the block grant for Northern Ireland to allow a reduction in APD in order to enhance connectivity within this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Heidi Alexander: I appreciate the importance of aviation to the Northern Ireland economy and thank the hon. Gentleman for his interest in this matter. As the Minister responsible for aviation, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) said in answer to substantive questions, airports are currently seeing their busiest times ever. This Government feel that our approach to APD is proportionate given the fantastic demand we are seeing.

T2. [904132] **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): Reliable bus services are not just a privilege; they are the backbone of communities across my constituency, and connect individuals to schools, jobs, financial services and social interactions with family and friends. Rural communities in Northumberland deserve the same opportunities as our more urban regions. Does the Minister agree that as the Government's better buses Bill proceeds to its further stages, we must not overlook rural voices on the services that they need?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Improving bus connectivity in rural areas is vital for kick-starting growth. Our Bus Services (No. 2) Bill will give local leaders the powers they need for their communities, including in Northumberland, which as part of the North East combined authority was allocated £23 million in 2025-26 to improve services.

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

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): At the last transport questions, on 27 March, in the context of the Secretary of State saying on television that some strikes are

“necessary”, I pointed out that the trade unions have welcomed her rail reform plans and said that

“a just transition to nationalisation would mean the levelling up of pay and conditions for rail workers.”

The cost of that to the taxpayer would be considerable. When I asked the Secretary of State whether she would “consider a strike over harmonising pay and conditions to be a necessary strike”,—[*Official Report*, 27 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 1099.]

she avoided answering the question, which was uncharacteristic of her. I will give her another chance now: would that be a necessary strike?

Heidi Alexander: The answer I gave to the shadow Secretary of State’s previous question was that if, as an operator of the railway, we felt it was necessary to take a strike on grounds of safety, we would, of course, put the safety of the travelling public first—that will always be the case. On the harmonisation of terms and conditions, we need to bring legislation forward to establish Great British Railways. We will have many discussions with our trade union colleagues in a constructive way while ensuring that we provide value for money for the taxpayer.

T3. [904134] **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): Project Willow supports the potential of sustainable aviation fuel to bring jobs to Grangemouth, if the right policies are in place such as flexibility on the cap on hydroprocessed esters and fatty acids, and expediency on the revenue certainty mechanism. What is the Department doing urgently to assess, integrate and implement the recommendations of Project Willow and to support accelerated investment at Grangemouth?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for the Grangemouth refinery. He asks what we are doing: yesterday, we introduced the SAF Bill to bring forward the revenue certainty mechanism, and we continue to consider the Project Willow report and its recommendations.

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

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Following the fire at North Hyde substation that closed Heathrow a few weeks ago, various lines on the London Underground were brought to a standstill by another power outage this week. It is clear that we need to do more to improve the resilience of our transport energy infrastructure, so will the Secretary of State commit to a full review to ensure that these incidents do not keep happening?

Heidi Alexander: A review is being conducted by the National Energy System Operator on the Heathrow substation fire. The interim report has been published, and we expect the full report in June. The Heathrow report is expected to go to its board in May. My Department and I work very closely with all transport operators to ensure that they have robust resilience plans in place. The Government are conducting a review of critical national infrastructure to address the broader question.

T5. [904137] **Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, to make a journey of just 2.8 miles from St Hild’s school to the Headland requires two buses and

takes approximately 40 minutes. The Hartlepool transport users forum and residents across the town have had enough. Other parts of the country are putting buses back into public hands. Will the Minister mandate Tees Valley combined authority to do the same for Hartlepool?

Simon Lightwood: I hope the Tees Valley Mayor is looking at the great work that Labour mayors are already doing across the country to transform public transport in their regions.

T4. [904135] **Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): Residents in Cheltenham remain extremely frustrated about the state of the roads. We have too many potholes and the approach taken to the maintenance of our high street by the previous Conservative county council administration has been substandard. The state of our strand and the threat to our promenade are at the forefront of people’s minds. We have finally had a change of administration, with the Liberal Democrats now in charge of the county council. What can the Secretary of State and Ministers do to reassure me that the Liberal Democrat county council will be given the tools that it needs to fix our roads and maintain our high street properly?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The Department is providing Gloucestershire county council with an extra £9 million of highway maintenance funding this year, taking its total funding to £35 million. That will allow the council to get on with the job of fixing those potholes.

T6. [904138] **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted to see the Government pushing forward with the new lower Thames crossing. Are there plans to explore widening the carriage in the parts that need it from the crossing to Dover to assist trade transit?

Lilian Greenwood: Improvements to the A2 as it approaches Dover are being considered as part of the pipeline of enhancements being developed for possible delivery in a future road investment strategy beyond 2030.

T7. [904139] **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Last month, I visited the Pidley Lorry Group to discuss its campaign to introduce a 7.5 tonne weight limit to prevent HGVs from using the village as a shortcut. Having enforced the use of the self-funded route by Cambridgeshire county council, the cost to the group so has been in excess of £7,000. There are similar examples affecting Upwood and Alconbury, which are also villages impacted by high volumes of HGV through traffic. What are the Government doing to reduce the bureaucracy and expense for our rural communities, so that they can maintain their quality of life and the safety of those who live there?

Lilian Greenwood: Local authorities already have the powers that they need to restrict HGVs to certain vehicles or to place weight limits. If the hon. Member wants to write to me with further details of the particular issues to which he refers, I would be happy to look at that.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): My constituents in Bishopthorpe and Copmanthorpe are sick of putting up with unsafe HGV movements. Children walking to

school have been involved in near misses, yet the traffic commissioner cannot take that into account, so will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss this case?

Lilian Greenwood: Traffic commissioners consider road safety up to the point where the operating centre joins the highway, but, beyond that, it is probably a matter for the local authority or the police. Although traffic commissioner independence is crucial and ministerial influence would be improper, I will be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss his road safety concerns and how they might be tackled.

T8. [904140] **Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): My constituents in Tiverton and Minehead face many challenges when it comes to transport connectivity. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the merits of a strategic outline business case set out by West Somerset Railway to reconnect the heritage railway line at Bishops Lydeard to the mainline at Taunton? That would allow students to access the only sixth-form facilities in Taunton, take the pressure off the No. 28 bus, and massively improve our ability to entertain more tourists.

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Lady mentioned this to me a couple of days ago when I bumped into her, but I regret to inform her that the Department does not currently have any plans to take forward a development link between Bishops Lydeard and Taunton. I have, however, asked officials to reach out to those at the local authority to discuss the merits of the scheme.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): In the '60s, North West Leicestershire lost its only passenger rail service, the Ivanhoe line. In 2025, my constituents still have no direct access to the rail line. Increasing connectivity of railways is crucial to securing economic growth. Will the Minister share the Department's plans to improve access to passenger rail for communities with no current access?

Simon Lightwood: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Airports across the country are participating in the airspace modernisation review. However, there is a clear conflict of interest between environmental imperatives and profit motives. Will the Secretary of State undertake to introduce an independent member on each airspace review panel?

Mike Kane: The Government are pressing on with airspace modernisation and have set up the UK Airspace Design Service. I recently met the hon. Member in my office to discuss this issue. We continue at pace on this work and will be consulting widely.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): Every week on my journey to and from this place I join constituents on overcrowded Chiltern Railways trains that are often advertised as standing room only. The oldest class of carriages operating on that network has an average age of 47 years. In the light of this, can Ministers tell me what action the Department is taking to support the replacement and refurbishment of these carriages to improve capacity, service reliability, and passenger experience and comfort?

Simon Lightwood: Chiltern Railways faces challenges with ageing trains and is engaged in commercial negotiations to replace its oldest Mark 3 carriages. The Department is collaborating with Chiltern to ensure that the procurement delivers long-term passenger benefits. Separately, the Chiltern Class 168 fleet is undergoing significant refurbishment, including to its interiors, and improvements to reliability.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The 7.58 am train from Sunbury to Shepperton is used by a lot of schoolchildren in my constituency to get to school, but it was cancelled for four days during a recent six-day period, which meant that children were late for school. That appears on their attendance register, which follows them throughout life. The Secretary of State will own South Western Railway by the end of the month. Will she commit to improving the reliability and punctuality of that section of the line?

Heidi Alexander: With the transfer of South Western trains into public ownership in 10 days' time, the Government are determined to turn this situation around, but I have to say that we have inherited an abject mess from the train operating company, which over six years has failed to get the new fleet of Arterio 701 trains into service.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): At yesterday's Transport Committee hearing, the Minister for Local Transport outlined the measures that the Government are taking to reverse the 15-year decline in bus services. The measures will protect many at-risk bus routes and may deliver a few more, but as they deliver growth and reduce congestion, do the Government have a wider ambition to ensure that all rural and non-city areas in England have at least a basic level of bus service so that everyone can get to school, work and the shops, and use public services without needing to drive a car?

Simon Lightwood: I have to say, I really enjoyed my appearance at the Select Committee yesterday. Ultimately, we want people to choose to take the bus because it provides better connections in every part of the country to get people where they need be. It is a more reliable, more affordable, faster and more integrated form of transport, and I hope to see that in debates with Members across the House as the buses Bill proceeds.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Farnborough airport's noise and emission pollution affects a significant part of my constituency. The airport has announced that it will be launching its consultation to expand in August. This has obviously brought a lot of concern from residents groups and campaigners, who are worried that people will be away at this time. What can the Minister do to ensure that there is maximum engagement with the public and therefore a proper consultation?

Mike Kane: I thank the hon. Member for his question, but he will know that this matter is for the determination of Rushmoor borough council, the local planning authority. He will appreciate that this is a live application, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this time.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Businesses on the Newhouse and Bulwark industrial estates in Chepstow are desperate to keep using the M48 Severn bridge, which will be closed to lorries for at least 12 months. By the end of May, they will have to add at least 30 miles to their journey over the border, seriously affecting profitability and growth. Will the Minister meet me and Monmouthshire county council to find a solution, such as controlled flow, so that we do not hold back economic growth in Monmouthshire?

Lilian Greenwood: Safety is our No. 1 priority, and the weight restriction is about future-proofing the bridge for years to come, but I know how disruptive it is when a key crossing is closed or restricted to traffic. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Jeremy Hunt.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): Thank you for squeezing me in, Mr Speaker.

Is the Secretary of State aware that to access the platform at Ash Vale station in my constituency, people have to go up multiple flights of steps, equivalent to two or three floors, making it all but impossible for many older people and disabled people to use the rail network? Before she decides on how to allocate funding under the Access for All scheme in the spending review, will she or one of her Ministers visit Ash Vale, where we promise her a warm Surrey welcome?

Mr Speaker: That doesn't always work.

Heidi Alexander: I am aware that feasibility studies have been done on 50 Access for All stations, and we are reviewing the outcomes of those studies. I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman for not knowing whether that station in his constituency is one of those 50. I promise him that I will talk to officials about the matter.

Mr Speaker: In Chorley's case, work started but it has still not been finished. It was abandoned halfway through.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Residents across my constituency regularly raise with me the issue of potholes and the state of our roads in general. I greatly appreciate the additional funding provided by the Government to South Gloucestershire council to help with improvements. This is about safety. It also about pride of place and the costs of vehicle repairs—all these things matter—so what will the next steps be to support councils to keep roads up to scratch once the potholes are filled?

Lilian Greenwood: We are providing record amounts for local authorities this year, and we hope to provide a long-term funding settlement for local roads maintenance after the spending review.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Will the Secretary of State accept my warm invitation to visit my constituency and sit in traffic with me so she can experience what my

constituents experience morning, noon and night on the A27, which is strangling economic growth in the area and preventing investment?

Heidi Alexander: As tempting as the hon. Lady's invitation is, I regret that I will not be able to do that, and I will not commit the Roads Minister to it either, but we will look at the matters she raises and write to her with an update on the action we think could be taken to improve the situation.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): Economic growth requires people to be able to get to work. This morning, yet another road traffic accident happened on the stretch of M6 motorway that goes through my constituency and yours, Mr Speaker. This has a hugely disruptive impact on the mainly small roads around it in my constituency. Yet again, my residents in Longridge, Grimsargh and all the surrounding areas woke up to the prospect of another journey to work that takes two hours instead of 20 minutes, and that is becoming a monthly—if not weekly—occurrence. Will the Minister meet me to discuss what can be done?

Lilian Greenwood: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Congestion on the A38 in Bromsgrove is making it nearly impossible for residents to get around easily—yet, despite current investment, there is widespread scepticism that the Bromsgrove route enhancement plan, known locally as BREP, will improve the situation. Does the Minister agree that investment in transport must deliver a tangible improvement in traffic flow, and will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss investment in Bromsgrove so that we can keep Bromsgrove moving?

Lilian Greenwood: I understand the hon. Member's wish to get his constituents moving; it is one that we share. I would be happy to look at his concerns in relation to the A38, and I will contact him with further information.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): In 2022, the previous Government cut a significant number of Southeastern services that my constituents in Bexleyheath and Crayford rely on. My constituents continue to raise concerns that direct services from London Charing Cross to Barnehurst and Bexleyheath should be reinstated during the evenings and weekends. Could the Minister provide an update on progress to reinstate those services?

Simon Lightwood: Southeastern plans services to meet passenger demand while ensuring value for money for the taxpayer. Timetables are kept under review and can be adjusted to reflect fluctuations in demand. I am pleased to say that four additional weekday evening services will be introduced on the route in December.

Speaker's Statement: Ministerial Code

10.40 am

Mr Speaker: Once again, I have had to grant an urgent question on a matter that was briefed extensively to the media in recent days. I recognise that a written ministerial statement was issued, but I am surprised that the Government did not think that Members would want an opportunity to question Ministers on a very important issue.

On Monday, the Home Secretary was unapologetic about the fact that details of the immigration White Paper were given to the media, starting on Sunday morning, before it was laid before this House and long before she came to make a statement. I note that those who now occupy senior ministerial roles were not slow to complain when the previous Government made major policy announcements outside this place. I will continue to uphold and defend the rights of this House—the rights of Back Benchers—to be the first to hear the most important announcements of Government policy and the rights of hon. Members to question Ministers on those announcements in person. That was my position under the previous Government and it has not changed under this Government.

It is clear to me that the general principle set out in paragraph 9.1 of the ministerial code is being disregarded more often than it is observed. I will write to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to invite that Committee to consider the issues in more detail. If the Government are not going to take the ministerial code seriously, who will?

I do not like doing this. I believe that I am here to represent all Back Benchers, and Back Benchers have the right to question Ministers first. I am not interested in Sky News, the BBC or political programmes; I am here to defend you all, and I will continue to defend you. I say to the Government: please do not take MPs for granted. It is not acceptable. I know it is not the fault of the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin),

who is about to respond to the urgent question, but the message has to go back loud and clear: when you are in the wrong, apologise to Members.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): Mr Speaker, I hear your words very clearly. I very much respect the role of Parliament and I am pleased to be here today to follow up the written ministerial statement that was laid yesterday by the Lord Chancellor.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me gently say to the Minister: you would not be here at all if I had not granted the urgent question. That is the thing we should remember. You are only here because I have decided that you should be here. Please, do not try to take advantage of a situation that is not of your own making.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I will certainly apologise, Mr Speaker. I was not trying to take advantage. Clearly, it also took the action of the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), laying an urgent question. That is how Parliament works, and rightly so.

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to labour the point—but, no, this is not the way we should be acting. The statement should have been brought here on the day the plan was announced. Let us get this very, very clear: this is not about having to grant an urgent question; this is about the Government doing the right thing, rather than somebody else having to drag Ministers here. That is not how we should be working.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am sorry for any misinformation that I have given in trying to respond.

Mr Speaker: You are a good Minister and a nice person.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We respect each other, and I respect very much that you are standing up for Parliament, which is exactly the right thing to do. I applaud that.

Recalled Offenders: Sentencing Limits

10.42 am

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if she will make a statement on the public safety implications of the Government's plan to set a 28-day limit on prison sentences for recalled offenders.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): The Lord Chancellor laid a written ministerial statement yesterday, the background to which are the changes around fixed-term recall in the light of the prison capacity challenges that the Government face. When we were elected almost a year ago, we inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse. Although we took immediate action to prevent the catastrophe, prisons continue to be perilously close to filling up entirely. Last December we published a long-term building strategy, setting out our aim to open up 14,000 prison places by 2031. That is the largest expansion of the prison estate since the Victorians. We have already committed £2.3 billion to prison expansion, and since taking office we have delivered 2,400 new places.

We also commissioned the independent sentencing review, which will report shortly. The sentencing review will hopefully offer us a path to ending the capacity crisis in our prisons for good, but the impact of sentencing reforms will not be felt before next spring. On our current trajectory, we will hit zero capacity in our prisons in November—we cannot allow that to happen. That is why we have announced our intention to lay a fixed-term recall statutory instrument that will mean that those serving sentences of between one and four years can only be returned to prison for a fixed 28-day period. The measure builds on previous legislation, introduced by the last Government, that mandated 14-day recalls for those serving sentences of under a year.

To be clear, higher-risk offenders have been exempted from that change. If further information relating to an offender's risk is received after they have been recalled which means they are no longer considered suitable for fixed-term recall, they may be detained for longer on a standard recall if that is assessed as necessary.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick: "Sorry" seems to be the hardest word today. I see that the Justice Secretary has still not come to Parliament to defend her policy. Yesterday she deliberately avoided scrutiny in this House, because she knows that this decision is wildly unpopular and risks the safety of the public. To govern is to choose. There are 10,500 foreign criminals in our jails and 17,000 people in prison awaiting trial. Combined, those two groups make up roughly a third of the prison population.

The sensible step forward would obviously be to introduce emergency measures to expedite deportations and get the courts sitting around the clock. If the Justice Secretary chose to do that, we would support her, but so far she has not. She has refused to take the judiciary up on its offer of extra court sitting days. It is not uncommon for as many as half the courts at the Old Bailey to sit empty on any given day. Instead, she has decided to let out early criminals who reoffend or breach their licence. There is now no punishment or

deterrent for criminals who immediately reoffend or cheat the system. The Justice Secretary says these people will be "in prison outside of prison"—I am sure that hardened criminals will be quaking in their boots at that farcical doublespeak.

There is no two ways about it: this decision has put the public in danger and victims in jeopardy. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs, has said that she "cannot stress enough the lack of consideration for victims' safety and how many lives are being put in danger".

Is the Justice Secretary or her Minister really telling domestic abuse victims that their abusers will be back on the streets in just 28 days if they breach their licence, and that nobody will even check with the Parole Board? Can the Minister explain to the House who is exempted from the scheme, because right now confusion reigns? Yesterday the Justice Secretary gave the impression that no domestic abusers or sexual offenders would be eligible for her scheme, but her Department has since said that it will include "many" but not all.

The written ministerial statement laid yesterday deliberately concealed the answer to the question of which criminals will be excluded, so will the Minister take this opportunity to tell the House? If he does not know the answer, will he commit to publishing it by the end of the day? Lastly, can he confirm to the House that anyone in breach of a restraining order will be ineligible for a fixed-term recall, because anything else would be an insult to the victims?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Since taking office, we have deported over 1,800 foreign national offenders in custody, securing their early removal from our prisons—15% higher than in the previous 12 months. We have just announced 110,000 court sitting days, which is the highest level for a very long time.

To answer the right hon. Gentleman's specific questions, we will exclude anyone serving more than four years in prison; all those convicted of a terrorist or national security crime; and those who are subject to higher levels of risk management by multiple agencies where the police and the Prison and Probation Service work together, which includes certain sexual and violent offenders, including many domestic abusers. If there are ongoing concerns about the risk posed by an offender who is due to be released after the 28-day period, frontline workers can apply additional licence conditions to manage that. If further information related to an offender's risk is received after they have been recalled, meaning that they are no longer considered suitable for fixed-term recall, they may be detained for longer on a standard recall, if that is assessed as necessary by the HMPPS public protection team.

We know how important it is that victims are kept informed. All those eligible for the victim contact scheme will be notified about an offender's release and will have the opportunity to make representations about victim-related licence conditions. Although there are certain exclusions for serious offenders, changing recalls for fixed-term offenders is necessary. It would be even worse to run out of space, which at this stage would mean the managed breakdown of the criminal justice system. The Lord Chancellor said rightly that that would be unconscionable. No Government should leave that challenge as a legacy to their successors, as the right hon. Gentleman's Government did.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): We should never forget that the crisis in our prisons that the current Lord Chancellor is seeking to resolve was created over 14 years by the irresponsible mismanagement of the previous Government. Although today's announcement makes sense in the short term, subject to safeguards, we must consider the whole way in which recall has developed, from 100 cases 30 years ago to more than 13,000 today—over 15% of the prison population—with less than 30% of recalls being for further offences. Will the Government consider the way in which recall operates? Without the freeing up of space in prisons, rehabilitation is impossible, overcrowding reaches ridiculous levels and we run out of space altogether.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is right: the recall population has doubled in just seven years and we need to address that. The independent sentencing review will report shortly, and I hope that there will be recommendations to which we can respond in that report.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): There is no doubt that the Conservatives plunged our prisons into crisis. [*Interruption.*] They chunter from a sedentary position, but what else would they call it? It is clear that the Government have failed to step up and tackle the sheer scale of the problem. Across the country, victims and survivors are worried about what this will mean for them. If there were a specific domestic abuse offence, dangerous offenders could be excluded from early release, but the Government have taken no action at all since the Liberal Democrats raised that solution with them last autumn. Will the Minister finally commit to giving victims and survivors the protections that they deserve by creating new domestic abuse aggravated offences, and will he go further to protect our communities by introducing a clear plan to reduce reoffending, which is the only way to solve prison crowding once and for all? If the Minister will not listen to me, will he listen to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, who has just warned that lives are now at risk?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member will know that his colleague, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), is working closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), on getting things right for victims. That is something we take very seriously, and it needs to be done properly, with victims, in order to get it right. I hope that the independent sentencing review report will contain things that give us confidence about moving forward and about the way we work with victims.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): The Conservatives appear to have forgotten quite a number of things, and I think it might be a good time to remind them. Former Justice Secretary Chris Grayling's disastrous partial privatisation of the Probation Service was overturned in 2019 after the number of serious offences—including rape and murder—committed by those on probation skyrocketed. Does the Minister agree that we are seeing the long tail of Conservative failure, which overshadows everything that we must do now?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is right to remind the House of the chaos and turmoil that the Conservatives applied to our very important Probation Service when they were in government. We are putting probation back together. We have already brought 1,000 new probation officers on board, and we are committed to a further 1,300 in the coming year.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Mr Speaker, to pick up on your statement, for which I think the whole House will be grateful, I am sure that my Committee will take up your clear urging for us to look at the issue with regard to the ministerial code.

I know the Minister will agree that domestic abuse cannot be an issue to which lip service is paid in this House and then policies seem to neglect. I make no apologies for returning to the views of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, who issued a severe warning to the Lord Chancellor yesterday, commenting:

"I cannot stress the lack of consideration for victims' safety and how many lives are being put in danger because of this proposed change."

Why does the Minister think the commissioner, with all her expertise and knowledge, has arrived at that conclusion?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We have great respect for the Victims' Commissioner. What would be letting down victims is if we allowed the prison system to get to a place where we cannot lock prisoners up—that would be unconscionable. That is why it is important that we have taken these steps. I remind the hon. Member that we are excluding those prisoners who pose the most risk and are managed under MAPPA—multi-agency public protection arrangements—levels 2 and 3. That means various agencies working together. The exclusion also includes all those convicted of terrorist and national security crimes. Proper action can be taken where agencies identify risk to move from a fixed-term recall to a standard recall.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): Will the Minister tell me whether I am correct that when we entered office, there were fewer than 100 spaces left in our prisons—a terrible failure from the Conservative party? Does he agree that instead of empty words and false promises to build prisons, this Government are getting on with the job?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is quite right. We faced a real emergency when we came into office. It is unconscionable that any Government would do that to an incoming Government. The previous Labour Government added 28,000 prison places in 13 years. In their 14 years, the Conservative Government managed to add 500. In 10 months we have already delivered 2,400 prison places.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Has the Ministry of Justice conducted an impact assessment for this policy? If so, will it release that to the House as soon as possible? If not, can the Lord Chancellor confirm how she knows what impact the policy will have on victims and the wider public?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We are always alert to the need to assess how policies apply to the wider public and victims. That is important.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): This situation is one of the most egregious examples of state failure and a consequence of the worst chaos and incompetence of the last 14 years. The Lord Chancellor has been clear that, given current levels of demand, we cannot build our way out of this crisis. Does the Minister agree that we have to be honest and do something different to ensure that we never again run out of prison places, including improving the existing prison estate and investing in the Probation Service, so that we can reduce reoffending and thereby reduce the pressure on prison places?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We are improving the prison estate and investing in probation, and there will also be actions coming forward from the independent sentencing review. I agree with everything my hon. Friend said.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Victims of domestic abuse, sexual abuse and stalking are now in fear, particularly those who live in rural areas, where tagging does not always work. What particular measures will the Minister put in place to support victims in rural areas who are distant from probation officers and the police?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Anybody subject to a fixed-term recall will be recalled for 28 days, and if their risk is assessed as greater, they will be transferred to a standard recall. The reality is that anybody affected by this has already served their time in prison; they are on licence, being properly monitored and effectively managed by the Probation Service.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): The prison capacity crisis has been years in the making. Does the Minister welcome the news that Wayland Prison in Norfolk has been granted planning permission just this week, by Breckland council's planning committee, for a 25% increase in capacity, with 247 extra places? That application alone represents 50% of the total places created under the last Government in 14 years. Does he agree that this is further evidence of the Government delivering after years of inaction?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is exactly right to point to that planning application going forward. It is excellent news, and shows that we are cracking on with the job.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): Although the Government should have volunteered to defend their position, I accept, having held ministerial responsibility for the prison estate, that they had no good options at this point. Does the Minister accept that the problem with what he is choosing to do is that the return to prison for breach of important licence conditions is there to be a deterrent, and if we reduce that deterrent, we run the risk of more people breaching licence conditions, which would make the overcrowding problem worse? If he chooses that path, will he consider increasing the deterrent effect by ensuring that, following a 28-day return to prison, there are other restrictions on a prisoner's freedom, such as electronic tagging?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I certainly hope that all those things will be looked at by the independent sentencing review. The mandating of the 14-day fixed-term release

was a measure taken by the previous Government. We are extending that to 28 days for sentences of up to four years because of the situation that we face, to ensure that we do not run out of prison places in the interim.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Like me, many residents across Filton and Bradley Stoke were rightly appalled last summer to discover the real situation left behind by the Conservative party. When it comes to prisons, does the Minister agree that this is an opportunity for the Conservative party to apologise?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and the House will have heard it.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Minister and the Secretary of State have often used the word "emergency" to describe the state of the prison population, and I have asked the Secretary of State how long it will take to deport all the foreign criminals clogging up our jails. This is a moment for the Secretary of State to say, "Yes, this is an emergency," and to deport the lot of them, freeing up about 10,000 places, which would help overcome this crisis.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We have deported more foreign national offenders in 12 months than the last Government did in the previous 12 months, and we are continuing to work hard with the Home Office to deport foreign national offenders. We will never be able to do that on the scale necessary to address the challenges that we face in our prisons at this time.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): On a recent visit to Featherstone prison near Wolverhampton, I came across several prisoners who had been recalled, and who were waiting up to a year to have their cases progressed. Does the Minister agree that limiting the recall sentence, making greater use of technology to punish offenders in the community, and making the Probation Service more effective will result in better rehabilitation of prisoners, reduce reoffending, and ease the prison overcrowding caused by the previous Government?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend points out the actions that we must take to address the challenges that we face in the system, and to make the system work better for victims and protect the public.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Many domestic abusers will, given their nature, welcome the opportunity to give another twist of the knife at the cost of a mere 28 days. Has the Minister just presented them with a practical opportunity?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I have carefully gone through the exclusions from this measure, and emphasised the importance of good professional bodies continuing to apply proper risk assessments. When risk assessments say that a standard recall is more appropriate than a fixed-term recall, that will happen.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): It is a bit rich for Conservative Members to be critical when they left the criminal justice system in total meltdown. Does my hon. Friend agree that tagging is an important resource for protecting the public from

[*Andy McDonald*]

criminals? Perhaps he saw the Channel 4 programme “Dispatches”, which showed that the contract given to Serco by the Conservative party was totally and utterly failing. Does he have confidence in Serco to deliver that contract, and if not, will he remove it, and bring that service back under public control?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: It is clear that tagging technology has huge potential. A recent study has shown a 20% reduction in reoffending by offenders wearing curfew tags, but my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to concerns about the contract. Serco’s performance is improving, but it is still not acceptable. The reporting in the “Dispatches” programme was from last year, when we knew that there were serious issues, and we issued financial penalties to Serco, which was given the contract by the previous Government. If Serco’s performance drops again, all options will remain on the table.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): This announcement is a further illustration of why this House should legislate to remove all impediments to the deportation of foreign national offenders. In his reply to the shadow Justice Secretary, the Minister said that victims who are affected by this policy should be kept informed about release, yet he refused to say whether the Department has conducted an impact assessment. What new information is he today willing to commit to publishing each month, so that victims are indeed kept informed?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Victims absolutely need to be kept informed, and we continue to work with victims’ groups and the Victims’ Commissioner to ensure that they are.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): In separate cases, two families in my constituency lost loved ones when they were murdered by offenders who were out on remand but should never have been. Will the Minister meet me and, if they wish, both families, so that they can have some assurance that lessons have been learned from these cases, and so that other families are not placed in the same horrendous situation?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I am very sorry to hear about the cases mentioned by my hon. Friend. I am happy to meet him to take the matter further.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Victims’ Commissioner has warned that freeing prisoners early who have been shown to pose a reoffending risk to the public will

“place victims and the wider public at an unnecessary risk of harm.”

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner has said that it is “simply unacceptable”. What discussions did the Government have with those two commissioners before making the announcement?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We speak to the Victims’ Commissioner regularly; the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), is speaking to them later today.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Justice Secretary could have chosen to deport more of the thousands of offenders in our jails, maxed out court sitting days, repurposed buildings or procured temporary facilities to hold offenders. Why has she instead chosen to release serious offenders, including domestic abusers, from jail early, with no consideration for the victims?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: This is not about releasing people from prison earlier.

James Wild: Yes, it is.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: No, it is not. This is about people who have already served their sentence in prison; they are out in the community. If they breach a condition of their licence, they are returned to prison. The hon. Gentleman might as well ask why the Government he supported did not take any of the measures that he mentions. Our Government inherited the mess that his Government left us, and we are taking decisions to address the unconscionable threat of having a prison system that is not able to lock up dangerous people.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Ministers seem to have been deliberately vague about the number of domestic abuse offenders who will be eligible for release, and the breadth of their offences. Given how big the announcement is, the Government and the Department will have done a lot of work looking at who will be eligible. Will the Minister set out to the House the exact number of domestic abuse offenders who will be eligible for this scheme?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I hear the right hon. Gentleman’s question, and I will write to him.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The first duty of government is to keep the public safe. I recently met a constituent whose convicted ex-husband is serving a prison sentence, having raped her twice. Despite being in prison, he continues to have indirect access to their children. My constituent thinks that is wrong, and I agree. Does the Minister agree that convicted violent and sexual offenders should serve maximum possible custodial sentences, and lose parental access rights?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Victims and Courts Bill is about to go through Parliament, and that is the sort of issue that we will look at during the Bill’s passage.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): One of the reasons why our prisons are so full is that we have more than 10,000 foreign nationals in them. What steps is the Minister taking to deport them?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I say gently that we have deported more foreign nationals in the first year on our watch than the previous Government did in the years on their watch. He is right that we have to roll up our sleeves and continue to get on with the job.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Minister has been slightly equivocal in answering this question, which I have asked on two previous occasions; third time

lucky! Prior to announcing this policy change yesterday, did the Government meet and consult the Domestic Abuse Commissioner about it—yes or no?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The commissioner has been spoken to by the team. To be clear, the impact assessment will be published when we come to consider the statutory instrument.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The new measures announced by the Justice Secretary suggest that the Government have learned nothing from the furore and loss of public confidence that followed last year's early release debacle. That same Justice Secretary, along with the Victims Minister, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who is in her place, signed the protest letter that led to the convicted child rapist Fabian Henry being removed from a deportation flight. The Prime Minister signed that letter, too. Why do the Justice Secretary and her Ministers appear to have such scant regard for the impact that their management of prison releases will have on the victims of crimes? When will she implement measures that act as a deterrent to recidivism, rather than as a minor inconvenience to the continuation of a criminal career?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We are committed to getting this right. The early release scheme that the previous Government put in place did not have the same exceptions as our early release scheme did for the sort of offenders that the hon. Gentleman draws attention to, but these matters are very difficult. The most important thing is ensuring that we have a criminal justice system that works. We need to be able to lock up dangerous people, and those who do really bad things. When we came into government, the situation was that we might not be able to maintain that ability. We have had to take actions that we would far rather not take in order to keep the system going.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is a very decent person, and he and I have been friends for many years, but I must ask this question, which I hope I can put in the way that I wish to. I really struggle to understand the rationale behind allowing a criminal to consider their options and work out whether what they intend to do is worth an additional 28 days in jail, or allowing a person to weigh up whether breaking a restraining or non-molestation order is worth a month in prison. Criminals need to fear that if they break the law again, it will be worse for them. How do the Minister and the Department think that the policy will disincentivise repeat offending?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I have made clear the exceptions that apply to this tight, fixed-term recall alteration. The management of people in the community will be risk-assessed, as always. If the view is that a different approach needs to be taken, it will be taken.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Act 2025

Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Act 2025

Great British Energy Act 2025.

Business of the House

11.13 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the future business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I shall. The business for the week commencing 19 May includes:

MONDAY 19 MAY—Second Reading of the Mental Health Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 20 MAY—Second Reading of the Victims and Courts Bill.

WEDNESDAY 21 MAY—Opposition day (8th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to terrorism.

THURSDAY 22 MAY—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a general debate on access to NHS dentistry, followed by a general debate on dementia care. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 22 May and return on Monday 2 June.

The provisional business for the week commencing 2 June will include:

MONDAY 2 JUNE—Second Reading of the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill [*Lords*].

Jesse Norman: I thank the Leader of the House for her remarks. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, this week saw the tragic and untimely death of Sir Roy Stone. We had a brief moment of recognition of him earlier in the week, but I am keenly aware that many Labour colleagues were not in the House at the time of his flourishing. As such, I wanted to mention in the Chamber today how much we all respected him, and give the Leader of the House the chance to say something about him if she wishes.

More widely, we have had a week of mixed economics, with growth slightly up, weak wage growth, a spike in unemployment—as everyone had predicted in the case of national insurance—and fiscal strains highlighted just today by a former Treasury civil servant. We have also had an immigration policy launched with echoes of Enoch Powell, and a Prime Minister who appears not to know the difference between capital and current spending in relation to hospices that are seeking to support people day to day across this country—people who are literally at death's door.

I would have moved on from the politics of the week at this point in my remarks, but for the extraordinary series of interventions by Mr Speaker only a few minutes ago on the Government's failures to announce their policies in the House. Mr Speaker rightly sought—and was eventually given—an apology by the Minister, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin), for their latest failure, but the irony is absolutely extraordinary. That announcement came just hours after the Leader of the House had to be dragged to this Chamber to answer questions on this very topic. She failed to apologise to

[Jesse Norman]

this House yesterday; I wonder whether she will take the opportunity to do so today. Whether she does or not, I hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as well as Mr Speaker and all the Deputy Speakers, will insist on maintaining the primacy of our parliamentary democracy and demanding that Governments are held to account.

Today, I come to the Chamber not to ask about a particular item of policy, but to offer a positive policy idea; not to focus on what may be passing from day to day in the Government's policies, but to focus on the longer term and to celebrate. I do so in relation to a personal interest of mine—indeed, a mini-obsession, as the House probably knows—which is growth, development and innovation in higher education. This week, we saw the graduation of the first students at our new university in Hereford, the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering. It is the first greenfield university in this country for 40 years, a specialist, technical engineering university teaching students of every age and background—especially those from less well-off families—in a very intensive and immersive way. It teaches them the hand-on skills of an apprenticeship, but also the rigour of a master's degree. Its students work in teams, building work habits and working closely with partner companies in defence, security, energy, construction, food and agriculture.

I mention that university now because it highlights what could be considered a lack of ambition in the way that we as a country have thought about higher education over the past 50 years, or possibly even longer. NMITE is an institution that is not just focused on marginal educational gain, but on transformational improvement. It aims to take a person—male or female, young or old—who might never have thought of going to university at all and help them to find their passions, head, hands and heart, and take them as far as they can go. It aims to reinvent not just what students learn, but how they learn, with theory and practice tied together in real-world challenges, forging professionals through immersive and intensive work with a sense of mission and purpose. It aims to build the right habits and prepare those students, not just for the world of work, but for a world of work that is constantly changing.

Above all, the university seeks to keep the benefits of being small in size—something we have lost in so much of higher education—with agility, accountability, personal engagement, teamwork and friendships and a sense of belonging and community, so that our students grow as morally serious human beings who can readily and resiliently deal with complexity and uncertainty, and who are deeply aware of the power and responsibility that comes with being an engineer. Does it work? These students are studying for a masters in engineering, certified independently as being of very high quality. The first cohort are going into jobs at a rate of almost 100% in companies such as Balfour Beatty, Kier, Cadbury, BAE, AWE, Safran and local companies at an average salary of £34,000, drawing national needs and local needs together. It is the small modular reactor of British higher education.

I raise this example because I want to invite the Government and Members from across the House to consider whether we could not do it elsewhere. There are at least 50 small cities and large towns in this country that lack higher education and higher economic

growth. There is a huge need for specialist science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills. We have vast amounts of talent deprived of opportunity, and this can be part of the solution. I do not know whether any colleagues would like to be involved, but each could be, in their own area and their constituency, leading on the creation not just of a campus, but of a new university designed for local people, local businesses and national economic opportunity. That is the opportunity. I invite the House and the Government to consider it.

Lucy Powell: I will take this opportunity to also pay tribute to Sir Roy Stone, the former principal private secretary to the Government Chief Whip. He was very much known as the “usual channels”, and I think he embodied that with distinction. I did not know him personally, but I know of his reputation and of the love and esteem in which he was held by many Members across the House. We send our thoughts to his family and friends again at this time.

The thoughts of many across the House will also be with those living in Gaza. We see the intolerable suffering, death and starvation on our screens most evenings, and it must stop now. Food is not reaching starving people, airstrikes are killing civilians and hostages are still being held. I know that this whole House wants to see a change of course, meaningful aid getting in, an urgent ceasefire and a path to a durable peace.

I also heard Mr Speaker's statement this morning about the Government giving statements to this House in a timely fashion, and I absolutely hear what he says. As I said yesterday in the House, I will ensure that that message is relayed, as I do on many occasions, to our Cabinet colleagues. I just remind the House that the Lord Chancellor laid a long written ministerial statement yesterday afternoon, as did the Home Secretary earlier in the week, but we can and we must do better. The right hon. Gentleman, as I said yesterday in the House, should remember that we have given 146 oral statements in just 133 sitting days, and that far outstrips what happened under his Government when, frankly, they disrespected Parliament time after time. I will not be taking any lectures from him on that.

I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says about the new technical university in his constituency in Herefordshire. It sounds like an important and good innovation to provide technical education and engineering pathways, particularly for people from certain backgrounds who might not otherwise access such education. My eldest son is currently studying engineering at one of the universities that I represent—Manchester Metropolitan University—and I hope he and many others have a pathway into work. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that when higher education joins much more closely with the place of work and the skills that are needed for the jobs of the future, that is when we get much more bang for our buck, and our young people have the opportunities in life that they need.

I noticed that the right hon. Gentleman did just about mention the economy again this week. He did not seem to want to welcome the good news on growth figures out this morning, and he did not mention the interest rate cut last week either. Nor did he mention the 200 jobs that we have created since the election. I do not know if he noticed what the former Chancellor, George Osborne, said last week about the stance of the

Conservatives under their current leader: that they are more interested in culture wars than in having a serious economic plan. He is right, isn't he?

The right hon. Gentleman talks about getting figures wrong, but what a way for the Leader of the Opposition to get her figures wrong during Prime Minister's questions yesterday—by a factor of 100. I do not know if the right hon. Gentleman wants to set the record straight on that. She also did not seem to grasp the importance and value of the trade deals that we have struck in the last week or so, and of the billions of pounds that they will bring into the economy. Thankfully, though, there are still a few true Conservatives on the Back Benches who really understand the core conservative idea of free trade. His former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden), welcomed those trade deals. His former Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), welcomed them too. Even Kwasi Kwarteng, the former Chancellor, said that the US-UK deal is a success. George Osborne is right, isn't he? The Conservatives have no idea where they stand on the economy, and they have no plan. We have a plan for growth, a plan to improve living standards and a plan to put money back in people's pockets, and people are starting to see the fruits of that today.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Astwood Bank is a beautiful village in my constituency of Redditch and the villages. However, despite its aesthetic beauty, it is the people of Astwood Bank who I am most proud of. In the Gallery today are a group representing Astwood Bank's Royal British Legion, which has been responsible for raising tens of thousands of pounds for our veterans and service personnel. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Astwood Bank's RBL, including officers, veterans, school governors and our local reverend, for its public service and commitment to the community?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in welcoming those from Astwood Bank's Royal British Legion to Parliament today. I am sure the whole House is grateful for the work that they have done, for the thousands of pounds that they have raised, and for all the service that they have given over many years.

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

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I echo the Leader of the House's words about the intolerable and increasingly unsurvivable situation in Gaza. I urge the Government to do everything in their power to help remedy the situation.

My Chelmsford constituent, who is self-employed, regularly has to deal with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. He recently wrote to me about the unacceptable waiting times on HMRC's customer service helpline. In his experience, this issue has been going on for years but has recently grown considerably worse. He tells me that he sometimes has to wait for up to 40 minutes before giving up and hanging up. It is all very well having services online, but if they are not fully accessible, people will still need an HMRC helpline that is responsive. Sadly, that is not the case.

The unacceptable level of customer service has been the subject of cross-party criticism in this House many times over the years. This year, the Public Accounts Committee agreed that the situation has indeed got worse. It found that 44,000 HMRC customers were cut off while waiting more than 70 minutes to reach an adviser—more than six times the figure for the whole of the 2022-23 financial year. I am sure the whole House will agree that spending time on the phone while waiting to resolve tax issues is not something that many of us or our constituents particularly enjoy doing, and it does not do anything to help productivity. Businesses need to spend their time selling their goods and services and generating tax receipts for the Treasury, not languishing on the end of a phone. Will the Leader of the House ask for a statement to be made about when we can expect to see improvements?

Lucy Powell: First of all, as I said in my opening remarks, the situation in Gaza is truly intolerable and awful to see.

The hon. Lady raises what is, unfortunately, an all too familiar issue that many of our businesses and constituents face when trying to contact HMRC and other services. It is simply not good enough that people have to wait as long as she describes, which is incredibly frustrating for them. As she says, it has a real impact on the time that they could otherwise spend on their businesses and on doing what they need to do. She may be aware that, later this year, HMRC will publish a transformation road map to ensure that its services significantly improve, particularly at the customer end. I will make sure that a statement is given about that plan when it is ready, and that she gets an update from the Minister in the meantime.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Like many hon. Members across the House, I have leaseholders in properties in Newport East managed by FirstPort who have seen their service charges dramatically increase—in one case, a constituent reports, by 262% since 2020—despite getting very little in return. Can we please have an update on the Government's timeline for the introduction of greater protection for leaseholders and strengthening the regulation of managing agents?

Lucy Powell: This issue is raised with me regularly at business questions, and by my own constituents, as I represent many leaseholders across Manchester Central. The situation my hon. Friend describes is all too familiar, and I am sorry to hear what FirstPort is doing in her constituency. She will know that this Government have real ambitions for leasehold reform. We want to end the feudal system of leasehold and bring forward a system of commonhold. That is why we have published the White Paper, and we have also laid regulations to make it easier for leaseholders to get the right to manage. Later this year, we will bring forward a draft leasehold reform Bill, which will be a comprehensive package to change the system for good.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, in the Chamber next week there will be a statement from the Business and Trade Committee. When we

[*Bob Blackman*]

come back after the Whitsun recess, if we are granted the time, on 5 June there will be a debate on high street banking closures and banking hubs, followed by a debate on safety regulations in the construction and planning of battery energy storage sites. If we are given the time, on 12 June there will be a debate on the distribution of special educational needs and disabilities funding, followed by a debate on the fifth anniversary of the covid-19 pandemic.

In Westminster Hall next week, on Tuesday there will be a debate on pensions for people living overseas, and on Thursday there will be a full three-hour debate on the UK-EU summit results. When we come back, on Tuesday 3 June there will be a debate on the powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, and on Thursday 5 June there will be a debate on the police presence on high streets, followed by a debate on the contribution of maths to the UK. On Tuesday 10 June there will be a debate on the US aid funding pause and the impact on UK international development, and on Thursday 12 June there will be a debate on the legal recognition of humanist marriages, followed by a debate on long-term conditions.

Today is the last day for people to respond to the consultation by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on my private Member's Bill, which was given Royal Assent in 2023, on supported housing exempt accommodation. Unfortunately, over the last two years rogue landlords have continued to exploit vulnerable people, but I am delighted that the Government have taken up the regulations we had prepared before the general election. I urge individuals who wish to respond to the consultation to do so without delay. Will the Secretary of State make a statement after Whitsun on what action the Government will take, how many responses have been received and when we can expect the regulations to be brought into force, so that vulnerable tenants do not continue to be exploited?

Lucy Powell: First, I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for announcing the important debates it has coming up. In particular, the issue of banking hubs gets raised with me regularly in these sessions, and anyone with a prepared question about that might take note of the fact that there is a forthcoming debate. The issue of planning applications for battery storage facilities is one that the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) also regularly raises in these sessions, so I am sure she will be speaking in that; in fact, it is probably her debate.

I also thank the hon. Gentleman for his Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023—an important Act that he pushed through Parliament—on the very important issue of tackling rogue landlords who are taking advantage of very vulnerable people. I know this is a matter of interest to many people across this House, and I will get in touch with the Minister about making a statement on its implementation.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): People in my area are totally brassed off with Yorkshire Water, which has failed, repeatedly, to deliver clean water to houses in Upton. It has delivered 5,000 hours of sewage into our local rivers and streams last year, and today we learnt that people are having to boil water

in the north of Yorkshire. In the meantime, it is pushing up prices and has pocketed over £1 billion of profits since covid. Can we have a debate on Yorkshire Water's lamentable progress on delivering clean water? Can we have an opportunity to see whether or not we think privatisation is a failed experiment?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I am sure he will agree that the previous Conservative Government let water companies profit from filling our waterways and rivers with sewage and, frankly, rubbish at times. We are taking action. We have already passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which now holds water bosses criminally liable for such discharges, and we have secured over £100 billion of private sector investment to upgrade and build our water infrastructure. There is more to be done, which is why we had the commission, which published recently. Further legislation will come forward in due course to look at the broader issues of water reform and water governance.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I commend the Leader of the House for her very full answers, but there are many Members standing and to get everyone in we will need very short questions and short answers, please.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): As short as possible, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Leader of the House will know that I have raised the issue of crossbows in this Chamber before. They are murderous devices in the wrong hands. In response, the Government have helpfully tabled amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill, yet I have still received no information, despite the Prime Minister's promise that I would, about the response to the consultation. It is now well over a year old, yet we have heard nothing. May we have a statement to the House on the Government's response to the consultation on crossbow ownership and sale as soon as possible please?

Lucy Powell: I will ensure the right hon. Gentleman gets an update on the consultation. He is right to say that we brought in amendments in the Committee stage of the Crime and Policing Bill. The Bill will come back after recess for its remaining stages, when some of these issues can be discussed. In the meantime, I will ensure he gets a full response on the consultation.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): A few weeks ago, I was pleased to welcome three educational groups to Parliament: Derwentside college in Consett, St Joseph's primary school in Blaydon, and St Mary's primary school in Blackhill. I congratulate all of them, pupils and staff, who were a real credit to their schools and colleges, and to our Blaydon and Consett constituency. I also thank our magnificent education and engagement team here in Parliament. May we have a debate in Government time on what more we can do to give young people an understanding of our democracy and how they can take part in it?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in commending the great work that the education team here in Parliament do, and I am glad to hear that the schools and colleges from her constituency had such a

great experience. Education about citizenship and democracy is a vital part of what people are doing in schools and need to continue doing.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): A number of weeks ago, I mentioned the inaugural Harrogate town council elections. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all those who were elected? May we have a debate in Government time on local government reorganisation? Harrogate borough council used to receive 0.5% of profits from Harrogate Spring Water, but that has now been taken away by North Yorkshire council. We want them to go back to the new Harrogate town council to ensure that local communities do not miss out when we have the new super councils that are not so super.

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman makes a really good point. I am delighted to congratulate all those who were elected to Harrogate town council, even if many of them are not Labour—I imagine they probably were not. We are bringing forward the English devolution Bill, when many of those issues will be debated and discussed. There is a real keen interest in the Bill and the issues therein, so I will make sure he gets a ministerial response.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the work and dedication of Mel Metcalfe and the entire Durham Pride team—supported by the Queen of Durham, Tess Tickle and her Dragettes—in aiming to make this year's event the biggest and greatest celebration of the LGBT+ community in the county yet? Can we have a debate in Government time to ensure that the hard-won rights secured by the LGBT+ community, activists and campaigners are not eroded by those who would prefer to see celebrations like Pride consigned to the history books?

Lucy Powell: I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating those who organise Durham Pride every year. I have a large Pride event in my constituency in Manchester, too. We are coming towards Pride season—I think we do usually make time for a debate on the LGBT community ahead of Pride, but I will take her question into account.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Later today, the House will debate the subject of solar farms. I do not wish to pre-empt that debate, but the fact of the matter is that building solar farms on agricultural land is completely incompatible with the Government's proposed policy on sustainable agriculture. Could the Leader of the House have a quiet word with the Prime Minister in the privacy of the Cabinet Room and ask him to talk to the Energy and Agriculture Secretaries and bang some heads together?

Lucy Powell: As the right hon. Gentleman says, we will be debating some of those issues later today. He is absolutely right that we need to strike a balance between meeting our energy needs, achieving energy security and getting bills down—for which developing solar is absolutely key—while at the same time maintaining our agricultural land and food security. I am sure we will be debating those issues later.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): As the MP for Crystal Palace, I asked the Leader of the House to join me in wishing Crystal Palace football club good luck last month, and my constituents were left feeling “Glad All Over” when her good wishes helped to secure them a thumping 3-0 win against Aston Villa in the FA cup semi-final. As a City fan, she may be less willing to wish the Eagles good luck for the final this weekend, but let me wish them good luck for Saturday. Will she acknowledge that it is not only Palace fans who are getting behind Oliver Glasner's underdogs, but the whole country?

Lucy Powell: Well. [*Laughter.*] As the MP for Manchester city as well as being a Manchester City fan, I do not want to see Crystal Palace winning on Saturday, but I do recognise that this is a huge step for them; it is, I think, a long time since they have been in the FA cup final. I know that their supporters will be there loud and proud on Saturday, and that the whole of my hon. Friend's constituency—and south London, I am sure—will be behind them. However, hopefully Man City will win.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Julian House is a homelessness charity that has been operating in Bath for nearly 40 years. Its lease is ending next year, and, with no route to capital or long-term funding, it faces closure. Can we have a debate in Government time on how to end short-term funding cycles for local authorities, which give them little choice but to retain charities on insecure, short-term contracts, which are so devastating for our most vulnerable and at-risk people?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about the homelessness charity in the hon. Lady's constituency and the challenges it is facing. She is absolutely right: the short-term funding cycles we have seen for local government are part of the challenge for charities like the one she mentions. We are committed to three-year funding cycles for local government and have boosted local government finances in every part of the country to help to deal with the situations she describes.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): First, I welcome the Leader of the House's remarks on the intolerable situation in Gaza and her commitment to ensuring that our Government do everything they can to bring about a swift conclusion to this situation. What Israel is doing to blockade what is necessary to sustain life offends every principle of international humanitarian law—the same laws that our own armed forces have to uphold when defending us.

Alongside arms sales, one of the biggest issues is the continuation of RAF overflights from RAF Akrotiri, a base from which I once served. Although I have no doubt that our people are serving honourably and in line with assessments of international law, further clarity is required on the purpose and extent of UK military co-operation. We must be open and transparent and assure our constituents that nothing is being done to aid Israel's disgraceful acts against the people of Gaza. What can my right hon. Friend, alongside our colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, do to address this matter?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and reiterate what I said earlier, which is that the situation in Gaza is intolerable and needs to end. We want a

[Lucy Powell]

return to a ceasefire, negotiations to stop the bloodshed and the killing of innocent civilians, and the hostages to be freed. As far away as this may feel from the situation that we are in, a long-term two-state solution must be found as well. He will know that on the issue of arms exports we have suspended export licences to Israel for anything that could be used in the military operations in Gaza.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): In January 2024, my constituent, Mr Michael Moyse, wrote to the Treasury about his business, and the Royal Mail has confirmed that his letter was signed for. As he did not receive a reply, he came to my surgery in January this year seeking assistance. Having investigated the matter, I wrote to officials in the Treasury on 18 March requesting that they reply to Mr Moyse. They did not do so. I wrote again to the Treasury on 7 May. My constituent has still not received a reply. Will the Leader of the House have a word with the Chancellor and ask the Treasury to reply to my constituent?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Member and his constituent have not received a reply to their correspondence. If he would supply me with the details of that correspondence at the end of this session, I will ensure that he gets a speedy reply.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Dinnington village in my constituency recently experienced the sudden and unexpected closure of its post office. We all know how important postal services are for providing banking services, opportunities to pay bills and identity services. I have set up a petition and 200 residents have signed it already. I have also been in touch with the Post Office. Can we have a debate in Government time about the importance of post office services to communities such as mine?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the closure of the post office in my hon. Friend's constituency. This matter gets raised with me a lot in business questions, and, as I have said many times before, it is critical that Members of Parliament stand up for these services and make it clear to the Post Office that these closures are not acceptable to our constituents. I will ensure that she gets an update, and that the House is continually updated on these matters.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am sure that we would all agree that the wellbeing of our universities is vital to the economic wellbeing of this country. As the Member for Edinburgh West, I know that the wellbeing of our four universities in Edinburgh is vital not just to the economy, but to the livelihoods of many of my constituents. International students, in turn, are vital to the wellbeing of those universities. Universities Scotland says that, under the immigration measures proposed this week by the Government, the levy could cost universities in Scotland £85 million a year. There is a great deal of concern about this, so will the Leader of the House arrange for me to have a meeting with the relevant Minister to see how we can address this issue and perhaps reassure our university sector?

Lucy Powell: International students play an important role in our country. They bring with them skills and make a great contribution. I think that is why Universities UK said this week that our measures will keep us very competitive in these areas, but I take on board what the hon. Member is saying. We have education questions coming up soon, but I will ensure that the Minister gets back to her on these matters.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Sunday marked National Fishing Remembrance Day. Fishermen in our coastal towns and villages, including Looe and Polperro, play a vital role in food security and national security. I pay tribute to the previous member for South East Cornwall and to her late husband who lost his life to the sea. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on support for a sustainable fishing industry, particularly for smaller, local fleets?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in paying respect to the former Member. It was National Fishing Remembrance Day last week, and I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to those who contribute to our economy and the fishing way of life in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's. The topic of fishing and fishing communities always raises lots of interest in the House, so I am sure that if she wanted to apply for a debate on it, she would get a lot of interest.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The Leader of the House has previously been very helpful in facilitating ministerial engagement on the switch-off of the radio teleswitch service. However, the switch-off is due to take place at the end of June, which is only weeks away, and reports suggest that over 100,000 people in Scotland still have not had a new meter installed. That carries the threat of them losing hot water and heating at the end of June. I have constituents, such as Ian Dalling of Peebles, who have repeatedly had appointments for a changeover cancelled, which I think is unacceptable. Will the Leader of the House ensure that a statement is brought forward to tell us exactly what is happening with the switch-off and to assure us that nobody will be left without heating or hot water?

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Member for raising this important matter with me again; he is very diligent on behalf of his constituents. He is right that the radio teleswitch replacement programme has been far too slow. We have been trying to speed it up, but what he describes is simply not good enough, and he is right to say that it is unacceptable. We need suppliers to meet their obligations in order to ensure that none of his constituents are left without hot water or heating. I will ensure that he gets a ministerial response, and I will ask for the whole House to be given an update.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): As a proud Stoke, I cannot wait to celebrate our city centenary on 5 June alongside my fellow residents. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Councillor Jane Ashworth OBE, leader of Stoke-on-Trent City council, and our fantastic Lord Mayor Lyn Sharpe on their exceptional leadership in delivering a truly ambitious and inclusive programme of activities and events to mark this historic year?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend, the proud Stoke that he is, in congratulating Stoke-on-Trent on its centenary, and I too thank Jane Ashworth and Lyn Sharpe for their great leadership. I love visiting Stoke, and I look forward to the city flourishing over its next hundred years.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): There has been real interest in Westminster Hall debates on maternity services and the recently announced closure of the maternity service and special baby care unit at Yeovil hospital. Will the Leader of the House commit to time in the Chamber to debate the failure to implement in full the Ockenden recommendations that would see the improved maternity care we need across the UK?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate the hon. Lady on raising these matters in Westminster Hall and elsewhere; they are important issues. I am sure that were she to apply for a Backbench Business debate on those matters, she would get a lot of support. *[Interruption.]* Ah, the hon. Lady is a member of the Backbench Business Committee, so she cannot apply. Perhaps she could encourage Members who are listening to her pleas to ask for a debate. She raises important matters which I know are very important to the Health Secretary. He is keen to keep the House updated, and I will ensure that the hon. Lady is kept updated as well.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): It was fantastic to attend Primary Engineer events in Derby earlier this month, supported by the amazing Jemma Smalls and the wider Rail Forum. Pupils from local schools showcased model trains that they had designed and made themselves. We are proud in Derby of our rail heritage, and we know that through investing in our young people we can ensure that there is a bright future ahead. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the outstanding creativity, teamwork and problem solving that the young people showed?

Lucy Powell: The rail forum initiative in my hon. Friend's constituency sounds wonderful. I am thrilled that the Government are committed to headquartering Great British Rail in Derby. Hopefully, its rail history will very much be a part of its rail future and young people in his constituency will be able to have a great career in rail engineering.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I join the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House in their tributes to Sir Roy Stone, further to those in the House on Tuesday. He was the most exceptional civil servant and his loss is deeply felt by many.

Can we have a debate in Government time on any legislative and wider changes needed to deliver value for money in the restoration and renewal programme, particularly given Government statements on wider pressures on the public finances and the fact that so many Members of the House were newly elected last July and therefore have not had an opportunity to give their views and shape the programme?

Lucy Powell: I join the right hon. Member in paying tribute to the exceptional service of Sir Roy Stone. I know that he worked with Sir Roy, as did many others across the House; he sounds like the most tremendous person to have worked with.

The right hon. Member raises the really important issue of the restoration and renewal project for the House of Commons. He and I both sit on the House of Commons Commission, where we discuss these issues. It is vital that the House has its say on what that project will entail, that we get value for money and that people can see what that money is being spent on—some of the necessary resourcing works that we must see at some point. We will have plenty of time to debate those issues on the Floor of the House.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Last week, His Majesty the King was pleased to approve the appointment of the new Bishop of Carlisle, Rob Saner-Haigh. His appointment after two years acting in the role has been widely welcomed across the diocese. May I invite the Leader of the House to welcome the appointment? Would she make time for a debate on the important work our faith leaders do in all our communities?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Bishop of Carlisle on his recent appointment. I know that these matters are of interest to the House but, because they fall outside Government business, they often struggle to get debating time, as I discussed recently with the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). Hopefully, through the Modernisation Committee and other work we are doing, we can find more time to debate such important matters.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Like the Leader of the House, I am delighted that we will be having a debate on battery energy storage systems, but that is not my question for today. It will come as no surprise that I want to press her again on Aldridge train station.

At Transport questions, I asked the Secretary of State a question, and she said that she would come back to me with an update and speak to Mayor Parker. Money has been taken away from the project, and I am struggling to get a response from the Mayor of the West Midlands to correspondence from months ago. Could the Leader of the House perhaps assist in that or offer us a debate in Government time on the importance of rail connectivity not just to my constituency but around the west midlands, particularly given that we await the review on the west midlands rail hub?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her persistence in raising the same issue twice in one morning. She is right to do so, because access to train stations and investment in stations is a critical issue to our constituents. I hope that the Secretary of State will come back to her; I will chase that. I think there would be a lot of interest in a broader debate on access to train stations and rail infrastructure in the west midlands and beyond.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am concerned that this week FedEx announced that it is planning to close its depot in Newcastle-under-Lyme. That is bad news for hundreds of workers in my constituency and feels very much like a case of profit over people. It stands in stark contrast to the Government's commitment to our industrial heartlands. Let us be clear: the site is strategically placed and should prosper.

[Adam Jogee]

With that in mind, will the Leader of the House join me in urging FedEx to think again and work with me to explore alternatives that will protect my constituents' jobs and livelihoods?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about the proposed closure of the FedEx depot in my hon. Friend's constituency. He is right as a constituency MP to raise that with me on the Floor of the House. Obviously, these are matters for FedEx, but we want to see more investment in jobs and opportunity in his constituency. I will ensure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): West Yorkshire police recently announced, to much fanfare, that areas such as Keighley and Ilkley would receive extra officers as part of a new neighbourhood policing team strategy. What seemed like a good and positive announcement hid the fact that the so-called new officers have been seconded from Operation Steerside—a critical team of officers that tackles vehicle crimes, which will now be disbanded, with a negative impact on my constituents. May we have a debate on that important issue in Government time? Does the Leader of the House agree that if officer numbers are an issue for West Yorkshire police, the force should not continue with discriminatory hiring practices that deter white recruits from applying?

Lucy Powell: We are committed to introducing more neighbourhood policing roles. As part of our policing guarantee, we are going to introduce an additional 13,000 neighbourhood policing roles by 2029. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's constituents, like mine, will want to see those neighbourhood police officers in his constituency, on the street, tackling crime in our communities and making sure that our streets are safer.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Defibrillators are a vital community resource; they save lives and provide reassurance to local residents and visitors. In my constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, Paul Kimberley has been leading the St Agnes parish-wide defibrillator network, which now includes 50 different defibrillators across the area. Thanks to that initiative, St Agnes now ranks in the top 2% nationally for defibrillator coverage. Will the Leader of the House congratulate Paul for his work? Does she also agree that we need a more informed and strategic approach to defibrillator provision, and will she allocate time to support and debate that initiative?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Paul Kimberley on getting more defibrillators to Camborne and Redruth. We recognise the importance that they play; improving access to them is critical. We have topped up funds to do that, but my hon. Friend is right that we need to go further and have a more strategic approach.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Questions and answers will have to be much shorter so we can get more colleagues in.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I am sure that the Leader of the House, like me, loves a farm shop. Johnsons of Old Hurst in my constituency was last

week declared the best farm shop and delicatessen in Cambridgeshire at the Muddy Stilettos awards for independent businesses. The shop offers high-quality, home-grown British produce, and I know from personal experience how busy it is and how difficult it is to get a table in the tearoom there. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Andy and Tracey, and wishing them well for the best of the best national finals next month, where they will be in contention to become the best farm shop and delicatessen in the country—and surely the only one with a lion enclosure?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Andy and Tracey on their award-winning farm shop, which sounds fantastic. Maybe next time the hon. Member can offer me an invitation and I might join him.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Football Families for Justice is a voluntary organisation that campaigns on behalf of ex-professional footballers who have died or are suffering from neurodegenerative diseases incurred by heading footballs. Footballers suffer such diseases at four to five times the national average. The FFJ has tried to engage the football industry to persuade it to accept some responsibility for the problem, but to no avail. Will the Leader of the House advise on whether the Government would consider amendments to the Football Governance Bill that would encourage the industry to do so?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking the FFJ for all its work on this important matter, which she is right to raise. We have debated the Bill on Second Reading. My hon. Friend might want to see if she can join the Public Bill Committee, which will provide a good opportunity to debate further action.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Scottish fire and rescue service is facing damaging cuts thanks to underfunding by the SNP Government in Edinburgh. Last week, I visited Hawick fire station, where I heard about the proposed cuts, including changes to the retained service and a reduction in the 24/7 coverage to office hours. Such proposals could put lives at risk, so may we have a debate on the importance of adequate funding for our fire and rescue services? Also, does the Leader of the House agree that the SNP cuts are completely reckless?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is a fantastic campaigner for services in his constituency. I am sorry to hear that the SNP Government are proposing to cut the Scottish fire and rescue service. They have had a very good settlement in the Budget recently, so there really is no excuse. I implore him to continue campaigning for this vital service.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): During the previous 10 years or so, one student has died every four days in England and Wales due to suicide. Members of this House have previously put questions to Departments on several occasions on establishing a statutory duty of care on higher education providers towards their students, yet the position remains uncertain for students who may be very vulnerable but are not diagnosed with a disability. Will the Leader of the House please meet me and the director of student life and designated safeguarding

lead at the University of Wolverhampton in my constituency to discuss and clarify what duties and responsibilities universities have towards their students' health and wellbeing?

Lucy Powell: These are shocking statistics and difficult stories to hear. They are not just numbers but individual tragedies happening in our universities. The Department for Education leads on these matters, and I will ensure that the relevant Minister has heard my hon. Friend's important question.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Flooding is an increasing concern across the country. Only last month, I met agencies involved in tackling flooding on the railway at Old Sodbury, which impacts on the surrounding farmland and caused homes in Yate to be flooded during Storm Bert—yet the Government have made no funding commitment for flood protection beyond next April. Will the Leader of the House ask the Flooding Minister to bring to the House plans for longer-term flood protection funding?

Lucy Powell: We have boosted flood protection funding considerably after years of under-investment and cuts by the previous Government, and we have a flood taskforce in place. We have already made a number of statements on flooding, but I will ensure that the House is kept updated on all our plans for enhancing flood defences.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): LightSpeed Broadband has been installing infrastructure across my constituency. Disgracefully, it has falsely claimed in communications, including written letters to my constituents, that during a meeting I signed off on its works. That is a gross misrepresentation of the meeting I held with the company to raise complaints about this issue, and this unacceptable behaviour undermines Members and this House. May I therefore request a statement on how the Government are ensuring that corporate companies cannot misrepresent Members, make false claims for financial gain or undermine MPs in their constituencies, and the penalties for doing so? Such company is a disgrace, and I warn colleagues about their conduct.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of that shocking incident and that LightSpeed has misrepresented my hon. Friend so badly to her constituents. She is absolutely right to raise the matter on the Floor of the House, and I am sure that it will get the attention it deserves.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Estate management monopolies are blighting the lives of homeowners across the country, including residents of Cofton Hackett in my constituency. The most egregious examples by companies including FirstPort—of which I know many colleagues are aware—represent at best carelessness and at worst a lack of moral ethics. Does the Leader of the House agree that the regulation of estate management companies is essential, and will she update the House on when these essential leasehold reforms will come forward?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, and the case of FirstPort has already been raised in this session. It is obviously a matter of great concern to the hon. Member's constituents and across the House. We are absolutely committed to

leasehold reform. We have already published the commonhold White Paper and have brought forward regulations to make the right to manage easier. We will also bring forward a comprehensive draft leasehold reform Bill later this year, which I am sure the whole House will welcome.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): This Government are getting on with building new railway lines across the country: High Speed 2, East West Rail and, of course, the TransPennine route upgrade, which will benefit my constituents. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of those lines should be named the Turing line to honour Alan Turing's personal tenacity, British brilliance and English ingenuity?

Lucy Powell: As the MP for Manchester Central, I am huge fan of Alan Turing and ensuring that he gets the recognition that he so deserves. It would be a fitting tribute to consider naming the TransPennine route, or perhaps some other rail line, after him. It is important that we get those upgrades, and the transport infrastructure connecting our constituencies, as the north deserves.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Leader of the House knows a great deal about my constituency because I never tire of telling her about it during business questions, so she knows that it is in the administrative county of Surrey, but she may not know that it is in the historic county of Middlesex. Tomorrow is Middlesex Day. I wrote to the Government on Monday to remind them gently of that fact and to suggest that the Middlesex flag be flown over Downing Street. I have not yet had a reply to that letter, but I do not really mind about that as long as they fly the flag.

Lucy Powell: As a new Member of Parliament, the hon. Gentleman flies the flag for Spelthorne very well indeed. I know which constituency he represents and he should take great pride from that. I am sure that we can all recognise the historic Middlesex Day this week.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I plan to host in June a joint event with the Royal British Legion and the Ministry of Defence armed forces covenant team. The aim is to better inform MPs across the House about the current offering of the covenant. As part of the event, there will be an opportunity for all Members to engage with constituents sharing their experience of the armed forces covenant. Might the Leader of the House allow some Government time in the House in the week commencing 7 July so that these real voices and experiences can be heard in this place and represented by their local MP?

Lucy Powell: It sounds like my hon. Friend is organising a great event to share experiences of the armed forces covenant with Members of Parliament. He gives me a great deal of notice for the debate that he requests, so I will certainly consider it and ensure that he gets a full response.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The town of Bude in my rural constituency is further from a district hospital than almost anywhere else in the country. Derriford hospital in Plymouth is more than an hour and a half away. The No. 12 bus from Bude to Plymouth

[Ben Maguire]

has made two changes, which means the route now has three buses and often three different bus fares. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on how the Government should fund vital healthcare transport routes?

Lucy Powell: Ensuring that health services are available in every community is a vital part of the Government's health mission. We also need to ensure that those services are connected and joined up with local transport. The hon. Gentleman will have heard me say that the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill is coming to the House after recess; he may wish to raise these issues then.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): This weekend, young Hartlepool sporting stars will compete on the national stage. The Oaksway under-14 netball squad has qualified for the England Netball national finals in Sheffield on 17 and 18 May. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the team the very best of luck for the finals, and in thanking clean energy company Enviromena, whose generation donation, among others, has helped to make their participation possible?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in wishing Oaksway under-14 netball squad all the very best for the event in Sheffield—I am sure that they will do Hartlepool proud—and in thanking the sponsors for making it happen.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Last week, I had the privilege of visiting Ash Field academy, a truly remarkable place in my constituency. It is more than a school; it is a sanctuary for more than 150 extraordinary children, many of whom unfortunately have life-limiting conditions, and physical and mental challenges. Despite that, I was struck by their boundless joy, courage and unbreakable spirit. However, during my visit, I heard the school community's deep concerns about proposed cuts to post-16 transport funding—changes that would have a devastating impact on the children, their families and the school. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the incredible work of Ash Field academy and its staff—particularly Mrs Martin and Mrs Chamberlain—and will she affirm that access to education, especially for our most vulnerable young people, must never be hindered by a lack of transport?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in recognising the great work that Ash Field academy does in bringing so much joy, love and education to all those who go there. He raises the important matter of access to transport funding. That is a matter for local areas, and I am sure that his remarks have been heard. He may want to raise that important issue on Second Reading of the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, after the recess.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): There is real concern from families in Truro and Falmouth that changes to the adoption and special guardianship support fund are being brought in before the impacts are fully known or assessed. Match funding is going from the fund, which is used for emergency support packages for the most complex cases—including children affected by foetal alcohol syndrome—where there is a real risk of a return to care and of harm. Individual support budgets are also going down, and funding for

specialist assessments is included in those budgets. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the impact of changes to the adoption and special guardianship support fund?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those issues, which have been raised with me many times before—indeed, Mr Speaker granted an urgent question on this a few weeks ago. I recognise that the fund offers a huge amount of support to adoptive and kinship families, who do a tremendous job. We should all commend them for their work, including the life-changing role that adoptive parents play for the children they look after. I will ensure that the relevant Minister gives a full reply, and I will remind Ministers that this is a matter of great importance to the House and that we should get regular updates.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Unless questions and answers are very short, many colleagues will be disappointed.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): At the UN Security Council this week, humanitarian affairs co-ordinator Tom Fletcher talked about the need to prevent genocide in Gaza. He said:

“Future generations will hold us in this chamber to account”.

Members of this House were given the opportunity yesterday to ask the Government about their assessment of the likelihood of genocide in Gaza, but will the Leader of the House grant a debate about the obligation on Governments such as ours to prevent genocide?

Lucy Powell: I know that many colleagues, and many members of the public, will have heard that important speech by Tom Fletcher at the UN Security Council. We had an extensive debate in the House about these matters yesterday. I reiterate that the Government want to see an end to what is happening in Gaza—an end to the bloodshed and the airstrikes—with aid getting in, an urgent ceasefire and the hostages returned, alongside work towards a long-term, diplomatic solution. It is not for the Government of the day to make an adjudication on whether genocide has happened; that is a matter for international courts, and we absolutely respect the international courts and what they do.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): A constituent who worked in the banking sector all her life is now being told that, because of an abatement clause in her contract, she may receive 20% less of her pension than would otherwise reasonably be anticipated. Will the Leader of the House support my call for the Government to identify those affected by underhand pension clawbacks and support them in seeking due redress?

Lucy Powell: On pension clawbacks, it is important to ensure that pension customers are treated fairly and decently. We will shortly introduce a pensions Bill that will contain additional consumer protections, and my hon. Friend may wish to raise those matters then.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for this opportunity to raise an important matter, as I try to do every week. Around the world,

many Christian and other religious minority communities face persecution, displacement and violence. Non-governmental organisations and faith-based charities do vital work to support them, and overseas development aid also has a crucial role to play. Will the Leader of the House ask the relevant Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister to update the House on how UK ODA currently supports persecuted religious minorities, and may we have a statement, or a debate in Government time, on how we can better use aid to protect freedom of religion or belief globally?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the important matter of freedom of religion or belief, as he does every week in business questions. I will ensure that Ministers keep the House updated on the overseas development aid budget and its distribution.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on making the issuance of bilingual death certificates the default for deceased persons from Wales? I was recently visited by a constituent who was unable to get such a certificate for her late husband. She has been told that that is because of the circumstances of her case and that, unless there is a change in approach, her only way to get one will be to go the High Court, have the current process quashed and undertake another inquest. What support or advice can the Leader of the House offer me and my constituent, and does she agree that bilingual death certificates should be the default when the deceased person is from Wales?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about that case. I know that this can be distressing for people at what is already a very distressing time. My hon. Friend will know that death registration law is a matter for the General Register Office, but I can assure him that the Ministry of Justice is working with the GRO to encourage it, particularly when it comes to bilingual requests such as the one in his constituency.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Pupils at Leverhulme Memorial school in Harris, in the most beautiful constituency in the country, have won the top prize in the Eco-Schools Scotland awards. They are the most environmentally aware pupils on the planet, and when I visited the school they gave me a lesson on the effects of microplastics on the marine environment. Will the Leader of the House join their campaign and that of the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), who is not in his place, to lessen the effect of microplastics on the marine environment? I ask this not for cross-party unity, but for the planet and for the pupils of Leverhulme Memorial school.

Lucy Powell: I congratulate the students of Leverhulme Memorial school on educating my hon. Friend, and now the rest of us, about the problems that microplastics cause in our marine environment. The private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa)—the Microplastic Filters (Washing Machines) Bill—will have its Second Reading on 20 June, and I think it would make a very popular topic for a debate.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that mums and babies have been badly failed in the past by maternity services at

Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother hospital in my constituency. I am sure she will share my delight that the unit has now been rated “good” by the Care Quality Commission. That improvement is testament to the hard work that has been put in by hospital management and staff to turn things round. Will she join me in welcoming the £1.8 million for additional improvements in the maternity unit, and share my rising confidence that QEQM has turned a corner—though I will keep a close eye on it, to ensure that we see further improvements in care for new mums and babies in Thanet?

Lucy Powell: I am really pleased to hear that maternity services in my hon. Friend's constituency have been rated “good” by the CQC. That is a great testament to all the work of those in the hospital and the community. I am really pleased to hear that there is new money going in, and I look forward to her keeping a close eye on their performance.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Last weekend, my constituency hosted Golcar Lily Day and the Udders Lindley cider festival, and the Holmfirth folk festival marked its 47th year, having proudly maintained its community-based roots. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the organisers of these vibrant festivals, and may we have a debate in Government time on the importance of local festivals in attracting tourism and strengthening local economies?

Lucy Powell: Once again, my hon. Friend highlights the tourist hotspots of his constituency, in Golcar and Holmfirth—he is a great champion for them. He is right: these festivals can really draw in the crowds to our constituencies. I will ensure that the relevant Minister is made aware for the next time he goes on a visit there.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): My constituent PC Demar Rowe has been nominated for a national police bravery award. In the summer of 2023, while off duty and without protective equipment or handcuffs, he was able to disarm a man wielding an electric saw and restrain him for 20 minutes while he waited for the police. I want to put on record my thanks to PC Rowe. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising his bravery, pass this on to the Home Secretary and make time to mark the contribution that our police officers make in all our communities?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking and congratulating PC Rowe—what remarkable bravery. I will ensure that the Home Secretary has heard her question and that we can all celebrate their great work.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): This week, when the Independent Pharmacies Association visited Parliament, I got stuck in and had my blood pressure and bloods taken. It highlighted the essential preventive work that pharmacies do to reduce pressure on GPs. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking independent pharmacies for the vital role they play in community healthcare, welcome the record £3.1 billion uplift, and grant time for a debate on the importance of supporting local pharmacies?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking local pharmacies for the work they do. As she says, they play a vital role in preventive and community healthcare.

[Lucy Powell]

That is what this Government are committed to, which is why we have put in extra funding and why we will continue to support community pharmacies such as those in her constituency.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): My constituent Tina has Rett syndrome and severe scoliosis and needs a new wheelchair. She was measured for one over a year ago but is still waiting to receive it. In my constituency the only option for getting a wheelchair through the NHS is AJM Healthcare. Tina's mum and dad are not the first constituents to raise with me problems with AJM, and I doubt they will be the last. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on how we can improve wheelchair services for constituents such as Tina and Noah—I have mentioned him before—and, importantly, on how we can hold badly performing providers to account?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of my hon. Friend's constituents' experience. As she will know, NHS England has recently issued new guidance on this for integrated care boards. That includes the wheelchair quality framework, published in April this year, which we hope will improve the experience for constituents such as hers.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Overnight, the Israeli Government have issued one of the largest evacuation orders seen in the last 20 months. The Minister with responsibility for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has appeared before this House to make statements and respond to questions on numerous occasions. However, it is clear that Members on both sides of the House are increasingly alarmed by the Israeli Government's actions. Will the Leader of the House schedule an urgent debate in Government time on the UK's response to the conflict and recognition of the Palestinian state?

Lucy Powell: This has been raised with me a number of times today. As I have said, the situation in Gaza is truly intolerable. We need to see an urgent ceasefire, aid going in, the killing stopped and hostages released. We have to work towards a long-term solution in the middle east. The Minister has come to the House on many occasions, and I will ensure that the House is kept constantly updated. I can assure my hon. Friend that this Government are taking a leading role in ensuring that peace is brought to Gaza and the middle east.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): The modernisation and introduction of the blue badge programme was a lasting legacy of the last Labour Government. Can the Leader of the House provide time to discuss a cross-party campaign, led by Kent MPs and the editor of my local paper, Matt Ramsden, to support the success of the scheme and look at the inclusion of time-limited conditions in the eligibility criteria?

Lucy Powell: I am well aware of the great campaigning that my hon. Friend, other Kent MPs and his local newspaper are doing on blue badges, which are vital for those who receive them. I think we have already had a debate on this important matter, but I am sure that a further debate would have wide support.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming tomorrow's launch of the national celebration called Love Your Local Market? It is a two-week campaign where markets upload their details to a map, and we can promote their businesses, food and culture as a key driver of local economic growth, such as my fabulous indoor market in Shrewsbury, voted the UK's favourite market for the third year running.

Lucy Powell: I will have a look at the Love Your Local Market website later today. I know of the fantastic market in my hon. Friend's constituency and am sure that many people will be visiting it this weekend.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): HARP—Haweswater aqueduct resilience programme—is a 10-year project about to commence for United Utilities to tunnel water through my constituency from the Lake district to Manchester. I recently met residents of the communities that this work will disrupt for a decade. Will the Leader of the House assure my residents that this Labour Government strongly expect big infrastructure stakeholders such as United Utilities to be proactive in providing regular communications and engaging with the communities they have active projects in? Would she consider allowing time for the House to debate how community impacts should be mitigated in areas disproportionately affected by new water infrastructure projects?

Lucy Powell: Let me be clear: the Government expect water companies, including United Utilities, to engage with local communities about big projects such as the one my hon. Friend describes in her constituency. We want to see water companies being more accountable. That is why we have already passed legislation on that, and there will be further legislation coming soon.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): My residents are very concerned about animal welfare issues, which is why there was such outrage at the weekend after reports in a national newspaper of horrific abuse of animals by workers at an intensive livestock farm. Given that next year will mark 20 years since the last Labour Government brought in the historic Animal Welfare Act 2006, may we have a debate on intensive livestock farming practices and the fact that regulation does not go far enough to protect animal welfare?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Animal welfare attracts a great deal of interest from Members from across the House, and this Government are committed to introducing the most ambitious programme for animal welfare in a generation, building on our historical reputation on this issue. We have a number of manifesto pledges that we will bring forward this Parliament.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Gerry Borge shared with me the story of his father's and uncle's service with the Royal Scots in the far east during world war two. Next Tuesday, a memorial will be unveiled in the Zhoushan islands to commemorate the death of over 800 allied servicemen who were captive on the sunken freighter Lisbon Maru, and hundreds of survivors rescued by Chinese fishermen who braved the seas. Gerry will be in attendance, representing his family members who survived. Will the

Leader of the House make a statement on remembering those who perished in the tragedy, and the bravery of the rescuers?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. That tragedy needs to be remembered, and she has made sure that we are remembering it today. I am pleased to hear about the new memorial being unveiled.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I hope the whole House will join me in paying tribute to my constituent Roger Cooper, who died this week. Roger was a brilliant, decent man and a member of the Labour party. He campaigned for over 60 years for the party, his first election being in 1964, and I am extremely proud that what turned out to be his last election elected a Labour Government and a Labour MP. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Roger, and to all members of all political parties who are the unsung heroes of our democracy?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely; I join my hon. Friend and the whole House in paying tribute to Roger Cooper and his 60 years of service to the Labour party. Whichever party we are from, we all know that our party members and activists are the reason we are here, representing our constituents. Roger will have been thrilled that the final general election he was involved in managed to elect such a wonderful Labour MP for High Peak, and a Labour Government, after 14 years. We send our heartfelt wishes to his family.

Sanctions Implementation and Enforcement

12.32 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the cross-Government review of sanctions implementation and enforcement. I promised to update the House on this issue at the earliest opportunity, and I am glad to have the chance to do so today. For those Members who want to get into the full details, they are being published on gov.uk.

Sanctions are a powerful tool in our armoury, and a vital foreign policy and national security tool. They are used to deter and disrupt threats and malign behaviour, and to demonstrate our values. Our sanctions support UK interests, protect our citizens, and defend international peace and security. Maximising economic pressure on Russia is key to securing a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, as we debated in the House yesterday. As I said then, the UK has sanctioned over 2,400 targets under our Russia regime, and international sanctions have deprived Putin of \$450 billion dollars since the invasion began—an amount of money that would have allowed him to prosecute this terrible war for many more years. Since July 2024, this Government have introduced over 500 new sanctions designations against individuals, entities and ships. Just last Friday, the Prime Minister announced a major package of sanctions to target the decrepit and dangerous shadow fleet carrying Russian oil. This is the largest package of sanctions against the shadow fleet, with 110 targets. According to some estimates, sanctions have crippled 200 ships—almost half of Putin's entire fleet.

President Zelensky is serious about peace, agreeing in principle to a full, unconditional, and immediate ceasefire. His readiness for that peace is demonstrated by his being in Türkiye. Meanwhile, Putin has dodged and delayed, all the while raining down terror on Ukraine. If Putin does not engage seriously on peace, the UK and our allies will have no choice but to ramp up the economic pressure even further, forcing him to the table.

Alongside taking measures against Russia, we are using designations to uphold human rights and promote democracy around the world. Just last month, we targeted pro-Kremlin operatives responsible for destabilising Moldova, and we sanctioned corrupt officials in Georgia and Guatemala for undermining democracy and the rule of law. We will not stop there. We will continue to expose malign activity wherever we find it, using the full range of sanctions tools at our disposal to shape the world for the better. Sanctions play a crucial part in the Foreign Secretary's mission to tackle corruption and dirty money, which is vital to protect the UK from criminals and safeguard our democracy. In January, the Foreign Secretary announced our new world-first legislation to use sanctions to crack down on those fuelling irregular migration.

This Government are committed not only to using sanctions effectively, but—this is the main focus of the statement—to ensuring that they are enforced rigorously. That means punishing serious breaches with large fines or criminal prosecutions. In opposition, we recognised that there was a need for greater focus on sanctions

[Stephen Doughty]

enforcement. Since we came to office, we have been working across Government on this, as well as liaising with law enforcement partners and industry. In October, we launched the office of trade sanctions implementation, which has new civil enforcement powers to crack down on those seeking to soften the blow of our sanctions. At the same time, we introduced civil powers for the Department for Transport to enforce transport sanctions.

We have reinforced the office of financial sanctions implementation in His Majesty's Treasury—known as OFSI for short—and the multi-agency Joint Maritime Security Centre, enabling them better to tackle evasion and develop new tools targeting the Russian shadow fleet, including in the English channel. The investments and improvements that we have made are already paying off. Last month, OFSI imposed a penalty of £465,000 on a major law firm's subsidiary for breaches of sanctions linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We also saw the UK's first successful prosecution under the Russia financial sanctions regulations, thanks to excellent work by the National Crime Agency. I commend it and its teams for the incredible work that they have done. I expect to see more enforcement action in the coming year—I obviously cannot go into the details of that in the House, but we should be assured that our teams are working effectively in a range of agencies and across Government.

Funding from the economic deterrence initiative has been critical to strengthening our capabilities and maintaining the UK's reputation among its allies. That initiative is bolstering sanctions work in the overseas territories and Crown dependencies. For example, in the British Virgin Islands, it has enabled the NCA to support enforcement and combat potential circumvention. Excellent work has been going on in that regard, and we hosted OTs and CDs at Lancaster House just a few months ago, to collaborate and ensure that we are improving capability across those territories.

I turn to the enforcement review. I am determined to go after those who try to evade our sanctions. In October, I launched a cross-ministerial review to look at how we can improve UK sanctions implementation and enforcement. A strong sanctions regime is crucial for achieving our foreign policy goals and, in turn, building a secure and prosperous UK. This forward-leaning review had three goals: first, to make it easier to comply with our sanctions, which will help businesses to support us in our shared goals; secondly, to increase the deterrent effect of enforcement and make it clear that avoiding sanctions does not pay; and, thirdly, to enhance our ability to take robust action against those seeking to evade our measures. We are publishing the report on the conclusions today, and I am glad of this opportunity to set out how we will ensure that the UK's approach continues to set a gold standard.

We know that the vast majority of businesses agree with our sanctions and are keen to work with us to make sure that they are enforced. To simplify compliance, we have launched a new email alert system to keep UK businesses updated on designations, legislation, licences, and other related topics. We are also making our guidance clearer and easier to access, providing further clarity to UK industry on ownership and control, and introducing a single sanctions list for all designated persons. We will also assess the benefits of creating a single reporting

point for suspected breaches. To give our sanctions extra bite and deter evasion, we will publish a new enforcement strategy, making clear the consequences of non-compliance. We will look at new options to accelerate civil penalties for financial sanctions breaches, including via an early settlement scheme, and we are dedicated to strengthening our enforcement tools and ensuring that we have the necessary powers, capabilities, and intelligence.

We have already taken action. Last month, we introduced measures to prevent designated individuals from holding director roles in the UK, protecting our brilliant British businesses. The Department for Business and Trade is updating laws to protect workers who report breaches of financial, transport and certain trade sanctions, giving them crucial whistleblower protections. Those actions, taken together and at pace, will further improve our world-class sanctions regime, allowing the UK to project strength and promote the rule of law across the world.

But we are not satisfied with just those measures. We are committed to exploring other areas, so that we can go even further and deeper to improve enforcement. A number of those areas will take longer to scope; I will be able to update the House on them in due course. We will explore options for more effective join-up on intelligence, including the merits of a new joint sanctions intelligence function. We will consider the introduction of sanctions end-use licensing controls for exports with a high risk of sanctions diversion.

We will continue to support the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies in enhancing their enforcement capabilities, and will explore enhancing transport powers to target specific aircraft with sectoral sanctions. As appropriate, we will update Parliament when additional outcomes have been scoped, including those that require new or amended legislation. We have brought forward a number of pieces of sanctions legislation recently; in addition, we expanded our Russia regime this week into a range of areas, and varied our Syria regime in the light of changed circumstances there.

Let me conclude by reiterating this Government's commitment to strengthening the implementation and enforcement of UK sanctions. As we deliver the actions set out in the review, we will continue to engage across Departments and with industry, wider stakeholders and international partners to maximise the effectiveness of our work. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

12.41 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): This is the third time in a week that the Minister and I have met across the Dispatch Box to debate sanctions. Once again, I thank him for advance sight of his statement.

Sanctions are imperative in supporting the rules-based international system and punishing those who breach those rules. The last Conservative Government placed sanctions on Assad and his cruel regime, and helped to lead a co-ordinated approach with our allies on Syria. Britain put in place sanctions on Iran, and worked with the US to reaffirm our shared commitment to opposing those who threatened peace, security and stability in the middle east. In 2021, the UK put in place sanctions, including asset freezes, on Chinese Government officials for gross human rights abuses. Britain led international

efforts to sanction Putin and those behind his war machine in response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. We put plans in place to set up the office of trade sanctions implementation, which, as the Minister said, was formally established in October. It was set up to bolster our trade sanctions capability, crack down on companies that breach trade sanctions, and co-ordinate across Government to ensure that sanctions are implemented effectively.

At the time, the Minister announced a cross-Government review. We have not yet seen the report, but I wish to press the Minister on a few points. First, what changes are being made to the sanctions implementation and enforcement framework? What role does OTSI play in any changes? The Minister refers to robust action to increase sanctions evasion deterrence, but what specific measures are being considered? He also mentions a new enforcement strategy; when can we expect that to be published? I would welcome clarity on how the new joint sanctions intelligence function fits into our existing intelligence framework. How does he envisage that working with what we are doing with the US and our other Five Eyes partners?

As I am sure the Minister appreciates, thanks to our leaving the European Union, we now have our own sanctions framework. The flexibility to set our own framework and lead the charge with allies and partners cannot be squandered. Does the Minister expect the EU security pact to touch on the independence of our sanctions regime? We should look to build on the strong measures that we have placed on countries and entities. What progress is being made in identifying further sanctions to impose on those already targeted?

Will the Minister give us an assessment of the number of groups and militia operating in Syria? How will he ensure that the relaxation in sanctions benefits the people of Syria? How often will he review the impact of the relaxation of sanctions? Will he commit to putting sanctions on entities and people in Syria if the standards that we expect in relation to protecting rights are not met? Will the Government consider introducing a new bespoke sanctions regime and set of regulations for Syria?

The critical mass of the current UK sanctions on Iran were introduced under the last Conservative Government. Sanctions form one part of the approach to tackling Iran, but what is the Minister's broader strategy on Iran?

When we were in government, we imposed the largest and most severe set of sanctions that Russia had ever seen. The economic pressure that we have collectively imposed with the international community has crippled the Russian economy and deprived Putin of \$400 billion that could have funded his illegal war. We cannot afford to let up on exerting that pressure on Putin's war machine. Part of that includes tackling Russian assets. What consideration has the Minister given to deploying assets from the sale of Chelsea football club to support Ukraine? Will he confirm a timeframe for deploying that money?

I would welcome clarity on what information is coming forward to the Minister about potential sanctions breaches and loopholes that are being exploited. Does the review sufficiently plug the gaps that have been identified? Will he update us on what action he is taking against any third party countries that are supporting the countries and entities we have already sanctioned?

Finally, how does the Minister plan to deepen our international co-ordination? What discussions have the Government had with the United States? Did the Government have advance knowledge of yesterday's announcement? Will it have a bearing on UK policy on sanctions on Syria? Sanctions are a crucial tool in our diplomatic arsenal. We must ensure that they operate as effectively as possible to ensure that international norms are adhered to.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the shadow Minister for her broad welcome for this work. I will do my best to answer as many of her questions as I can.

The shadow Minister asked me about the overall review. As I said, it is being published now and she can peruse that when she can; I encourage other hon. Members to look at that as well. We welcome feedback and suggestions on it. To summarise a couple of the key themes, we recognise that different sectors are at different levels of maturity with sanctions, and that Government communications and engagement need to reflect that. Some areas need more assistance; there is a lot of will, but they need support. Some of the measures can be very technical and we want to ensure that businesses can comply. Direct engagement between Government and industry is important, as that has the highest impact on compliance.

We need to bring together our efforts so that they are understood. A range of different agencies are doing important and distinct work, but that needs to be understood by the layperson. We need to improve our guidance and ensure we bridge any gaps in unclear regulations. We need to ensure that people understand the consequences of breaching sanctions, as well as the options. If they voluntarily disclose measures, as a number of businesses and others have done, there are ways forward.

The shadow Minister asked me about intelligence and co-operation with other countries, which is crucial. We will explore how that intelligence function works, but I can assure her that there is already a huge amount of co-operation between us and key partners, including in the United States, the EU and elsewhere. Cross-Government co-operation is also important. Our officials work incredibly hard and I pay tribute to the incredible team in the sanctions unit at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and in other Departments, because they do remarkable work.

The shadow Minister asked specifically about co-operation with the EU. It is important that we co-operate with the EU on sanctions, as we do already. That is being considered, along with a range of measures, as we approach the important summit next week. I assure her that our sanctions policy remains our own, but we can often have maximum effect when we work in co-ordination with others. The EU is progressing its own packages against Russia and others.

On third country circumvention, I have paid particular attention to that issue; indeed, I had meetings just this morning to raise concerns on that specific issue with a partner country. Such meetings are a feature of pretty much every week, and we are bearing down on all the routes that might support measures that undermine our sanctions. On the sale of Chelsea football club, we are determined to see the proceeds reach humanitarian causes in Ukraine as soon as possible, and we are doing everything we can to bring that about quickly, but this is

[Stephen Doughty]

a complex legal issue. The UK is working with international partners, has engaged with Abramovich's team and is exploring all options to ensure that the proceeds reach vulnerable people in Ukraine who are most in need.

On Syria, the shadow Minister knows that we updated the regime this week, and we remain with those sanctions against the Assad regime, but we have removed restrictions on others. We reserve the right to introduce new sanctions in future circumstances on any regime, but we will keep the situation there under close review and respond to the changing circumstances. We will judge the new Government by their actions.

On Iran, we announced on 14 April further sanctions to tackle the domestic threat posed by the Iranian regime by sanctioning the Iranian-backed, Sweden-based Foxtrot criminal network and its leader, Rawa Majid, for their role in attacks against targets across Europe. We took very firm action in relation to the supply of ballistic missiles to Russia for use in the illegal war in Ukraine. We remain determined that Iran must never develop a nuclear weapon, and we are committed to using all tools available to ensure that, including using the UN sanctions snapback mechanism if necessary.

Lastly, the shadow Minister asked about enforcement, how we are having an impact and what difference is being made. I have already given some examples, but another example is that in April, the National Crime Agency secured the first criminal convictions for the breaches of Russian sanctions. Dmitry Ovsyannikov was found guilty of circumventing sanctions regulations and money laundering after receiving £76,000 from his wife and a new Mercedes from his brother, who was also found guilty of circumventing sanctions regulations. They were sentenced to 40 months imprisonment and 15 months imprisonment suspended for 15 months respectively, so the right hon. Lady can be absolutely assured that all the appropriate authorities are acting.

These investigations are often complex and necessarily are not made public. I urge the House to bear with some of our excellent teams in different agencies as they seek to enforce on these regimes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The Minister already knows my view that, as we develop our sanctions policy, Parliament should be more engaged so that we can have collective knowledge and all feed in to the best possible sanctions policy. We do not have enough of that at the moment, and there is more that we should do. One thing that Members would do is suggest more creative ways of using sanctions and more lateral thinking, but, in the end, it does not matter how creative or eye-catching a sanction is: if it is not enforced, it means nothing. My concern, and the concern of many, is that there are simply not enough investigations being done for breaches of sanctions, particularly against British companies. I have listened very carefully to the rapid way in which the Minister gave his statement and read carefully what is in it, but nothing in it says that more resources will be put into actually investigating potential breaches of sanctions. We can change rules and give more powers, but if there are not enough

people actually kicking down doors—literally or otherwise—to ensure that companies are not breaching sanctions, we are frankly wasting a fantastic opportunity.

Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend is no stranger to these issues, and it has been a pleasure to engage with her on them in my conversations with her. I welcome the work of her Committee in that regard. I gently say that there has been a significant amount of parliamentary scrutiny of sanctions—including two occasions this week already, as the shadow Minister mentioned, as well as the course of our debate, FCDO oral questions and my statement today—but I am absolutely committed to engaging with parliamentarians. We have held a number of roundtables, and I hope to continue to do those on a regular basis. We welcome all advice and information from parliamentarians. It is often not possible to come back to the House, particularly on specific information and suggestions. My right hon. Friend will understand the importance of our not commenting on possible future designations, because doing so would lessen their impact.

My right hon. Friend rightly raises the challenge of the actual resources for enforcement. They are across a range of agencies and Departments and are subject to ongoing discussions in the spending review, but, having witnessed the work of a number of those organisations, I can assure her that they are doing some absolutely incredible work. I will give another example: in March, the office of financial sanctions implementation announced the imposition of a civil monetary penalty of £465,000 against HSF Moscow for breaching UK sanctions and publicised the lessons that industry can learn from that case. There is example after example, and I want to see more of them. I will continue to work with our enforcement agencies and others to ensure that is the case.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I welcome the cross-party consensus we have heard today that an effective sanctions regime is one of the most potent tools at our disposal to promote the UK's ideals and interests abroad. It has formed a vital pillar in the strategy to punish Putin and undermine his ability to prosecute the war in Ukraine. However, our sanctions regime must be coherent and consistently applied to be effective. I know that the Minister is personally committed to that, and I welcome today's report, yet the disparate responsibilities across Departments and agencies have sometimes worked against the effectiveness of our approach despite the hard work of officials, to which the Minister has already referred.

What lessons can the Minister point to from the review that will ensure that future development and application of our sanctions policy will be truly joined up across the many agencies in Government? Following President Trump's meeting yesterday with President al-Sharaa, our approach to sanctions in Syria is a critical test of that approach. Can the Minister confirm that the Government will consider lifting further sanctions on Syria only if sanctions relief is preceded by clear progress towards political inclusion and the protection of minority groups and women in Syria?

The Minister knows that the Liberal Democrats have repeatedly urged the Government to use sanctions more robustly against the leaders of countries that have taken actions against British values or in violation of international law. May I therefore urge him to use the impetus from the review to take a fresh look at three cases? Will he and officials urgently review the application of sanctions on supporters of the Georgian Dream party, including Bidzina Ivanishvili and Irakli Kobakhidze, who are working to suppress democracy in Georgia? Will they review that for officials in Hong Kong who have led the suppression of democracy in the city and the extraterritorial intimidation of democracy campaigners resident in the UK? Will they also review that for the extremist members of the Israeli Cabinet, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, who continue to advocate for the conquest of Gaza and the forced displacement of Palestinians from the occupied territories?

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for his broad support for the thrust of these measures and agree with many of the points he made. He specifically asked me about Syria. We had an extensive discussion about this earlier this week, but I am absolutely clear that the sanctions on those individuals responsible for atrocities under the Assad regime remain in place. The changes that we have made are related to ensuring that financial and economic activity in line with the potential for peace and stability in Syria is able to emerge, but I assure him that we keep the situation under very close review and retain the ability to impose further sanctions and other measures at a future point. He made points about an inclusive political settlement and the absence of violence. We have seen some very worrying incidents in recent months, and we will watch very carefully and closely along with other partners and co-ordinate with others on that.

The hon. Gentleman also raised three specific contexts. He knows that I will not comment on future designations, but we always welcome input, and I note what he said. In relation to Georgia, we have sanctioned multiple individuals responsible in relation to the repressive actions and corruption that we have seen in recent months, and we keep the situation under close review. I am deeply concerned about the situation in Georgia. I have made that clear to Georgian Dream representatives, and I will make it absolutely clear again. Our teams are working very closely, and the hon. Gentleman knows that we have suspended wider co-operation with Georgia. That is a deep regret, because we had significant and positive relations with it, but as long as it turns away from the Euro-Atlantic path, there must be consequences, as well as consequences for the actions it has taken domestically and otherwise. I note what he has said, but, as he will understand, I will not comment on future designations.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The Minister is doing important work on sanctions that are highly relevant to the situation in the middle east, where Israel's aid blockade means that large numbers of children in Gaza will begin dying of starvation in the coming days. It plans to dismantle the humanitarian system and replace aid workers with mercenaries. The Israeli Government are threatening the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and calling up the military to make it happen, while British diplomats at the UN warn of genocide. This House cannot say, "Never again", to

atrocities unless it acts when faced with them. Does the Minister agree that the UK must uphold the responsibility to protect and that concrete action, including fresh sanctions on Israeli Ministers, are needed to stop Israel in its tracks, let aid in, get hostages out and force an urgent ceasefire?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend speaks with typical passion and from her experience of these matters. She will know that we do not comment on potential future sanctions, but as the Foreign Secretary said in Parliament on 1 April, we continue to keep all these issues under review. The culture of impunity for those engaging in violence is intolerable, and the Foreign Secretary has also been clear with Israeli Ministers that the Israeli Government must clamp down on settler violence and settlement expansion—my hon. Friend will know the sanctions we have imposed in that regard. She will also know the actions we have taken against Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the designations that have been introduced, and that we have repeatedly called for an immediate ceasefire. We have restored funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, suspended a number of our export licences and provided £129 million in humanitarian assistance, and we continue to work at every level to bring an end to the horrific violence we are seeing and the intolerable death toll. We will continue to work with all of our partners globally to achieve that.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, now it is slowly dawning on President Trump that his friend Vladimir is stringing him along, there are good prospects that America will not weaken the level of sanctions it imposes on Russia? Can he also clarify one point? He said in his statement—and also yesterday evening—that if Putin does not engage seriously with peace, the UK and our allies will have no choice but to ramp up the economic pressure even further, forcing him to the table. I would have thought that we ought to be ramping up the economic pressure now to the maximum level that we can, so unless the Minister is just saying that that ramping up will take longer, can I suggest that the Government get on with it as quickly as possible?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman will know that we have been ramping up that pressure—indeed, the new measures we took just last night on support to Russia and its military industrial complex do exactly that, let alone the huge package of designations we have introduced against the shadow fleet. Again on the topic of enforcement, during its first six months of operation—from 1 October last year to 6 April this year—the UK's voluntary insurance reporting mechanism has challenged 271 suspected shadow fleet vessels in the English channel on their insurance. Not only are we putting these measures in place, but we are following up on them. We have been very clear that President Zelensky is serious about peace—he has repeatedly shown that by his actions. Vladimir Putin has not. We are clear that our sanctions will remain in place and we will continue to do all we can to choke off support for the Russian war machine, which is causing such devastation in Ukraine.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given that sanctions provide crucial leverage and deprive individuals and regimes of power and resources, it is

[*Rachael Maskell*]

vital that they are applied equally. When we see the effect that sanctions have had on Putin's Russia, we question why the Government have not brought equality against the Israeli regime, whose treatment of the Palestinians is pushing people into starvation and famine and ultimately bringing 2.1 million people to their deaths. In light of Israel's actions, we need equality, and while I understand that the Minister will not make pronouncements from the Dispatch Box today, could he set out how he formulates the evidence by which the thresholds are reached for sanctions to be applied? Will he look again at those frameworks to ensure that there is equality, so that we can use sanctions effectively and the world understands where this country is coming from?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend asks about the broad principles that underlie our sanctions action. Essentially, there are three parts: the first is to deter malign activity, the second is to disrupt malign activity, and the third is to demonstrate values. As I referenced, we have imposed sanctions in relation to extreme settler violence, and we have worked with other partners on a range of measures. She will understand that I am not going to comment on future designations, as I said a moment ago, but we remain deeply seized of the situation in Gaza at present. The Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), as well as the Foreign Secretary and others, are deeply engaged with this issue, and I have set out a number of the steps we have taken to respond to it.

My hon. Friend can be assured that we act around the world through our sanctions regime, and I have given a number of examples—not just geographic areas, but in relation to themes. I have mentioned the theme of tackling illicit finance and kleptocracy more widely. We have introduced a number of measures in that regard, so she can be assured that this is not simply about Russia and Ukraine sanctions, but about acting globally.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and I do not agree on many issues, but she is absolutely right to focus on enforcement. Before coming to this place, I was head of sanctions and anti-money laundering at a financial institution, so with respect, I found it a bit naive for the Minister to say in his statement that avoiding sanctions does not pay; these are often very profitable accounts. He also referenced the issue of compliance in his statement, but institutions often say that they are complying by filing suspicious activity reports, safe in the knowledge that insufficient action will be taken. I appreciate that the stock answer is, "We do not comment on individual enforcement cases", but could the Minister tell us the average cost of a successful prosecution for a sanctions breach, and how many there have been since the Government came to office?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman knows the industry and these measures—of course, he also held senior roles in government that were responsible for these matters—so he will understand that I am not going to go into the technical details of every individual case. However, I can tell him that, for example, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has issued six compound settlements since 2022 against UK companies that have

breached the Russia trade sanctions, for a total of £1,363,129. Those include a compound settlement in August 2023 for £1 million, so I feel absolutely justified in saying that avoiding sanctions does not pay, and I am committed to ensuring that we have more of these actions in future. Some of them will be public, while others will not be—a range of measures is in place. We are introducing new powers, particularly to find ways of settling cases in which companies have come forward and voluntarily disclosed, but equally so that those that do not do so will face penalties.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): Too often, sanctions evasion happens via our British overseas territories, particularly through secretive havens such as the British Virgin Islands, and a lack of public ownership records complicates efforts to find out who is involved in sidestepping our sanctions regime. With that in mind, can the Minister set out how he is working with all of the overseas territories to finally meet their commitments to introduce registers of beneficial ownership, and can he reassure this place that our sanctions are robustly enforced across the entire UK family?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, which I have repeatedly raised with the leaders of the overseas territories and indeed with the Crown dependencies. We have seen robust action on sanctions, both in implementing sanctions and working with our authorities to ensure that we have the biggest enforcement effect. I have mentioned the recent meetings we had at Lancaster House with sanctions enforcement officials, as well as the specific example of BVI. The National Crime Agency has been working with the British Virgin Islands on a range of issues, and that work has been very productive, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that transparency contributes to effective sanctions. I have repeated my expectation that OTs and CDs should introduce fully accessible public registers of beneficial ownership, but the OTs also agreed at last year's Joint Ministerial Council to introduce legitimate interest access registers. We have seen real progress from a number of them, although some others are not quite there yet. My hon. Friend can be assured that I am not resting in raising serious concerns about this issue, and I will continue to do so over the weeks ahead.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Richard Foord, a member of the Select Committee.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The G7 oil price cap prevents us from selling shipping and insurance services to companies carrying Russian oil when it is sold above \$60 per barrel. I appreciate that the Minister might say that he cannot preannounce future sanctions—I think we all understand that—but has the UK advocated with G7 allies for reducing that price cap further, given that in recent weeks, the price of crude oil has dropped below \$60 per barrel?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue. I will not comment on future actions, but since the introduction of the oil price cap, data from the Russian Ministry of Finance showed a 30% reduction in tax revenues from oil in 2023, compared with the year before. The price it has received for flagship Urals-grade crude has continued to sit below global levels, and our

work—particularly on the shadow fleet—has significantly disrupted and impacted the revenues that Putin is able to get from oil to fuel his war in Ukraine. We will consider all possible lawful measures to further strengthen our efforts in that regard, but the best way to do so is by working with our international partners. We are engaged in daily conversations on these matters, but of course, I will not comment on future specific actions.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. Will he commit to investigating whether further sanctions are required on regional, federal, military and legal enforcement agencies that have been involved in and made possible the continued mass abduction and deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia? At the very least, will he commit to ensuring that the UK aligns its sanctions against individuals involved in this forcible transfer of children with those imposed by the United States and the European Union?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend raises a crucial point, and she knows of my personal support and indeed that of the Foreign Secretary on this important issue. She knows that we have already designated individuals in this regard. We continue to keep all future sanction possibilities under review. We will look closely at examples of anybody involved in that heinous action of taking Ukrainian children away from their families and attempting to wipe out their culture and identity.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): As the sanctions regime ramps up, although perhaps not as quickly as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) calls for—I endorse that call—the Minister is right to be doing the work he is doing. As part of his review and assessment as those sanctions ramp up and become more complicated, does he feel that everything possible is being done to ensure that UK-based businesses are kept up to date with that changing picture, so that no one inadvertently falls on the wrong side of the law?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue. The vast majority of UK businesses and individuals want to comply with these regimes. They support them, and they certainly do not want to be exposing themselves or their customers to any additional risk. We want to make sure that they have the best advice in a timely, clear and understandable fashion. That is exactly what some of the measures in this review are set out to do. They consolidate information and how it is provided and ensure that there is training and capacity-building in sectors that are perhaps less used to enforcing in these areas. He can be assured that that is very much at the heart of what we are doing, because we want to help people to comply.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a powerful case for the efficacy of sanctions in achieving our diplomatic and foreign policy aims, but as we observe the 50,000 deaths, the countless injuries, the forced displacement, and now the possibility of mass starvation and the renewal of bombing of hospitals by Israel in Gaza, is it not time that sanctions were applied to Ministers such as Smotrich and Ben-Gvir? It is perfectly understandable for the Minister to say that he will not discuss future designations in the Chamber,

but will he consider and discuss with colleagues the strength of feeling in this Chamber that sanctions must be placed on these individuals sooner rather than later?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend raises important and serious issues. She knows that we have repeatedly condemned the extreme rhetoric of far-right Israeli Ministers. We have taken action against violent settler groups in the west bank. We are regularly supporting the humanitarian response in Gaza, whether that is through the £129 million of humanitarian assistance, the medical treatment and food, the work we have done with Jordan to fly medicines in or the work with Egypt to treat medically evacuated civilians and with Kuwait to support UNICEF. There is a range of measures, but she will understand that I will not comment on future designations.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The UK rightly has imposed sanctions on Russia for its illegal invasion of Ukraine and on Putin for war crimes. The UK has imposed sanctions on officials in Syria for breaches of international humanitarian law, for targeting hospitals, schools and aid convoys and for obstructing humanitarian aid, as well as for the use of chemical weapons and the indiscriminate bombing of civilians. How do the Government therefore justify the absence of similar sanctions on senior members of the Israeli Government, when there is clear evidence of Israel perpetrating the same violations? What actions have the UK Government taken to comply with their obligations specified in the International Court of Justice advisory opinion from July 2024 to withdraw all political, economic and diplomatic support that helps perpetuate Israel's unlawful occupation of Palestine?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of questions, and it might be helpful if I get the Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer) to respond to him directly on a number of them. We have repeatedly been clear, as I have just said, in condemnation of the extreme rhetoric of far-right Israeli Ministers. We have been clear about the horrific situation that we see in Gaza. We have been clear about the support we are providing to make a difference on the ground. We have been clear in our support for a ceasefire and clear in our calls for immediate humanitarian access. As I have said repeatedly, he will understand that I do not comment on future designations.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Can my hon. Friend update us on what conversations have been had about the use of frozen and sanctioned Russian assets to support those fighting Russian aggression in Ukraine?

Stephen Doughty: That is an important question that has come up a number of times this week. My hon. Friend will know that we have already disbursed the first two tranches under the extraordinary revenue acceleration scheme, which is making a tangible difference to Ukraine right now. We have put £2.26 billion into the scheme, and I again thank colleagues for ensuring the swift passage of that measure. We are resolute in that support. We are continuing to explore all other lawful options. We are clear—at least, the majority of parties in this House are—that Russia needs to pay for the damage it has caused, but the most impact will be felt if we can work with partners and in collaboration with others.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers and for returning to the Chamber within 24 hours of his comments about Russian sanctions yesterday. I read an interesting article on financial sanctions that highlighted the alleged loopholes that are enabling sales and transfers of funds through estate agents, property management and so on. Can the Minister outline whether the Department's approach will also deal with those UK citizens who may be enabling Russian assets to be diverted and therefore the circumvention of sanctions, which are right and proper?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman will know that there are significant civil and criminal penalties for the evasion of sanctions. If he or any other Member of the House has any evidence of that, I hope that they would share that with us and the relevant authorities, and we are looking at a single reporting point for people to do that. He can be assured that we look at every way in which people are trying to circumvent the sanctions regimes. We cannot have London, the UK or our British family being a place for those who enable this type of activity. We are resolute and committed to cracking down on it.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. It is fairly obvious that these sanctions are essential in deterring the kinds of behaviours and activities that we do not want to see internationally. The Foreign Secretary has spoken about introducing sanctions against those involved in smuggling gangs and those who cause irregular migration to the UK. The Minister made reference to it in his statement, too. Will he update the House on when we can expect to see such sanctions take effect? Will he also comment on their effectiveness in dealing with and defeating the criminal smuggling gangs?

Stephen Doughty: This Government have been clear that we will take every measure possible to crack down on irregular migration and those who facilitate the cruel trade in human beings, trafficking them across continents

and countries. That is one of the reasons we are introducing the new regime. We will be bringing forward the legislation in due course, and at that time we will be able to discuss the exact details of the proposals; we aim to bring that forward as soon as possible so that we can start taking actions. That is just one of the measures we are taking, and I regularly engage with European and other partners to deal with the whole chain of smuggling gangs and illegal migration. That is exactly what the Prime Minister will be setting out in his visit to Albania.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The final question goes to the ever-patient Chris Vince.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement. Listening to comments from across the House, I am reminded of a conversation I had this week with one of my constituents, Anne Strike, who is a victim of polio; she raised her concerns about the recent cases of polio found in conflict zones. I know how important residents of Harlow see it to tackle breaches of UK-imposed sanctions. The Minister has touched on this a bit already, but will he tell me what progress we have seen on enforcement measures in recent months?

Stephen Doughty: I am delighted that the residents of Harlow not only have my hon. Friend as an MP, but are interested in seeing these measures being effected. I think that is shared across the United Kingdom: people want to see these measures work. I have given a number of examples, but I will give him another. The Department for Transport has detained four transport assets under the Russian sanctions regulations: one helicopter, two private jets and one super-yacht, totalling more than £80 million. I hope the House can see today just how serious we, our enforcement agencies and all our Departments are. It is fantastic to be working in a team across Government on this issue. I again pay tribute to the fantastic officials, not only in the Departments but in our enforcement agencies. They bring the pressure to bear on those who seek to evade or divert from our sanctions regimes.

Safeguarding Vulnerable Claimants

WORK AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Work and Pensions Committee. Debbie Abrahams will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches—hopefully, people understand the difference between those two things. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Chair of the Committee, not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.20 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for me to make this statement to the House, which marks the publication of the first report of this Parliament, “Safeguarding Vulnerable Claimants”.

The inquiry that led to this report was first launched in 2023 by our predecessor Committee under the stewardship of the former Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who is now the Minister for Social Security and Disability. I pay tribute to him for both initiating and supporting the inquiry. We were not able to conclude the inquiry before the general election last year, so when I was elected as Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee last September, it was a priority to bring it to a conclusion. I was pleased that the new members of the Committee agreed, and I thank them for their support. I also thank the members of the previous Committee, who contributed to the thinking behind some of our recommendations.

I want especially to thank the Committee staff—some of the unsung heroes in this place. From the previous Committee, I thank Danielle Nash and particularly Sarah Dixon. From the current Committee, I thank John-Paul Flaherty and especially Alexandra Ming. I also thank everyone who contributed to the report—the many people and organisations who submitted written and oral evidence, and who took part in roundtables and surveys. Finally, I wish to mention all the people who have not been treated or supported as they should have been by the Department for Work and Pensions. Ultimately, this report is for them and tries to ensure that others do not have to endure what they did.

The Department for Work and Pensions is responsible for the delivery of essential services to millions of people each year. That includes some of the most vulnerable people in society, who rely on benefits—or, as I prefer to call it, social security support—as their main source of income. Our predecessor Committee opened the inquiry on 23 July 2023, primarily in response to concerns that inadequate safeguarding practices in DWP had contributed to the deaths of claimants, including through suicide and starvation. I first became aware of these appalling facts over 10 years ago, when the first Work and Pensions Committee on which I served undertook an inquiry into sanctions and the case of David Clapson came to light. David was a veteran who died after being sanctioned,

which, for the uninitiated, means that his financial support was stopped. He could not pay for power, and the insulin in his fridge no longer worked.

The cases kept coming. Errol Graham, who had serious mental illness, had his employment and support allowance incorrectly stopped. He starved to death, and his emaciated body was found in his flat. Philippa Day, a young mum with mental health issues who relied on the personal independence payment, took her own life. I will never forget hearing the recording of Philippa phoning DWP and pleading for her money not to be stopped. There have also been the cases of Kevin Gale, Michael O’Sullivan, Alexander Boamah, Faiza Hassan Ahmed, Emma Day, Terence Talbot, Nazerine Anderson, Afolabi Ojerinde, Richard Brookes—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Ms Abrahams, would you like a sip of water before you continue?

Debbie Abrahams: Yes, I would be very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Not at all.

Debbie Abrahams: That was just the intervention that I needed.

There have also been the cases of Jodey Whiting, Mark Wood and many, many others. Our report recognises the significance of every death and harm experienced by claimants, and the impact of these cases on their loved ones.

We know that 40 deaths and 13 serious harms of claimants were investigated by the Department in 2023-24 alone as part of its internal process reviews, but in common with the National Audit Office’s 2020 report, we believe that the actual numbers are much higher. We heard evidence that the process of accessing DWP support, and some DWP policies themselves, can create or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. For example, sanctions or the threat of sanctions can lead to material deprivation, stress, and the deterioration of physical and mental health. In some cases, the experience of engaging with the system and the processes has been so difficult and distressing that it has contributed to claimants deciding to take their own life.

Some of the most serious cases of harm—where a coroner’s inquest has found that DWP contributed to a claimant’s death—have resulted in prevention of future death reports. Since 2010, DWP has been issued with 10 prevention of future death reports relating specifically to the deaths of benefit claimants. The fact that the Equality and Human Rights Commission issued a section 23 notice on the DWP for potential discrimination against disabled people in 2022, and the investigation that was subsequently launched last year after the failure to reach an agreement, added to the evidence that the Work and Pensions Committee collected on the DWP’s inadequate approach to safeguarding. The inquiry set out to examine the support that the Department provided to vulnerable claimants, how it had learned from mistakes and failures, and what needed to change.

The new Committee agreed to reopen the inquiry on 30 October 2024. Before I turn to the findings and recommendations of the report, I should acknowledge that in the “Pathways to Work” Green Paper, published in March, the Government said they were consulting

[Debbie Abrahams]

“on a new DWP safeguarding approach to make it clear what the department and its staff are expected to do in order to safeguard the public.”

I welcome that, and I was heartened by the Secretary of State’s evidence to the Committee last November.

Our principal recommendation is for a statutory safeguarding duty to be placed on the DWP to protect claimants. Although the Secretary of State would be accountable for this duty, reflecting the leadership needed to drive these changes, it would make safeguarding in the DWP everyone’s business: at all levels of the organisation and at all stages of policy development and implementation. The duty would include the proactive consideration of the safeguarding needs of claimants, the ability to refer vulnerable individuals to other agencies with a duty of care, and, again, the proactive consideration of the impacts of key policies and legislation on the health and wellbeing of claimants before they are implemented.

The need for a new legal obligation is clear. The current approach to safeguarding in DWP has been described as “piecemeal and lacking coherence”, and the Committee agrees. For that reason, the report calls for a comprehensive, systems-based approach to safeguarding that integrates into every stage of policy development, implementation and review. The approach must involve everyone in the DWP to ensure that safeguarding becomes a fundamental part of the Department’s culture.

We see a new statutory duty as the cornerstone of a bigger cultural shift that is needed in the DWP. For too long, the focus has been on cost cutting, often at the expense of providing genuine support. That approach has led to a system in which claimants feel undeserving of support and fearful of the very Department that is meant to assist them. The necessary cultural shift must be driven from the top down, with Ministers and senior officials leading the way. A statutory safeguarding duty would help to focus minds, improve accountability and ensure that safeguarding becomes everybody’s business in the DWP.

The need for deep-rooted cultural change in the Department cannot be overstated. The process of engaging with the DWP often leads to mental distress for claimants. This distress is compounded by a lack of trust in the system, driven by continual cost-cutting measures and an unhelpful media narrative. To rebuild trust, the DWP must prioritise safeguarding and support over cost cutting, and this means creating a system that not only helps people to find sustainable work, but compassionately supports those who may never work.

The report also emphasises the importance of learning from past mistakes. The Department has conducted a number of IPRs, but the full scale of harm is much higher. The ongoing investigation by the Equality and Human Rights Commission into the Department’s treatment of disabled people and those with long-term mental health conditions underscores the need for transparency and accountability.

In addition to the statutory duty, the report makes a number of other important recommendations, which I will go through quickly. As I have mentioned, it is recommended that all significant new policies are analysed by the Department’s chief medical adviser’s team. Currently, such assessments are not routinely carried out, leading to policies that may inadvertently harm claimants or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. By making these

assessments a standard part of policy development, we hope to ensure that the impacts of policies on the health and wellbeing of claimants are considered and harms mitigated.

The report stresses the importance of having a robust, clear and accessible complaints procedure to prevent failures recurring. As I have stated, the true scale of deaths and harms is not known. The report calls for systematic recording and publication of all cases of serious harms and deaths involving claimants. The Department should commit to publishing this information annually to aid transparency. The report also recommends improving transparency in the processes used to learn from serious mistakes and failures, and the introduction of an independent body—the Department should not mark its own homework—to investigate serious harms.

On defining and identifying vulnerability, the Department’s current approach is seen as flexible, lacking in clarity and consistency. The report calls for a formalised definition of vulnerability that is clearly communicated in public-facing documents. It also recommends adding victims of abuse to the additional support area in universal credit, and implementing proactive measures to identify and support vulnerable claimants.

Ensuring that vulnerable people can access the benefits they are entitled to is crucial for delivering equitable welfare provision. The removal of the Help to Claim face-to-face service has made it more difficult for some individuals to apply for universal credit. The report recommends that the DWP ensures that jobcentres provide thorough support, and that detailed information about additional support is proactively offered to claimants. In that regard I do give praise, because there are so many good people in the Department, such as the advanced customer support senior leaders, who are integral to helping frontline DWP staff. I praise those staff, and we need more of them.

Effective communication and making sure that people are aware of what support they can access is also important, and we need more of it. That also applies to training and capacity building for frontline staff, which needs to happen to achieve the cultural changes we need. Finally, collaboration with other agencies needs to be a statutory responsibility, and there needs to be DWP membership of the safeguarding adults boards. I am very grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): First, I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend. She has been a persistent champion of safeguarding vulnerable people in the system, and this report really emphasises that. I was surprised that the Committee did not recommend the removal of conditionality, because that is a serious lead into harm for so many people. In anticipation of the pathways to work legislation coming before this House, I think the report makes very sobering reading and raises serious concerns about safeguarding and the accountability of that safeguarding.

I would pick out the recommendation about the chief medical adviser’s assessments. Currently, that is private advice to Ministers. What steps does my hon. Friend believe can be taken so the House can be supplied with the full evidence base it needs to make informed choices, not least because policies such as pathways to work will place many people at serious risk, including serious risk to their lives?

Debbie Abrahams: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. On the pathways to work Green Paper, one of our recommendations is that any analysis undertaken by the CMA's team should be published and made available. More generally, we also ask that analysis of the impact of key policies and legislation on the health and wellbeing of claimants is considered beforehand and responded to appropriately.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the hon. Lady believe that the safety of very vulnerable claimants would be improved if there were a system within the DWP for flagging them as vulnerable and ensuring, so far as it is practically possible, that they always deal with the same person, who might be specifically qualified to look after people with such vulnerabilities?

Debbie Abrahams: The right hon. Member makes an excellent point. There are some systems, but the inquiry found that they are very fragmented and a little too ad hoc. This is about making a coherent case that this is everybody's business. Yes, we should be proactively identifying and assessing the vulnerabilities of claimants when they present, and we should be able to signpost them to other agencies that may, for example, have a statutory duty of care.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): This report is both important and timely, and I am proud to be a member of the Committee that has published it today. It was good to hear the Minister recognise during the inquiry that the culture of the Department needs to change and that safeguarding must be at the heart of this. A duty to report safeguarding concerns is second nature to me. As a teacher, I had a clear understanding of the safeguarding duties expected of me, and rightly so. The safeguarding of vulnerable adults is just as important, so this needs to be second nature to those at the DWP. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must see clear action from the Government to create the more compassionate system that we need to make this a reality?

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and thank her for all that she has done since becoming a member of the Select Committee. I wholeheartedly agree with everything she says, and I do hope that the Government response comes sooner rather than later.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for what was a very distressing statement. How might the plans for safeguarding DWP claimants apply to current Government policies?

Debbie Abrahams: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), this is really important. The bedrock of the report is that safeguarding needs to be integrated into policy development at all stages and at all levels of the organisation, and before policies and legislation are implemented, so it is absolutely key to the legislation that is being considered and that will be going through the House.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement, and it is a pleasure to serve under her chairship on the Select Committee. This report is sobering reading, and the evidence we took was often heartbreaking. Does she agree that, over and above the report's specific procedural recommendations, the overarching theme from everything we heard is that there needs to be a cultural change in the Department that will ensure reflective practice, curiosity and sharing of best practice, with a culture driven by compassion for the most vulnerable people in our country?

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is my vice-Chair on the Committee, and I thank her for all that she does. The culture is one of the key things, and both the statutory duty and making sure we have a system-based approach to safeguarding are absolutely key. I will never forget a quote from one of our witnesses, who had lived experience of using the system, when she said she felt that

"a system that is meant to wrap its arms around us is strangling us".

That just should not happen in this country, and with such an important Department.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I know that the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) takes her work incredibly seriously, and we could see the emotion when she delivered her statement.

Backbench Business

Solar Farms

1.39 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered solar farms.

I must first inform the House that my husband is a farmer and agricultural contractor.

I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me time for a debate on large-scale solar farms. There are some things that Members across the House can agree on: we all want cheap and reliable energy, we all want food security and affordable food prices, and we want to live sustainably and to protect our natural surroundings. Whether or not we agree on how we should achieve those goals, I think we can at least agree that these are desirable aims, so why is the issue seemingly so controversial? It is controversial because it is doubtful that large-scale solar farms on prime agricultural land can achieve any of those aims.

First, how good are solar panels? In principle, solar energy is green, but the reality is murkier. The journey of a solar panel, from raw materials to installation, is far from carbon neutral. The production process demands substantial energy, often sourced from fossil fuels. It requires the mining of silver and zinc. It requires energy to produce the intense heat needed to melt quartz for polysilicon, and the transportation of components and finished panels across vast distances by diesel-powered trucks, trains and ships. What happens when the panels reach the end of their lifespan? Recycling should be the obvious answer, yet they are notoriously difficult to recycle. A constituent of mine who dedicated their master's research to this issue found that most solar panels, once they finish their lifecycle, cannot currently be effectively recycled.

Solar energy is not morally clean either. Most solar panels sold in the UK—an astonishing 97%—contain materials sourced from places where there are concerns about forced labour. Baroness May of Maidenhead, the former Prime Minister, did so much to champion the cause of combating modern slavery during her tenure, and we must not be complicit in human rights abuses in business supply chains. The Government's decision to U-turn yesterday on the Lords message on the Great British Energy Bill is welcome, but it is shameful that it came only after so much pressure.

Even if the challenges with production, transportation and recycling could be resolved, there are concerns about whether solar energy is the right option for the UK's energy production at all. Solar energy is most effective in sunny places, where there is high demand for energy when it is sunny. But in the UK the highest energy demand occurs when it is cold and dark. That means energy must be stored, leading to the need for large battery storage systems, which bring their own problems—we would require another debate just to discuss those. In fact, the UK is ranked as second to last on a list of 240 countries in terms of its suitability for photovoltaic electricity production.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): There is a further point about suitability. My hon. Friend, as a Lincolnshire MP, will know that our

county produces a hugely disproportionate amount of the nation's food. Compromising food production puts food security at risk, because the solar farms, which are industrial developments, use up land that could otherwise feed the nation.

Dr Johnson: My right hon. Friend is of course right, as usual, and I will address that point in more detail later in my speech.

Even if we could resolve all those production, recycling and transportation issues, and so accept that solar is viable for the UK, ground-mounted solar projects are not the right approach. Panels installed so far are relatively inefficient. Despite a currently installed capacity of 17.8 GW, the total output last year was less than 10% of that.

Our current approach is also centred around technology that is outdated. If Members can cast their minds back to 1984, when the first Apple Mac computers were put on the market, and then look today at the present advances in technology, they will see that technology has evolved at a rapid pace. Solar panels planned for fields today are already being superseded by cleaner, more efficient technology that does not need farmland. Researchers in Japan are developing next-generation panels made from iodine. They are flexible and 20 times thinner than existing panels. They would make it realistic to build solar installations on urban infrastructure such as stadiums, airports and office buildings.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that solar energy generation is a key stepping stone on our pathway towards a green economy and to reaching net zero, for those of us in this House who still believe in it? However, where possible, we should not take up agricultural land. I am very pleased to say that my office is supporting Farmer Dibble in my constituency, who is seeking to prevent solar panels being put over some 200 acres of his farm. We should instead shine a little sunlight on the idea of putting solar panels on the roofs of all new buildings, as suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson).

Dr Johnson: I agree wholeheartedly that we should not use our best agricultural farmland for solar panels. The previous Government took steps to establish a £50 million fund to incentivise rooftop installations on farm buildings. That is the right measure to maximise the efficient use of land. This Government's approach, by contrast, is to concentrate ground-mounted solar on prime agricultural land. That is folly in the highest degree. There are 600,000 acres of unused south-facing industrial rooftops across this country. We should use those before we even consider industrialising our countryside; industrialising it comes with consequences. I will come back to farming in a moment, but first we should consider the impact on the wider community. Access to green space and exercise are good for wellbeing. Imagine for a moment walking your dog not alongside a hedgerow, but between two 3.5 metre-high metal fences with CCTV cameras on them. How many of us would prefer to run past miles of 4 metre-high solar panels than rolling British countryside?

I listen carefully to my constituents and have conducted surveys in the affected areas. I have received over 2,000 handwritten responses to my solar farm survey, many of

which contain pages of heartfelt comments from people who are deeply worried about the disproportionate number of applications for massive solar projects in our area.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The beautiful village of Stowe-by-Chartley in my constituency will be almost ringed by solar panels. Does my hon. Friend think that the Planning Inspectorate needs to consider, when making decisions, the cumulative impact of multiple developments on communities?

Dr Johnson: My right hon. Friend is right. I will come on to the cumulative effect later in my speech. He will recall that the previous Government brought in measures to ensure that happened, but it does not seem to be happening.

In my survey, 91% of respondents were concerned about the enormous scale of proposals, and 73% were concerned about the use of productive farmland. The scale of the proposed developments is really difficult to describe. I brought to the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), maps, with overlays, of areas with which he was familiar. He saw the problem, and to his credit, he took the action that I have described. If the Minister is prepared to meet me, I would like to provide him with similar maps, so that he can see for himself the scale of these potential developments.

The developments go on for miles. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) said, they encircle villages, preventing natural growth and home-building over time. They even encircle individual homes. One isolated rural home in my constituency may soon find itself surrounded by solar panels on all sides, like the hole in the centre of a miserable glass doughnut.

Such is the wonderful nature of my constituents that the prime concern that they have expressed to me was not for themselves, their views or their wellbeing, but for the security of the country—specifically, food security. Let us be very clear that using our best farmland for solar puts us at risk, in a volatile world, of being unable to feed our citizens. The best and most versatile land is defined as land in bands 1, 2, and 3a, although land in 3b is a valuable and entirely useable resource for farmers. In Lincolnshire, 99.1% of solar installation area covers land in the best and most versatile land category.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. One issue not normally considered is the reinstatement provisions after a solar farm has been implemented. A vast quantity of our prime agricultural land is being taken out of production, generally for a term of 20 to 25 years. Should not consideration be given to the state of the organic matter, the soil and the potential yield of that land after the term of 25 years or longer has ended, and the negative impact on our food production?

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend is right, but I do not believe that the land will ever be returned to farmland, and many of my constituents feel the same.

It is worth noting that 99.1% of solar installations cover the best and most versatile land, but tests procured by the developers appear to suggest that soil is of

poorer quality than maps from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and local knowledge would have predicted. Will the Minister ensure that where soil testing is done, the results are independently verified?

As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) said, Lincolnshire is the nation's breadbasket, and produces 30% of the UK's vegetables. The land in the county is also more productive than the UK average; the wheat harvest there, over the difficult past five years, was 25% above the UK average, and it is much more productive than global averages. This is the land that we can least afford to lose.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we face a perfect storm of conditions? There is not just a widespread societal push towards net zero, but, with changes to agricultural property relief, a real risk that solar will become the new cash crop, at the expense of valuable food production, which is as essential as energy security.

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend is right. As a farmer's wife, I understand that farmers are being put under a lot of pressure by the various changes that this Government have made to taxation on cab pick-ups, inheritance tax, national insurance and much more.

Displacing our farmland leaves us reliant on imports, which use more land, may have been produced to poorer standards, and require us to factor in transport emissions. The previous Government took action by publishing planning guidance that made it clear that the best and most versatile land should not be developed where alternatives are available—and those alternatives are available. I am pleased to have signed my name to new clause 47 to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which seeks to prohibit solar development on higher-quality land, and I urge the Government to support it. Let us not forget the tenant farmers, who are often on multi-generational tenancies. They suddenly find their whole family without home or livelihood.

A 2023 report for the Welsh Government on the impact of solar panels on agricultural land found that solar sites risk causing soil compaction and structural damage, which in some cases may be permanent. This means that agriculture will suffer, even after the somewhat hypothetical end of these solar schemes.

I also ask the Government to give due consideration to the three RAF bases local to my constituency: RAF Waddington, RAF Cranwell and RAF Digby. Glint and glare from reflective panels will cause problems for pilots flying over these areas. Our newest pilots undergo basic training at Cranwell, and RAF Waddington is home to the Red Arrows. It is a huge joy for me and many of my constituents to watch our nation's iconic display team practise the loop-the-loop and roll into turns at high speeds, but the miles and miles of aligned panels creating glint and glare could lead to disaster.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady accept that pilots already seem to manage to fly throughout our nation and many others, despite there being widespread solar panels in, for instance, Spain, where there is more sunshine? It seems unlikely that they will be unable to manage in her constituency.

Dr Johnson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I wonder if the average jumbo jet flying into Heathrow does a loop-the-loop on its way in.

RAF Digby is the headquarters of the joint cyber and electromagnetic activities group. Any interference with that part of the defence estate could cause significant harm. My constituency of Sleaford and North Hykeham faces an acute burden from the most high-impact solar schemes. Colleagues will know that projects with a capacity of more than 50 MW are classed as nationally significant infrastructure projects. Four of these large-scale schemes are proposed for my constituency, at Springwell, Fosse Green, Leoda and Beacon Fen. Their combined size is 9,340 acres. For context, that land could support grazing for more than 74,000 sheep, produce 23.5 million loaves of bread and more than 700 million Weetabix. A fifth project, just outside my constituency—proposed by a Labour donor—was recently approved by the Secretary of State. What assurance can Ministers give my constituents that the Department is assessing cumulative impacts appropriately?

We often hear that no more than 1% of land will be used for solar panels. However, as we have seen in my constituency, the application for one giant solar farm leads to a proposal for a new substation to accommodate it, which in turn leads to a deluge of further giant solar project and battery storage applications. The cumulative effect will be to destroy the area.

With nearly 7% of land in my constituency proposed to be turned over to solar farms, 9% of the land in the neighbouring constituency, represented by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), and 5% of the land in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), we can clearly see the clustering of applications on our best farmland. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) has the Mallard Pass solar farm in her constituency. I congratulate her on the birth of her child recently, which prevented her from being here; I know that this subject is a big concern for her. Indeed, it is a concern for many of us, including my right hon. Friends the Members for Newark, for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), and for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). As members of the shadow Cabinet, protocol prevents them from speaking in the debate, but I know that they would have wished to, and will keep campaigning.

The national policy statement says that installations should, where possible, use

“suitable previously developed land, brownfield land, contaminated land and industrial land.”

Where farmland must be used, it notes that

“poorer quality land should be preferred to higher quality land avoiding the use of ‘Best and Most Versatile’ agricultural land where possible.”

Sadly, the evidence so far suggests that the Energy Secretary is so ideologically wedded to solar projects that he has not appreciated the damage that giant solar projects are causing to agricultural land. This debate will hopefully demonstrate that covering our best farmland with massive solar projects would be irreversibly damaging to the nation. I urge the Minister to listen to me, my fellow MPs and fellow citizens before it is too late.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Members can see that a number of people wish to contribute, so there will be a time limit of four minutes.

1.55 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Thank you for calling me so early on, Madam Deputy Speaker, at the sunrise of the debate.

I believe there is not only a climate and biodiversity emergency, but real insecurity in our energy market. That is why I absolutely back the Government’s plan to triple our solar capacity and reach the clean power target by 2030. We need to look at the whole gamut of renewable energy out there, including tidal—although perhaps not so much in Bedfordshire—wind and solar power. I am very lucky that my constituency is home to the joint tallest wind turbine in the country, an honour I share with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). When I visited, I suggested that we put a Union flag on top of the one in my constituency so that it would be the tallest, but there was no agreement to that—never mind.

My constituency is also home to a solar farm in Eggington, as the Minister knows, because he visited it with me. It produces enough power for 2,000 homes every year. What is interesting is that as well as producing that clean, green power, it retains an agricultural use; as the Minister may remember, there are also sheep grazing between the solar panels, nibbling at the grass.

Sir John Hayes: Just to be clear, this is not about what, but where. Of course it is important that we have a diverse energy mix, but the hon. Lady must know that if we put solar panels on the best-quality agricultural land, we will have to import more food and extend supply chains, and so damage the environment.

Alex Mayer: I think we need a mix, but we cannot rule out using solar panels on large chunks of land.

When the Minister came along to visit our solar farm in Eggington, he not only met the sheep, but saw that some of the land around the panels has been transformed into wildflower meadows. In my constituency, AW Group—the people with the turbine—is branching out into solar. In the next couple of months, it will build another solar array and again put in wildflower meadows. Those meadows are so important for biodiversity in our country, as our pollinators and other insects face real problems. I learned on my visit that solar farms can also be useful to some of our ground-nesting birds, which find shelter and sanctuary underneath the solar panels.

In essence, I just wanted to say that I really welcome what the Government are doing. I welcome what they did yesterday; the new rules make it easier for some of the smaller amounts of power generated from solar panels to be linked to our grid. I urge the Minister to go full steam ahead on this, and to make sure that our solar industry has a really bright future in this time of biodiversity and climate emergency.

1.59 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): To understand this Government’s approach to solar farms, one should start by re-reading the Labour manifesto—page 59 of the Labour manifesto to be more precise. I know that it was only a year ago, but in its solemn promise to the British people, it said:

“Labour recognises that food security is national security. That is why we will champion British farming”.

That may now seem a long time ago, because a succession of announcements from this Government have made it clear that there is no commitment to farming or to food security. Indeed, that applies to many of their other commitments—smash the gangs, council tax bills will not go up, or energy bills will come down. On food security and its importance to national security it is clear that it was a fake promise. Indeed, there is an irony here, because we still have the ongoing covid inquiry. I was Chief Secretary to the Treasury at the time of covid, and it was clear to me that at a time of national crisis, value for money changes; there is competing demand across nations for scarce resources. I assure Members that, at such a crisis point, food security becomes an issue of national security, which is why the carelessness of the current Government on their manifesto commitment matters so much.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes a brilliant point. Does he also recognise that the way that this Government have set up the arrangements—they are guaranteeing 10% to 20% returns on investment on these farms—is in effect bribing farmers to move away from farming?

Steve Barclay: Indeed, the Government are creating an incentive to do the exact opposite of own manifesto pledge, which is why I started with that point.

Let me come on to the second place where we can see Labour's approach—in the Cabinet. Of course, we cannot witness the Cabinet in action at first hand, but it is very clear—certainly to someone who has had the good fortune to sit in Cabinet—how marginalised the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has become. We see the Prime Minister announce things such as the compulsory purchase of farmland in order to support infrastructure schemes; we see the former Labour leader, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, make a whole raft of decisions in his first few weeks of office on massive solar farms, overriding DEFRA; we see the Deputy Prime Minister riding roughshod over the DEFRA Secretary of State on housing schemes; and we see the Chancellor phoning officials at DEFRA the night before to say that the sustainable farming incentive had been reduced so quickly that the Government have now had to concede in a legal case that their approach was wrong and allow a further 3,000 farm applications to proceed—and that is without any clear commitments in this area.

When I warned at the election about Labour's farm tax, the now DEFRA Secretary of State said that it was complete nonsense. Well, we have seen the Government introduce that tax and watched while the Treasury rode roughshod over the Department. We have a Department that is completely sidelined in the Government and failing to speak up not just for food security and farming, but for the very commitments that were made in the Labour manifesto.

We see a theme running across a whole range of policy announcements that shows the instinct, the values and the priorities of this Government, who always believe that top-down knows best. They do not believe in localism. The implication for solar farms can be seen in how the delivery of the policy is happening on the ground. We are seeing clusters in the east of England, as

my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) would point out, in areas of the best food production. We are seeing a gaming of the system, where the developers bring in consultants to grade the land in ways that sit at odds with historic knowledge of the value of that land.

Sir John Hayes: I am delighted to endorse everything that my right hon. Friend and neighbour has said about national economic resilience. The point about grading land is critical. To be fair to the Government, they have said that land at grades 1, 2 and 3a at least should be protected, but the problem is that the solar developers deliberately attempt to distort those distinctions by regrading land using organisations that are part of their own corporations.

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend is completely right; the issue is hiding in plain sight. When I was in the Government and sought to strengthen the protections for farmland, changes to the guidance were made, including bringing forward independent certification for agricultural land classification in soil surveys. We know at a constituency level that malpractice is going on and is not being challenged. The point is that that is not by accident. This is not an error of delivery. This is by design, and we can see that design in the raft of decisions made by the Energy Secretary in his very first weeks in office. Indeed, close to our constituencies, just near to Cambridge, there was an important announcement on a mega farm, which was made by the new Secretary of State against official advice. This matters because it is related to wider trust in our politics. A clear commitment was given to rural communities by Labour in its manifesto that is being broken.

I will close, conscious that many colleagues want to participate in this debate, with this comment for Labour Back Benchers. It may be that Nos. 10 and 11 have simply decided that, with their majority, they can afford to sacrifice a number of their rural MPs who had not been expected to win the election, and it may be that they decided that those MPs were not essential, but it is baffling that there is so much silence. These MPs are voting for measures that are having such a harmful effect in rural constituencies, and those measures are so short term that they are putting our food security, which does indeed matter to our national security, at risk.

2.6 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), as he will find out shortly.

I strongly support this Government's clean energy mission, and I want this country to be a clean energy superpower. I want to see more wind, tidal, hydroelectric power and, as I will say later, nuclear. For the environment, more renewable energy means less air pollution, lower greenhouse gases and, over time, lower flooding risks—an issue that is very significant in my constituency—and a more stable climate.

For the economy, more renewable energy will mean lower energy prices for households and businesses, because we will not be dependent on gas prices that are set by the global energy markets. As we saw after the invasion of Ukraine and the rocketing energy prices that followed, we have no control over the global price.

[Tony Vaughan]

For national security, more renewables will deliver energy independence, because, instead of our country importing fossil fuels from hostile authoritarian regimes, we can produce more of our own energy at home. Tragically, these points have been lost on the Conservative party, which has given up on being ambitious about tackling climate change. It simply does not believe that this country, the birthplace of the industrial revolution, has the will or the ability to build the world's strongest green economy.

Reform's policy seems to support the surrendering of control of our energy prices to the global markets, given its commitment to fast-tracking oil and gas developments in the North sea and abolishing subsidies for renewable energy.

My constituency is proving to be a popular place for planned solar farm developments, primarily because of the above average numbers of sunshine hours that we have and our relatively flat land. Currently we have five solar farm projects in my constituency which, if they progress, would qualify for nationally significant infrastructure project status. There are a few smaller ones as well. We want to play our part in Folkestone and Hythe in supporting this nation's clean energy mission, and I believe that we should be doing that in two ways: first, by bringing back nuclear energy generation at Dungeness; and, secondly, by taking our fair share of solar developments. I am glad that the Government have committed to nuclear as part of our energy mix.

Sir Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman said that he has five such proposals in his constituency. Does he support all five of those proposals in Folkestone and Hythe?

Tony Vaughan: As I will come on to say, there is an issue about each area taking its fair share of developments. It is absolutely key that we support the Government's clean energy mission and take our fair share, but we need to make sure that it is a fair share.

Dr Johnson *rose*—

Sir John Hayes *rose*—

Tony Vaughan: I will not take any further interventions at this stage. [Interruption.] Members will hear what I come on to say.

We have a decommissioned nuclear power station in Folkestone and Hythe, and I strongly believe that it should be brought back for energy generation. The site has the right location, with proximity to the grid, and a local skills base for these technologies, such as advanced modular reactors. I am grateful to Lord Hunt, the Minister responsible for nuclear energy, for his continued engagement on this issue, but I urge the Government to move faster to create the conditions for advanced modular reactors and other new technologies to become a reality.

On solar, Folkestone and Hythe must play our part in delivering the Government's clean energy mission, but it should not come at the expense of the fundamental character and beauty of the rural community. People visit Romney Marsh for its tranquillity and beautiful landscapes. We must take our fair share of solar developments to support the Government's clean energy mission, but covering a large area of Romney Marsh

with multiple developments will affect the character of the area. One of the projects would occupy 2.3 square miles of countryside, and there are four more in the pipeline. It is entirely consistent to support the Government's mission and accept our fair share while saying that there need to be principled limitations and a reasonable amount of development. That is the right position to take.

Solar farms need to be evenly spread across the country. The clean energy mission is a national endeavour, and we cannot have one community in Romney Marsh facing it on their own. [Interruption.] If any hon. Members want to intervene and make legitimate points, they are free to do so.

Dr Johnson: I think the hon. Member is making part of the point that I was trying to make in my speech. Some 7% of my constituency is the subject of solar panel applications. Does he agree that that is an obscene amount of solar panels to put on our best quality farmland?

Tony Vaughan: As I said, the whole country needs to play its part in supporting the clean energy mission, but there needs to be a fair-share principle. If all the areas of the country with similar features to my constituency played their part, there would be less of an impact in particular areas. It is an entirely fair balance to strike. The Conservatives seem to be wedded to the idea that net zero is something we should not aim for, but they have absolutely no answer as to how we solve the climate crisis.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It might be worth making the point that only 10% of solar applications end up being built. The cumulative number of applications is completely irrelevant; what matters is the number that are actually built on the land, so while 7% of a constituency may be covered by applications, that is not a reflection of the percentage that will be built on.

Tony Vaughan: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

As a final point, there are real concerns about how ethical solar panel supply chains are. It is so important that we have robust mechanisms to ensure—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I have no choice but to impose a three-minute time limit on speeches after the Father of the House.

2.13 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I agree with the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan); let us all play our fair share—and I will support him on Romney Marsh if he supports me on Gainsborough. That is a fair deal.

The distribution of solar farms across the country is, as has been made clear, highly uneven. Of the 650 parliamentary constituencies, 310 have more than 0.1% of land taken up by solar development, while 151 have more than 0.6% and 96 have more than 1%. The five most affected constituencies are Newark, with 8.85% of land taken up by solar farms, Sleaford and North Hykeham with 6.95%, Newport East with 5.12%, my own beloved Gainsborough with 5.08%, and Selby with 4.22%. I say to the hon. and learned Member for

Folkestone and Hythe that this is a debate not about solar farms or green energy but the sheer concentration of solar farms in some parts of England.

Sir John Hayes: That concentration is ironically on some of the best land for growing. That is the problem. There seems to be a correlation between the most productive farmland and the concentration of solar applications.

Sir Edward Leigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Edward Morello: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: I will make some progress and give way in a moment—I must be fair to other people.

There are solar schemes totalling 13,000 acres within a 6-mile radius of the small town of Gainsborough. Madam Deputy Speaker, can I please use a visual aid here? This map shows loads of solar farms—[*Laughter.*] I think I got away with it!

The Secretary of State approves these projects immediately; they go through his desk within a week. The cumulative effect of these solar installations is colossal in one small area, with numerous sites having been proposed and accepted in Lincolnshire. I want to say something to the Minister. Can he concentrate on what I am saying for a moment, because this is terribly important?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I am listening.

Sir Edward Leigh: We are not arguing against solar farms. All we are begging the Minister to do is take them together. We cannot have all these separate public inquiries. We have to look at the 13,000 acres all over Gainsborough. Is that not a fair point? Otherwise, it is totally unfair on one particular area. That is the only point we are making.

This is all done on a cheat—a so-called nationally significant infrastructure project, which was a device brought in by Tony Blair for nuclear power stations and that sort of installation. The Government are bypassing local democracy. That is what is so unfair, and it is why people feel disenfranchised in certain parts of England. I agree that if the Government distributed solar farms fairly all over the country, as the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe said, there would be no argument, but the fact is that they are concentrating them so much in one small area of England. That is the argument.

Edward Morello: I would just point out that the reason we get that concentration: grid capacity. The grid is constrained in the areas where there is the highest level of demand. It is unconstrained in the areas where we have the least amount of demand, which are rural areas. That is why we keep getting applications there. If we upgrade the grid, we will not have that problem.

Sir Edward Leigh: That leads me to the point of whether solar power is really an efficient way of achieving green energy. It is land-intensive, with 200 times more land needed compared with gas, and it is inefficient during winter or cloudy periods. There are doubts about

the carbon footprint. There is no clear evidence that energy generation over a 15-year panel lifespan justifies the embodied energy used in panel production—and we are never given reassurances on that point.

There are also environmental and safety issues. Placing battery energy storage systems in each field raises safety risks due to potential thermal runaway incidents. There is inadequate planning to provide water for firefighting in these fields. There are economic and community concerns—for instance, a negative effect on local tourism of the visual impact, and the lack of community benefits from large-scale solar projects compared with traditional local decision making—and I again make the national infrastructure point.

There are social and ethical concerns about possible connections between project stakeholders and forced labour in China, and we would like reassurances from the Minister in that regard. I asked him about that yesterday in the Chamber. I know we have achieved something with Great British Energy, but in this case we are talking about private companies, on which the concession that the Minister made yesterday will have no impact. There will be an impact on Great British Energy's involvement if it can be proved that the solar panels are made with slave labour, but private companies will be able to go directly ahead.

I want to reply to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). Solar installations will take over good agricultural land, which is vital for Lincolnshire's role as the breadbasket of England. Some 15% of regional farmland could be lost, undermining local agriculture, which is crucial for food security and sustainable farming.

In conclusion, covering our countryside with solar energy installations is environmentally harmful, economically unsustainable, a threat to food security, and damaging to local agriculture and tourism. Local opposition is widespread and strong, and the harms outweigh the benefits. Seeking permission for these sites via the use of nationally significant infrastructure projects is an abuse of NSIPs and subverts local democracy. It is part of this net zero craze that provides poor global value for money. It costs the UK taxpayer billions, and the net effect is cancelled out by minuscule increases in Chinese emissions. These applications should be taken in the round and, if necessary, refused.

2.19 pm

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): Last year, I got elected on a Labour manifesto that pledged to make Britain a clean energy superpower that will create jobs, cut bills, boost our energy security and reduce the carbon emissions that are killing our planet. I have had so many conversations with people in West Bromwich who agree that it is a no-brainer. If we continue to rely on oil and gas from abroad, we will be at the mercy of spikes in prices, with the whims of foreign dictators affecting the energy bills of ordinary families in Britain.

Our renewable energy from solar, wind and wave power is free. We have heard passionate arguments from hon. Members who are concerned about solar farms. As an MP from an industrial urban area, it is not my job to speak for MPs representing rural communities, but I do want to challenge the idea that solar energy is somehow a threat to our countryside. In fact, solar takes up about 10 times less land than that given over to

[Sarah Coombes]

golf courses. My dad is a big golf fan, so I am not attacking the golf industry, but if solar is threatening our food security, are golf courses not doing the same? Solar is also helping to restore nature, according to research by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Cambridge University, which found that solar farms contained a greater number of bird species than the surrounding arable land.

A few hon. Members have asked why we do not just put solar on rooftops. The Government are also doing that. The Black Country, which I represent, is a proud manufacturing area, and as we look out across West Bromwich and Oldbury, we can see huge numbers of factories and industrial roofs.

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Member refers to industrial activity. Does she agree that the predominant industrial activity that solar supports is far-eastern manufacturing of solar PV? What would she say in response to Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, who said in January that by pursuing this route we are in effect ceding control over national security and resilience to foreign powers?

Sarah Coombes: The hon. Member and I have nearby constituencies. The companies in my constituency that put solar on their roofs will see their energy bills reduce, and they could put more energy back into the grid. They think this will be a big benefit to their businesses.

There are no formal estimates of the amount of factory roofs in the Black Country, but to take a local example, William King, one of West Brom's longest running metal processing businesses, has 29,000 square metres of warehousing facilities—that is almost three hectares of rooftop that could be used to generate solar power. It has already made a start installing solar panels, and I hope that the 300 or so other manufacturing businesses in my constituency will soon follow suit. Lighting up the Black Country with solar will drive local growth, create new jobs, build new skills and power industry in our manufacturing heartlands.

There are still many challenges to the private sector making the most of the solar opportunity—many of which the Government are working to address—including upgrading the grid so that factories can give away excess energy to local schools and delivering quick new grid connections. We also need to make the business rates system even more pro-solar. At the moment, if a business installs solar panels on its roof and consumes all that electricity itself, there should be no increase to the rateable value. However, local businesses have raised concerns that if they generate excess energy through their solar panels and want to sell that back to the grid, their business rates may increase. That creates a disincentive for companies to install maximum numbers of solar panels and generate additional clean energy.

I met my hon. Friend the Minister just last week, and we had a good discussion about the full range of options at our disposal to make rooftop solar the norm and not the exception. I am excited about what unleashing the full potential of solar across the Black Country and Britain could mean. It will reduce our exposure to fossil fuels and their volatile prices, end our dependence on international markets and ultimately bring down household bills.

Across Britain, we are on the brink of a clean energy revolution. We should seize the opportunity to unleash the full potential of solar power across our country, including by lighting up the Black Country using our plentiful factory roofs.

2.23 pm

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The only less environmentally-friendly form of power generation than solar panels in the United Kingdom is the Drax power station, which is forest-fed. It is a complete myth to suggest that somehow there is no carbon price to be paid for solar farms. Neither are they efficient: given the lack of sunlight in most of the United Kingdom, the amount of power fed into the grid from solar panels is minimal. We are talking about sacrificing acres of agricultural land—some of it has already gone—to no useful purpose whatsoever. It is time that we grew up and recognised that.

At business questions this morning, I asked the Leader of the House if she would go to the Prime Minister and bang a few heads together, because the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are not singing from the same song sheet. The argument is simply not joined up. We cannot go on sacrificing agricultural land—such as that surrounding the village of Hoath in my constituency, or the Minster marshes, or the land around Sandwich and in west Thanet—and still expect to have food sufficiency. We are talking about land that this summer is growing bread-making wheat but in two or three years will be growing houses and solar panels. That is simply not compatible in terms of policy.

I urge the Minister to go away and think about this very carefully indeed, to take the message to the Secretary of State and to ensure that there is some joined-up thinking before it is too late. I am afraid that 2030 is dead in the water, and it is time we recognised that. The way forward will be North sea gas and oil to bridge the gap between where we are now and small nuclear reactors. It is time that we recognise that and stop messing around with pie-in-the-sky schemes.

2.26 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) on securing the debate, which is an important one for my constituents and indeed the whole county of Norfolk. We have seen a sudden influx of solar farm applications, which have become one of the most contentious and spoken about issues locally.

To be clear from the outset, I am not a nimby, or even a rural nimby as I have been referred to of late. I support the Government's growth agenda and welcome the much-needed growth in my constituency. I am also not anti-solar or indeed anti-solar farm—I recognise the need for energy security and I support the net zero ambitions—but we must approach these challenges and their solutions pragmatically with due regard for local communities and recognise the implications. That is why I am working cross-party with the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) in establishing the Breckland solar alliance in response to a solar farm proposal that cuts across both our constituencies to ensure that the voices of our residents, businesses and stakeholders are heard and that party politics does not get in the way of such an important issue.

David Davis: I am listening with interest to what the hon. Member has to say, and I have some sympathy with it, but does he have any specific proposal for how we deal with the nationally significant infrastructure projects approach, which completely overrules what he is talking about?

Terry Jermy: I encourage the right hon. Member to let me get to the end of my speech, as I may answer his question. I will then be happy to have a conversation with him.

The fact is that renewable energy projects are not evenly distributed across the country. In Norfolk, our terrain is flat and quite sandy, so it is relatively easy to get things into the ground. With the likelihood of increased pylon capacity, we are attractive to solar projects and we are getting more than our fair share of applications for solar farms, which places increased burdens on certain communities.

One of my particular concerns about the influx of applications is the impact on food security. All too often, agricultural land has become the default option for solar farms because it can be cheaper than alternatives when deployed at scale, not because that is the right social and environmental option. Solar farms are not being sited on just any old agricultural land, either; they are being sited disproportionately on better-quality farmland rather than on poorer-quality land.

There is three times more grade 5 agricultural land in the UK than grade 1 land, with grade 5 being the lowest quality land, as mentioned earlier, and grade 1 being the best, yet solar installations occupy 20 times more grade 1 land than grade 5 land. That cannot be desirable, or indeed acceptable. I firmly believe that grade 2 agricultural land and above should be protected and prioritised for food production. The national planning policy framework considers grade 1, 2 and 3a land as the “best and most versatile” land, and prioritises its protection. Yet that prioritisation is clearly not influenced in the proposals.

Dr Johnson: Will the hon. Member give way?

Terry Jermy: I will not as I have limited time—apologies.

Take the Drove solar farm application in my constituency. If approved, 20% of the application site would cover grade 2 land, and about a third of the land to be used would be “best and most versatile”. We are already seeing longer and hotter summers in Norfolk, and that adds to the challenges for farmers. Irrigation is needed more frequently, adding to the cost, and more land is becoming unviable for food production. As I have said before, I am fully behind a pro-green economy and ensuring that renewable energy is not something for the future but for now.

I have huge sympathy with the Minister and the team, because our energy security is in an appalling state after 14 years of Conservative Government. We have lived through soaring energy bills and fuel poverty, and we need cheap, clean energy, but that cannot come at any cost. There are alternatives, so let us recognise that and celebrate the fact that the UK is a world leader in offshore wind, with far more capacity than any other country.

2.30 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): May I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) on what he had to say? He was at least responsive to local interest in this.

We have heard a number of rather glib comments about this and that percentage of land. Let us just look at it from an individual point of view. Last Monday the East Yorkshire solar farm in my constituency, covering 3,150 acres, was approved. Not many policies make me angry in this place, but this one did for my constituents. Why? Because a decision rode roughshod over the desires, wishes and expressed complaints of my constituents. The solar farm will cover an area the size of Durham. Let us imagine, if we were applying to build a town the size of Durham, how long the planning would take. Yet this went through effectively on the nod, and the so-called consultation process was little more than a rubber-stamping operation. Why do I say that? Because there were a lot of sensible and constructive inputs from my constituents, and some from me, and no attention whatsoever was paid to any of them.

In trying quite properly to save the global environment, the Government are causing untold harm to the local environment in Britain, and in so doing they will fail in their first aim.

Sarah Russell: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that the Conservatives’ failure to have proper national strategies for development means that we do not have enough prison places to lock up all of our criminals, and that not having sufficient solar energy will do the same?

David Davis: Unless the hon. Lady is talking about the sustans of the criminals, I am not quite sure what the relevance of that was. She was one of the ones who were picking numbers out of the air, with this small percentage and that small percentage. I am pointing out the actual effect on ordinary citizens, and it is not the bland view that she has put forward.

A 3,000-acre solar farm is disproportionate for any part of the country, because it surrounds villages and makes life miserable for people. Multiple towns and villages will be completely surrounded by the East Yorkshire solar farm. Another one, the Mylen Leah solar farm, which would cover another 3,000 acres, is proposed for right next door. That will effectively be 6,000 acres. I am not very optimistic about the attitude of the Government in the approval process.

We have also heard slightly sneering references to nimbys. What are we talking about here? We are talking about actual people in my constituency. They range from pensioners who have spent their entire life savings to go and live in a quiet part of the country with a beautiful view, who will instead have a view of black plastic, to people not very far from me who bought a place in the country because they have got a child who is severely autistic and needs the peace and quiet and the rural environment that is provided. We have people who take lower salaries to work in the country because that is what they want. We have people who are committed there in farms and rural industries. They are the so-called nimbys and they do not want their lives ruined. That is what we are here to defend.

When I surveyed my residents, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) did, I found that 90% were against the size of the farm and against the overwhelming impact. They were not against the idea; they were against the ridiculous way this is being done.

[David Davis]

I am running out of time, so I will make one other point about the ill-thought-through nature of the policy. It depends on access to the grid. Therefore, the reason I have farms of 2,000 acres, 3,000 acres—probably more—is that we are near Drax on the grid. That encourages a concentration of huge farms in concentrated areas all over the country, where ordinary people will have their lives destroyed by an ill-thought-through, rotten policy.

2.34 pm

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I am proud that Britain has set ambitious targets for clean energy. We want 95% of our energy to come from low-carbon power sources by 2030. The Government are changing the planning system, as we have heard, so they can deliver the renewable energy of the future.

It is important that the benefits of that ambition are felt by us all, and I am keen to ensure that my constituency of North Northumberland is not overlooked in the new energy race. That means that our solar farms should be local, farmer friendly and effective so that they serve my constituents as well as the whole country. We have heard phrases such as “large-scale prime agricultural land” a lot. We just have to think through where the solar farms are going to be. It need not be an either/or, as seems to have been suggested here at times.

First, it is crucial that solar farms have local support and are rooted in communities. I know many in North Northumberland want renewable community energy that directly benefits them and their neighbourhood now. I have spoken to very small rural communities in my constituency that are well on their way in their attempts to get local solar farms. They want to sign up to the ambition of Great British Energy for the future.

We want to make sure that solar panels are a part of everyday life. In 2013 the Government estimated that there were a quarter of a million hectares of south-facing commercial roofs in the UK. We should make good use of those roofs to ensure that new build homes, for example, have solar panels for the benefit of their owners and their neighbourhood. That is entirely legitimate.

Secondly, solar farms must go hand in glove with farmers. In North Northumberland we have highly productive land that is outstanding for local farmers and for our national food security. It is therefore crucial that we use our scarce land for the best possible purpose. However, let us be clear to the Conservative party, which claims to be for farmers and the party of free choice and small businesses: it is for those farmers and landowners to decide whether they want to diversify.

Early research by Lancaster University suggests that sheep farming, sheep grazing and solar farms—actually called “agrovoltatics”—can go hand in hand. Solar farms could represent one strand of healthy diversification for many farm businesses, and I welcome that.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's points, including about the opportunities for agrivoltatics. I suspect that a lot of residents would be more open to solar farms if they were combined with food growing in the ways that he has described. Yet those are not the sorts

of applications that I see coming forward in East Anglia. Will he ask the Government to be stronger in their planning policies to encourage and require solar farms that are combined with food growing?

David Smith: I was just about to say that I welcome the Government's proposed new land use framework, which I think is key. The land use framework, which no Government have had before, will help landowners make sensible and effective decisions with their land. I trust that will include a strong focus on both food production and renewable energy.

Finally, and most importantly, solar farms must lead to lower bills. I am optimistic that as we ease the influence of foreign dictators off our energy supply and generate more of our own renewable energy, the British people will begin to see the benefit. Skilled jobs and lower bills will be the reward for the countries that win the clean energy race, and the best reward for investment in solar and wind power will be lower bills for my constituents in North Northumberland.

We have heard a lot of what I think is a false dichotomy here today, for instance from the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay). Setting up that false dichotomy between food security and energy security is not the way forward. We must do both together. I want my constituents to be part of the national conversation as we move towards net zero. They are keen to see lower emissions, lower bills and local jobs, and that means ensuring that solar farms are local, farmer friendly and effective so that they serve the British people well.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We will have a two-minute time limit from after the next speaker. I call Llinos Medi.

2.39 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Ynys Môn is known as “energy island.” However, support for clean energy should not undermine our communities. The current plans for huge solar farms on Ynys Môn do exactly that. At present we have a proposal for the Alaw Môn and Maen Hir solar farms, which would cover 3,700 acres. That is nearly 2% of the island's total land—a huge area. Those solar farms would be built on good-quality agricultural land. Ynys Môn is not opposed to solar energy—the island already hosts several solar farms, such as Bryn yr Odyn, Bodorgan and Porth Wen. In addition, Traffwll solar farm awaits construction. We are playing more than our part in the green transition, from solar to wind, from marine to nuclear.

Ynys Môn is also known as the mother of Wales, because the island's fertile land has served as the breadbasket of Wales. Building these projects on good agricultural land undermines food security and the agricultural sector, which is a vital part of our economy.

Adrian Ramsay: The hon. Lady highlights food security and energy security, which are often highlighted as being in competition in this debate. Is it not the truth that both are crucial for a sustainable future and that it is not clear how the Government will relate the strategic spatial energy plan to the land use framework? Does she agree that both have to work together under a clear national strategy?

Llinos Medi: The current approach to large solar is a sign of a lack of strategic planning, but also of a lack of food security planning. Ynys Môn has UNESCO global geopark status to recognise its outstanding geological heritage and to manage it for conservation, education and sustainable development—“sustainable” being the crucial word. The proposed solar farms are not sustainable for Ynys Môn and would totally undermine the island’s global geopark status.

I propose to the Government that solar deployment should follow a hierarchy in order to best suit the needs of local communities. First, solar should be integrated into new build domestic, commercial and industrial buildings by building developers. It should then be retrofitted to existing buildings by the building owners. I am deeply concerned that the Government are backing developers over local communities when it comes to control over land. There is a huge risk of development consent orders being used by developers to buy up land against the wishes of landowners. The threat of a DCO gives developers leverage over landowners to take on decommissioning costs for solar farms. What assessment has the Minister made of that trend? Does he believe that DCOs are being misused by developers in Wales?

We have a country to keep, a piece of land as proof of our right to survive. Coal, slate, water—our natural resources—have been extracted from our deprived communities for the benefits of others. The land of our fathers has been stripped of valuable resources and the profits taken out of Wales. It is only fair that communities in Ynys Môn and the rest of Wales are respected. Pushing through large solar projects that are at odds with the needs of local people is not the way forward. The Government must change course, end the pattern of extraction and put Welsh communities at the heart of their solar strategy.

2.42 pm

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): I have been given two minutes, so I will get straight to the point and talk about Whitestone. Last July, after being elected as the MP for Rother Valley, I made a solemn promise to my constituents that I would always put their interests first. The Whitestone proposal has raised real concerns among residents, and I have held numerous public meetings and consultations since the proposal first came to my desk last November.

Numerous concerns have been raised by residents, and I have made those very clear to the developer as the proposal has developed. I will share the three major concerns that stand out. The first is the sheer scale of the proposal. It would change the very nature of the area we enjoy. The second is the particular locations that are affected. Four beautiful villages—Ulley, Brampton-en-le-Morthen, Harthill and Kiveton Park—would potentially be engulfed by the Whitestone proposal. I have had conversations with the developer. I am pleased that there has already been a reduction of 25%, but I hope for much more.

The third is the issue of tenant farmers. It is right, as has been raised, that many landowners may choose to engage with the solar farm market, and that is their choice—we live in a free economy. But for tenant farmers the situation is somewhat different. I have tenant farmers in my constituency who have farmed land for generations, if not centuries, who feel that they are under threat, and I want to support them, as is my role.

I simply urge the developer, in coming forward with its proposal later this year, to take into account the thousands of residents who have raised serious concerns about the proposals as they stand. I urge the developer to make its proposal proportionate and fair, ensuring that we get a fair deal out of the transition to a green economy.

2.44 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Members for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) and for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) for taking a brave stance against their Government Whips and standing up for their constituents against these reckless solar farm proposals. Today’s debate is on solar energy, but the points I intend to make apply to more than just this type of energy infrastructure. The manner in which these projects are being pursued—aggressively and without due care—is beginning to cause a major backlash. There are rapidly growing fears that solar and renewable projects are being forced through and greenlit for installation against the wishes of the people who will have to live next to them.

The “net zero at all costs” agenda of this Labour Government, which is enthusiastically endorsed by the SNP at Holyrood, causes great concern across the country—and for good reason. Protecting the environment should not come at the expense of our economy, jobs and countryside. The approach of Labour and the SNP needs to change. Major infrastructure projects are a particular issue in rural constituencies like mine in the Scottish Borders, where the countryside is not some far-off place we speak wistfully about; it is where we live. The countryside is part of our community. When solar projects are proposed that are bigger than some towns, it is deeply worrying for local people.

Time and again, when I look at projects across my constituency, I see a scandalous lack of regard for the views of local people. They are given little information, are overlooked and even ignored, and then expected to just agree with the project. Labour and the SNP might think that is acceptable, but Conservative Members do not. We believe that it is wrong, and that people should not have to put up with it.

2.46 pm

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): The climate crisis grows more urgent, and our children’s future is under threat. Solar energy will play a crucial role in the mission to produce secure, affordable energy in this country. Since the general election, the Government have consented to more solar power projects than were consented to over the entirety of the past 14 years. Great British Energy is investing £200 million in new rooftop solar energy panels, including for the roof of the newly built Leighton hospital near my constituency, and in renewable energy schemes for schools, hospitals and communities. That will take hundreds of millions of pounds off public sector energy bills.

New building standards will ensure that all new build houses and commercial buildings are fit for a net zero future. The standards are expected to encourage the installation of solar panels, and I welcome that. It is critical that we exclude slave labour from the supply chain for solar panels, both on moral grounds and to enable alternative producers to compete on a fair playing

[Sarah Russell]

field. Much of the global supply of solar-grade polysilicon—a key component of solar panels—is manufactured in Xinjiang, China, where over 1 million Uyghur Muslims are imprisoned in a vast network of forced labour camps. This week, I met people from Open Doors to learn more about its work tackling religious persecution around the world. It said in its 2022 report that

“In Xinjiang you are always watched; a computer decides your fate, against which there is no appeal.”

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend surprised to hear that despite our deep concern about solar panel production in China, there was virtually zero investment in the UK’s solar production during the Conservatives’ time in office? Since we came to power—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. We really must have short interventions, or I will not be able to get every Member in.

Sarah Russell: I agree with hon. Friend. That is disgraceful, and I am very pleased that the relaunched solar taskforce is focusing on developing resilient and sustainable supply chains, free from forced labour.

It is important that we work with our farmers and growers across the country. British farmers own about 70% of our total solar generation capacity, whether it be on the roofs of their agricultural buildings or on solar farms. I am extremely pleased that the NFU is participating in the Government’s relaunched solar taskforce. We must continue to ensure that farms are properly consulted about land use, and that previously developed or lower-quality land is prioritised.

I thank the businesses in my community that have supported solar energy, including manufacturers Siemens and Bepak, which both use renewable energy sources. The Dane Valley Community Energy company is a not-for-profit mutual society that was set up by a group of volunteers in my constituency. They have constructed and run the Congleton hydroelectricity generation project at Havannah weir, and they supply electricity to Siemens and donate money to local community groups. A sister project, Congleton Solar, has installed rooftop solar on a number of sites in my constituency and beyond. Havannah primary school in my constituency will officially unveil its rooftop solar panels next week. I know that the project will inspire the next generation of green champions. I am very proud to be part of a Government who are meeting communities where they are, and following their lead.

2.50 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Obviously, I like to bring people together in consensus, and I think there is consensus in the House that there is a place for solar—on roofs. Of course, I like to lead by example, so I have put solar panels on the roofs of my industrial buildings. Then, one can sell electricity to the occupier beneath and ease the considerable pressure on the national grid.

Surely solar farms are completely inappropriate. We have been hearing about thousands and thousands of acres of solar farms. In the great, glorious county of

Lincolnshire, there are applications and plans for 40,000 acres of solar panels on top-quality farmland. That is completely inappropriate. It would destroy not only that farmland, but—this has not been mentioned—great jobs in the county of Lincolnshire for the next 20 to 30 years. That is absolute madness. It is also so unfair. Those living in a village or small town in the countryside might all of a sudden find themselves surrounded not by glorious fields, but by black plastic. There is no justification for that, or fairness in it.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware of the large battery energy storage plants that will be required as we use more solar farms, but is he aware of the danger that they pose to the public and the environment?

Richard Tice: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for common sense. Most solar farms now include huge battery storage systems, which, we have learned, are very dangerous. Three of them have gone up in flames just this year in the United Kingdom. The fires cannot be put out; they must be left to burn out. What happens when those systems burn? Toxic fumes are released, including hydrogen fluoride, and toxins seep into the ground, as we have learned from California, where one went up in flames. There are massive dangers from those battery storage systems, but nobody is talking about that—and by the way, no one knows who is responsible for battery storage system health and safety.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I have a solar development in my constituency, and there are proposals for a battery storage solution. The hon. Gentleman mentions safety. I am hoping to address that through an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that would require relevant fire authorities to be statutory consultees. Would he support that?

Richard Tice: I would be very interested. The fact is that fire departments in counties up and down the country do not have the resources, manpower or willingness to take on these safety risks. That should be the subject of a separate big, important debate. We are all concerned about health and safety. Surely nobody wants to live next to something dangerous and toxic that could cause entire villages to be evacuated, as thermal runaway means that the fires cannot be put out. I am conscious that other Members wish to speak. We need a greater understanding of these battery storage systems.

2.53 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I rise not just as the Member for Mid Norfolk, but as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture. As Members will be aware, Norfolk is Britain’s first county and our leading agricultural county—the Royal Norfolk show is the premier show in the country. Norfolk is absolutely at the vanguard of this country’s agricultural industry, and of the Government’s stated—although increasingly cynically stated—commitment to increasing food security.

The globe has to double food production in the next 25 years on the same land area, with half as much water and energy, and Norfolk is in the vanguard when it comes to the technologies with which to do that; there

are the drought-resistant crops, and the gene-edited, disease-resistant crops, at the Norwich Research Park. In my constituency of Mid Norfolk, the home of Banham Poultry and Cranswick Country Foods, farming and agriculture is the No. 1 industry, employing thousands in agricultural machinery supplies, haulage and food processing. I cheered when I heard that the Government were going to support the agricultural industry and food production, and I cheered their commitment to supporting UK science, including the agricultural science that is key to meeting that challenge, but since the election, we have seen the most extraordinary attack on farms, the rural economy and small businesses taking on jobs. There is also a proposal for a 7,500 acre—that is 10,000 square miles, or 20,000 km—solar farm, reaching from Castle Acre, through Swaffham, to Dereham. This is in a constituency where agriculture, food and tourism are the No. 1 industries.

Government Members need to reflect on this. I want renewable energy, and I want cheap energy. My constituents would like to be consulted. The residents of 14 villages will wake up living in the middle of a power station, with no serious planning consultation at all, no community benefit, and the rates being taken back to London by Ministers. This is an utterly cynical move towards the industrialisation of the countryside, which will rebound seriously on the Labour party and, more importantly, on this country's food and energy systems. It is wrong.

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

2.55 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I should declare that prior to entering this House, I spent the better part of a decade working in renewable energy finance. While I would not claim to be a solar expert, I could certainly write a whole speech debunking things that have been said today. For the record, solar panels have a lower carbon footprint per unit generated than the equivalent fossil fuel. They are 95% recyclable, and any solar farm development requires a glint-and-glare report before it gets approval if it is anywhere near an Air Force base or an airport. I will move on, because I could go on for a long time.

Those of us who believe in science know that tackling climate change means making bold, practical choices about how we decarbonise our economy. If we are serious about reaching net zero, tackling fuel poverty and protecting our countryside, we have to make renewables work for people as well as the planet. I have often made the point that the solar sector is not particularly good at communicating the benefits of a just transition to the population at large, so let me be clear: solar power means cheaper bills for consumers, protection against geopolitical insecurity and a greener future for the next generation.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. So that we in this House and the whole country can hear clearly, is he saying that the Liberal Democrats fully support solar farms?

Edward Morello: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that the answer is in my speech.

We have made substantial progress on decarbonising our power grid: a decade ago, just 6% of our energy came from renewables, and today, the figure stands at 42%. That is a national achievement we should be proud of, but we must go further, not just because the climate emergency demands it, but because renewables are the cheapest source of energy available.

Liberal Democrats believe strongly in expanding use of solar and other renewables to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, improve energy security and bring down bills. Crucially, we believe that this must be done while protecting our natural environment. A strategic land use framework is essential if we are serious about delivering net zero while safeguarding our ability to produce food and restore nature.

We are asking more and more of the countryside—to produce food, capture carbon, generate clean energy, support biodiversity and provide space for housing, tourism and recreation. Without a joined-up approach, we risk pitting these priorities against one another. It is vital that a framework gives clear national guidance on where solar is most appropriate; sets out that solar should avoid high-quality agricultural land wherever possible; and encourages dual-use solutions that support both energy generation and nature recovery. It must enable local authorities to plan ahead with confidence, and to balance competing pressures in a way that reflects the needs and character of their communities.

Planning policy should not be dictated solely by where grid connections are available, but by a long-term vision of how we want our land to be used. It is a common claim that instead of putting solar panels on fields, we should put them on rooftops and car parks. I do not disagree, but having worked in the sector, I feel obligated—I make this point a lot—to explain the commercial realities. If utility-scale solar costs 50p per unit to build, rooftop solar is roughly double that, and carports double that again. Meanwhile, energy companies pay as little as 5p or 5.5p per unit for energy exported to the grid. That means that pure-export rooftop and carport solar does not stack up financially for investors, but that is something that the Government can fix. By mandating a minimum export price, we could unlock rooftop and car port investment, reduce pressure on farmland and cut consumer bills. Yes, wholesale energy buyers would earn a little less, but consumers, communities and the climate would all benefit. This is an easy win for a Government who have stated their commitment to net zero.

Ground-mounted solar will invariably remain part of the energy mix, and we cannot reach our climate targets without it, but projects must be done right, which means prioritising lower grade land and ensuring that new schemes come with tangible benefits for the communities they affect. Community benefit funds should receive a fair share of the wealth created. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) has tabled new clauses to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to deliver just that, alongside local authority powers to invest in energy efficiency and support street-by-street upgrades to reduce bills. In Scotland, for example, community benefit is worth £5,000 per installed megawatt per year. That means that a controversial large-scale solar project, such as the Kingsway solar farm in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings),

[*Edward Morello*]

would provide £2.5 million annually to the local community. That is the scale we should be talking about, and it must be the community that determines how and where that money is spent.

Today, about two thirds of UK solar is ground-mounted, but rooftop solar has a critical role to play and the Liberal Democrats are proud to be leading on that issue. We welcome the Government's decision to adopt our policy of mandating solar panels on the roofs of new homes, which is a core part and first step of our rooftop revolution. We also call on Ministers to go further, by requiring new homes to meet net zero building standards and include provision for solar generation. When it comes to delivery, Liberal Democrats in local government are showing what can be done. From Barkham solar farm in Wokingham to Sandscale park in Westmorland and the thousands of car park panels installed in Portsmouth, we are delivering clean energy at scale, backed by communities.

Delivery must also be responsible, and I know that many of us are concerned about the number of solar farms being approved on our best agricultural land. Let me be clear: I am yet to meet a farmer who got into farming because they wanted to grow solar panels; this is happening because making a living from farming is increasingly impossible. We must ensure that farming is sustainable, profitable, and properly supported, so that farmers can keep doing what they do best, which is producing brilliant British food and looking after the land. I also share concerns about the use of nationally significant infrastructure project schemes, which are taking land out of use. That raises questions about long-term land use and oversight, particularly given the level of foreign investment in the sector.

Finally, a very quick word on standards—I appreciate that I am testing your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. There are genuine concerns about labour practices in the global solar supply chain, but the industry is taking action. Having been part of the Solar Energy UK supply chain sustainability working group when it was first constituted, I can personally attest that the industry is taking the issue very seriously. Through the solar stewardship initiative, robust environmental, social and governance and traceability standards are being applied to ensure compliance with UK and EU laws. By the end of this year, certified facilities will be producing 100 GW of panels annually, which is five times the UK's current capacity. As a result, we can be confident that we can meet our targets without compromising our values. The potential of solar is enormous. It can drive down bills, reduce emissions and create thousands of jobs, as well as protect our countryside.

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

3.3 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I pause to pay tribute to those Back Benchers who were not able to contribute today?

The passion about this issue is evidenced by the number of Conservative Members present. Two minutes was an inadequate amount of time in which to describe

the distress that many of their constituents feel. I will try to encapsulate what I have heard them say, but it will not do justice to the amount of anguish that rural communities are feeling. In this solar farm debate we are talking about an attack on rural communities. It is an attack on farmers, on tenant farmers and on the English rural way of life. I did not hear people complaining about solar farms being built in industrial areas or on rooftops; I heard complaints about 3,000-acre solar farms destroying the countryside, destroying villages, and being built with no concern for the communities they will leave behind.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). By securing a debate on this important subject on the Floor of the House she has done the House a tremendous service. Moreover, my hon. Friend has done much more, and she deserves recognition for that. She has worked tirelessly on the issue over a number of years, fighting for her constituents. I can testify to that, as I was the designated Whip when we were in government; no Member, from any part of the House, bothered us more on the issue of the importance of protecting rural communities from solar farm expansion. She secured vital changes from the last Government to limit where solar farms could be built—changes that this Government have now undone.

Solar has a role in our energy mix, including on rooftops and in south-facing industrial areas, but it carries significant costs and brings a dependency on China and forced labour supply chains that are questionable and should concern us all, despite what the Lib-Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello), may say.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): My constituency has 2,000 acres of raised reservoirs and there are 402 Members in the House from England alone who have raised reservoirs in their constituencies, but the debate has not covered the potential for floating solar. Does the shadow Minister agree that if the forthcoming Government solar road map does not contain a substantial amount on floating solar on raised reservoirs, then we will have missed a massive opportunity?

Joy Morrissey: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent point. May I suggest that he applies to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate on that topic? There is such interest today that I am sure that a debate on floating solar would be welcomed by the House.

Many people are affected by this issue. I pay tribute to Members on the Labour Benches for their bold willingness to stand up for their constituents. It is difficult to do that and I am very impressed that they have done so. The Government may struggle to understand that it is possible to be pro-solar energy while raising legitimate concerns about where and how that expansion affects communities, our countryside, farmers and food security.

Bradley Thomas: Does the shadow Minister agree that if we continue to permit applications for solar farms in the countryside, including those at Weatheroak and Hunnington in my constituency, we erode our agricultural self-sufficiency, and that it is important that this Government do not betray the countryside any more than they already have done?

Joy Morrissey: As the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs represents a constituency in Croydon, it is perhaps understandable that he may misinterpret the needs of rural communities. We need to continue to highlight the plight of rural communities and how such issues affect them, and we must allow for proper debate in the House about these important topics.

I hold the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), in high regard, and I hope that his response will recognise and encompass the concerns and issues that have been raised today. I know that his brief covers several Departments and that that brings challenges, but the Government need to address three key areas of concern: the loss of high-quality agricultural land, the clustering of development applications linked to solar farms and the importance of community consent.

On the loss of high-quality agricultural land, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham eloquently set out why that matters to her constituents. It also matters to constituents in Mid Norfolk, where a 7,000 acre development is proposed.

George Freeman: Does the shadow Minister agree that as well as all the points that have been made about agriculture and solar, there is a democratic point here? Residents in 14 villages in my patch, and in many others, will find that they are living in the middle of a power station. Let us name it for what it is: a power station. They think that each village will have a bit of solar, but they will be living in an industrial power station. That should not be allowed to happen without a proper planning consultation and proper compensation.

Joy Morrissey: I could not agree more with what my hon. Friend said. There is a lack of compensation for rural communities and no offer of lower energy bills or a discount on offsetting the cost of energy. These local communities will sacrifice their green spaces, livelihoods and way of life for energy that will not give them a direct benefit.

In Lincolnshire, this issue has a huge impact. We see solar applications in constituencies, particularly in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, where they cover 7% of the overall available land. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) in Lincolnshire faces 5% of land in his constituency being consumed by solar. That is shocking. Across the country, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) faces 9% of land in his constituency being consumed by solar farms. Lincolnshire's agricultural land is vital to our food security, but it is under threat. Developers see this land as the fastest and easiest pathway to solar farm development, enabled by a Government who seem to place no importance on our food security.

The Countryside Alliance recently highlighted that tenant farmers face threats; I appreciate that that was raised by the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards), and I appreciate his boldness in doing that. Those tenant farmers are being evicted to make way for solar farms. Tenant farmers are not landowners: they work the land, and they are being evicted so that solar farms can be put in place.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) and the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for

Gainsborough, pointed out, we are losing farmland and farmers and our food security in the reckless ideological pursuit of net zero. That is why His Majesty's Opposition have tabled new clause 47 to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which would limit where solar farms can be built on agricultural land. What assessment have the Government made of the impact of solar farm applications on the loss of agricultural land and tenant farmers in areas such as Lincolnshire and on our national food security? Will the Minister look at ways to incentivise the development of solar capacity away from agricultural land?

As developers seek easy access to agricultural land, this leads to a clustering effect, which many Conservative Members mentioned. We heard mention of a 3,000-acre development in East Yorkshire, which, coupled with another 3,000-acre development, means that 6,000 acres of land in East Yorkshire are being consumed by solar farms. The need for these applications to cluster around substations for cost-effective grid connection is creating an overwhelming impact in areas such as Lincolnshire, Suffolk, Buckinghamshire, East Yorkshire, Norfolk and across our rural communities in England and the south of Scotland.

I particularly want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am sure that the shadow Minister will bring her remarks to a close very shortly.

Joy Morrissey: I will, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that we can address this issue in the House again very soon, because there is much more to be said on this important matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) was not able to make all of his remarks, and many Members were not able to raise their concerns.

Finally, I will talk about community consent, which has been raised so many times already today. We need to ensure that we are listening to these communities, not ignoring them and bulldozing over our green spaces—our countryside and our agricultural land—for the sake of a relentless net zero target that will destroy our rural way of life. I mention again that agricultural land is being consumed by this Government at an alarming rate. Farming capacity is being lost as tenant farmers are evicted. Whole counties are being covered in clusters of solar farms. Local communities are being ignored and experts are being overridden. Those are the realities of a solar strategy driven by ideology ahead of evidence. I urge the Minister to heed the concerns that hon. and right hon. Members have raised so forcefully today and to change course urgently.

3.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) on securing a debate on this important issue. It is the first day in a while that Westminster has not been basking in sunlight, although I did note—contrary to some contributions made by Conservative Members—that solar is currently generating 30% of this country's electricity, more than any other technology. Solar plays a critical role in our energy mix. The hon. Lady asked whether I would meet her to discuss proposals in her constituency; of course, I am very happy to meet her to discuss these issues, as I meet Members across the House.

[*Michael Shanks*]

I welcome all—or perhaps I should say some—of the contributions to today's debate. When the debate began, I was not expecting the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) to endorse the clean power mission so comprehensively, not only endorsing our rooftop solar revolution but leading the way in his own industrial empire. I will include him in the next newsletter on the clean power mission; I am sure he will happily receive it. I know that we are short on time, but I am happy to briefly outline the Government's position and respond to some of the numerous points that have been made. I also hold the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), in high regard, and I will respond to some of her points over the course of my speech.

The clean power mission that this Government have embarked on is not about ideology. It is about delivering energy security, climate leadership, and the only way in which we can move away from volatile fossil fuels setting our constituents' bills, which is what so many have faced over the past few years. It is the only way to create well-paid industrial jobs and deliver the clean power mission right across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) referenced community benefits and the benefits to individuals of installing solar panels on their own roofs; he is absolutely right about that, and I will return to the issue of rooftops shortly. I welcome my hon. Friend's contributions, as he is a former pupil at Park Mains, where I used to teach—although for the record, he was not a pupil when I was teaching there.

My hon. Friend also made the point, which I want to reiterate, that this is not a battle between food security and energy security. I will just say one thing, which I am sure Conservative Members will strongly endorse:

“Solar projects and agricultural practice can co-exist. For example, the science of agrivoltaics is developing, in which solar is integrated with arable farming in innovative ways. That is coming on in leaps and bounds.”—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 184WH-185WH.]

We can achieve food security and energy security together for our United Kingdom.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister and I have had this conversation a number of times. He will be aware that paragraph 2.10.29 of EN-3 states that “best and most versatile” land should not be used for solar farms. He has already informed me that no solar farm in the country uses more than 50% of best and most versatile land; will he commit to a hard limit on how much of that land can be used for a solar project?

Michael Shanks: As I think I said the last time we had this exchange, I always welcome the hon. Gentleman's numerous written parliamentary questions to me—it is a treat to see them every morning, and he does raise important points. I am not going to put a figure on it right now, but we have clearly said that it is important to find the right balance when it comes to best-use agricultural land. I will come back to that issue.

The hon. Gentleman did not let me get to my point. I just spoke about this not being a competition between energy security and food security; those were the words of the shadow Energy Secretary, the hon. Member for

West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), not that many months ago, before the Conservatives went down the hole of denying that the climate crisis is a real thing and that our energy security and food security can co-exist. That was their policy when the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham last brought this debate to the House, which I think was nine months ago.

Dr Johnson: The Minister says that this is not a competition between energy security and farming security. It should not be; the reason it is becoming one is that his Government are allowing our best and most versatile farmland, used for growing crops, to be taken over by solar farms.

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Lady for her point, but it was not me saying that this is not a competition—it was her own shadow Energy Secretary just a few months ago. I do not accept her point, either; I will come to that very briefly, but in a bit more detail, in a second.

Let us not forget that this is also about tackling the climate crisis. The Conservatives might be willing to ignore that crisis, but the truth is that time and again they forget that climate change will have a devastating impact on agriculture and on land across this country. We have to do something about that, and this is part of it. Solar will be part of our energy security in the future, although it will not make up the entirety of our clean power system.

George Freeman: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will make a bit of progress, because I am conscious that another debate is to start soon.

Rooftop solar, as many Members have raised, is important. It is not an either/or. We see a real opportunity to put solar on every possible rooftop right across the country. We have announced our ambitions for new homes and for industrial buildings. We recently launched a consultation or a call for evidence on car parks, too. If there is a rooftop that we can put solar panels on, we are keen to do so, but there will also be a role for ground-mounted solar to play.

Finally on this point, the public also support solar. Many Opposition Members have said that they have done their own surveys—where, funnily enough, they get the result they hope to get. In the most recent poll, 88% of people said that they support solar, and that figure has never dipped below 80%. There is a question about balance, as I have said in this House on a number of occasions and will say again. We want to build a clean power system that brings communities with us. That requires a balance of different technologies in different parts of the country, but it is not credible to come here and say, “We support the building of infrastructure, but please do not build it in my constituency.”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Shanks: I will briefly give way to the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont).

John Lamont: I am grateful to the Minister, but what is he saying to my constituents who are genuinely terrified by these large-scale wind farms, pylons and solar farms coming to our area of Scotland, which I am sure he

knows well? Just as importantly, what does he say to the hon. Members for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) and for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), who raised the same concerns as Members on the Opposition Benches?

Michael Shanks: First, I say to the hon. Member that I have one of Europe's largest wind farms on my doorstep, so I know exactly what it is like. I would also say that bringing down bills and delivering energy security matters to his constituents as much as it matters to mine, and a robust planning system is in place. Opposition Members speak as though there is no process for local communities to be consulted, but there absolutely is; they are frequently consulted, and that plays a critical part in the decisions made about these projects.

George Freeman: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will not, because I am conscious that there is another debate to come.

These questions about the planning system are important. There is a rigorous process in place. We recently raised the threshold for solar projects going into the NSIP regime. I seem to remember a number of Opposition Members opposed that, but the whole purpose was to ensure we do not have the issue that we have at the moment, where a lot of projects are deliberately 49 MW, which is just below the threshold. By changing the threshold, we have more projects going through local, democratic council planning considerations, so those Members should welcome that decision. Those planning decisions also consider biodiversity, the local economy, visual amenity, protected landscapes and many other things, and those considerations also include, as a number of Members said, cumulative impact where more than one project is planned in close proximity.

Members raised many other points that I am afraid I will not have time to come to in this debate, so perhaps we should have another debate on some of them. On land use, the guidance makes it clear that wherever possible, developers should utilise brownfield, industrial, contaminated or previously developed land. Where development on agricultural land is necessary, lower-quality land should be preferred to higher-quality land and so on. On questions of food security, I defer to the president of the National Farmers Union, who says that it is "important that we're not sensationalist about the impact on food security".

I trust his judgment on this question above some others in this place.

I am moving through a number of points as quickly as I can. On land use, a number of Members have asked about how we bring together the land use framework and the strategic spatial energy plan. I had a meeting about that just this week. The Government should have had a serious look at land use in this country many years ago and at how we strategically plan our energy system right across the country. They will come together. We are also looking at regional energy plans that give a more localised view, too. The National Energy System Operator is currently taking that work forward, and that is an important step.

On community involvement, it is important that communities feel like they have a voice in this process. I have frequently said from this Dispatch Box that I do not for a second underestimate the strength of feeling for communities that have any infrastructure built near

their houses or villages—whether that is prisons, the electricity system or new housing—but as a country, we cannot simply say that we will not build any new infrastructure because some people might oppose it. If we did that, we would never build anything, we would never deliver economic growth, and we would hold this country back, so I make no apology for saying it is about the balance between how we bring communities with us and how we get on with building in this country again, and that is important.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham about glint and glare, the impact on the loop-the-loop was one of my highlights of the debate. As the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) said, solar panels are designed to absorb light, not reflect it, and glint and glare is considered in the planning process already, so it is taken into account.

I am conscious of the time, and I apologise to hon. Members who raised serious points that I will not be able to address in this debate. I am happy to follow up in writing on a number of those points.

Solar power is one of the cheapest forms of energy that we have in this country. It is deployable at scale, and can play a critical role in delivering our energy security and in our delivering the climate leadership that we need—to tackle not a future threat, but a present reality that will affect farmers up and down the country if we do not do so. I acknowledge that any infrastructure project has impacts on communities. The planning system does all that it can to mitigate those impacts, but we need to build stuff in this country. Infrastructure has to be built, and our electricity system has to be upgraded. We will build on rooftops, we will build a mix of energy technologies right across the country, and we will take on all innovations that are possible. It is fantastic how quickly we are innovating in this space, but hon. Members cannot simply say, "Let's not build in my constituency", because that is not a credible option.

I thank the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham once again for securing the debate. Although we might not agree on everything, I take her points very seriously. It is important for me to say that I hear the points that she and others have raised, and I am happy to meet her to discuss them further.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Dr Caroline Johnson has one minute to wind up.

3.26 pm

Dr Johnson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope the Minister has listened carefully to what has been said, and has understood that this is not about nimbys—it is not about "not in my back yard" and it is not even about the aesthetics of solar farms. It is about the overwhelming scale of the proposals and the fact that solar farms will take up a huge amount of good-quality farmland. If one had a sensible strategy and wanted to use ground-mounted solar, one would put it in places where there is not good food-producing land; one would not put it on the best food-producing land, but that is what this Government are seeking to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered solar farms.

Perran Moon: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) referred to the Heckington Fen solar project in her speech today, and claimed that it was approved by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State did not take that decision. He recused himself from it, and that was made abundantly clear—publicly—following the decision. We have a duty in this House to be accurate and not to question another Member's integrity. What the hon. Member said is categorically incorrect, and I therefore respectfully ask that she withdraw her comment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for his point. He will know that it is not a point of order, but a point of debate that perhaps would have been better dealt with in the debate itself by means of an intervention. However, if the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) wishes to respond, she may.

Dr Johnson: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My point was that under a Labour Government and Secretary of State, a Labour donor has been given permission to build a great big solar farm just outside my constituency. That is the point I was making: the Labour—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not going to have a continuation of the debate via points of order.

Sir Roger Gale: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the interests of accuracy—I understand that is what we are trying to pursue—the Minister said during the course of his final remarks that 30% of power is produced by solar panels. The figure for April, produced by NESO, was 10%.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. As I said, these are points of debate, not points of order, and they are certainly not matters for the Chair.

Youth Services

3.29 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the long-term funding of youth services.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate, Members for supporting it, and all the organisations that have provided material for today's contributions.

This Government have stated that they are on a mission to break down barriers to opportunity, to ensure that every young person in every part of our country gets the best start in life and has access to the tools they need to thrive. As has always been the case, a young person is shaped not just by what they do in a classroom or what they hear in the playground, but by the community they grow up in and the stake they have in it. That is what youth services are. They are a safe space outside school, and the place to broaden horizons and build meaningful connections with the outside world.

As an elder millennial with baby-boomer parents, I know that every generation believes that theirs has had it the hardest, but in our day we at least had the luxury of living our most awkward and vulnerable years without the glare of social media. At least we had the opportunity to fail, to be odd and to learn who we were before we presented ourselves to the world. Whether it is the impact of covid, the cost of living crisis or trying to prepare for a world of work that is constantly changing, our young people are facing unprecedented challenges in a country that, for too long, has not invested enough in their wellbeing.

As a result, in England one in five children and young people now have a probable mental health disorder. The number of emergency hospital admissions for children aged five to 18 due to a mental health crisis increased by 65% between 2012 and 2022. Incidents of youth violence remain at high levels, with 3,000 knife crime offences last year involving a child. The Office for National Statistics reports that 16 to 24-year-olds are now the loneliest group in our society, and the Good Childhood report states that the UK's children and young people are the “unhappiest in Europe”.

This damning picture of what it is like to grow up in this country should shame us all, because, as they say, it takes a village to raise a child. What has happened since the 2010 spending review, which saw funding for youth services pitted against services with greater statutory protections, is the systematic dismantling of the network of support that used to keep our young people safe. The village has been replaced by a patchwork of voluntary organisations, with fewer and fewer council-run youth services bidding endlessly for one-off pots of funding that will inevitably come to an end.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. She points out the extraordinary cuts in the funding for youth services—over 70% under the last Government—with 50% of centres lost. Can I take this opportunity to say that some centres have thrived and that continue, such as the Sulgrave youth club, which has its centenary next year, and that is thanks to long-term support and funding, but also to private philanthropy—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman is an experienced enough parliamentarian to know that that was a very long intervention.

Natasha Irons: My hon. Friend is quite right: there has been a 73% decline in funding for youth services. I congratulate the organisation in his constituency on its centenary.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend also recognise that there is also a funding crisis in Scotland, with the Scottish Government starving local authorities of the funding they need to provide these vital services? This is not just in England; it is a UK-wide problem, and the SNP Scottish Government are certainly not making it easy.

Natasha Irons: I understand that MSP colleagues are considering bringing in a youth Act in Scotland, which is quite innovative, and perhaps we should try to emulate some of its provisions.

With the closure of over 1,000 youth centres, one in eight local councils now has no youth centres in its area. The workforce crisis has seen youth workers often stuck in low-paid and insecure work. The voluntary sector, which now delivers 80% of youth work, faces its own funding crisis, with 25% of voluntary youth organisations having less than six months of cash reserves.

Despite those challenges, organisations across our communities are stepping up to rebuild the village around our young people. Nowhere is that more evident than in Croydon, the town I have the privilege of representing in this place. In Croydon, organisations are working tirelessly to provide the support that young people need: Redthread, which is working in Croydon university hospital to offer young people caught up in youth violence a way out; Reaching Higher, which aims to support and champion young people across school, community and home; Croydon Drop In, which offers free confidential advice and mental health support to young people and families; and Croydon Youth Consortium, which is driving collaboration across local youth charities, so they avoid competing against each other for the same limited pots of funding. Croydon is leading the way in giving our young people a stake in their community.

However, due to impending budget cuts and reorganisation, Croydon, which is London's youngest borough, is on the verge of losing its council-run youth engagement team. The team provides a critical link between the council, the voluntary sector and vulnerable young people across the borough. It provides outreach, runs youth hubs in hard-to-reach areas, and oversees Croydon's youth assembly. To put it simply, Croydon's youth engagement team has saved lives.

The limited statutory protections in place for council-led youth services mean that Croydon council can shut the service down without running a proper consultation; without asking key partners, such as the police or the NHS, how much they rely on the frontline knowledge the team offers them; and even without consulting the borough's young people properly, having approached only 31 of them in the process of drawing up its plans. The council claims that some of the services will be retained by inviting the voluntary sector to put in bids to run them, but they cannot replace the consistency, institutional knowledge and co-ordinating role that the

youth engagement team provides. As one mother, whose son attends the New Addington youth hub in my constituency, put it:

"The staff do such a good job at making everything seem conversational and natural... We've had pop up services through charities. But with the youth club, they've been able to spend time with a consistent staff team and build relationships with a professional and diverse staff."

I welcome the Government's commitment to the wellbeing of our young people: their work on a national youth strategy that puts the voice of young people at its heart, and their plans for the young future hubs to tackle the complex causes of youth violence. But I urge them to back up that investment with proper statutory protections for youth services.

It is time to stop the erosion of youth work. It is time to introduce statutory sufficiency benchmarks to ensure that no matter where they are, no matter the community they grow up in, all young people have the right to youth work, with measurable minimum expectations. As outlined by the National Youth Agency, that would not only give youth services the priority they deserve, but provide stability to the youth work sector, giving it the long-term structure needed to invest in proper pay, training and support for its workforce.

It is not just a moral mission to provide these services for our young people; it is also a practical one. As the Government's own data shows, young people who receive youth work support as teenagers are happier, healthier and wealthier. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates, for every £1 invested in youth services, we save between £3.20 and £6.40 in wider costs to society. For many, youth work provides a trusted adult; a guiding hand on to the next step when the next step feels impossible.

I would like to end by sharing the story of Rania. She is a young woman who, like many across our country, left education full of potential but was paralysed by fear. She battled deep mental health struggles, loneliness, isolation and a crushing sense that she was "not enough" for the working world. Rania got in touch with the King's Trust. She began to work with Charlie, a youth delivery lead who did not just help her with her CV and job applications; she listened, she believed and she walked her through every moment of doubt. Rania went on to apply for three NHS roles and was offered all of them. She is now proudly working as a band 2 healthcare assistant. As she puts it:

"With the support provided, I hardly recognise myself. I still can hardly grasp how much Charlie's support has impacted me and motivated me to achieve my goals."

That is the power of youth work.

At a time when hundreds of thousands of young people are struggling to find a future, it is youth workers like Charlie who are quietly pulling lives back from the brink. If we are serious about ending the youth unemployment crisis, if we are serious about the future of our young people, and if we are serious about breaking down barriers to opportunity, then we must get serious about the long-term funding of our youth services.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Members will be able to see quite how many are expecting to speak this afternoon, so I am introducing a three-minute time limit immediately.

3.39 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Young people in Devon have incredible potential. Across our whole county we see their creativity, resilience and ambition. We are lucky to have a dedicated network of organisations and volunteers who support them every week; from youth workers to counsellors, community leaders and peer mentors, people across Devon are stepping up to help our young people to get new opportunities.

In Sidmouth, for example, the YMCA plays a big role in the local community. It hosted election hustings last summer before the July elections, and the people who came to those hustings from across east Devon asked some really fantastic, searching questions. Sadly, with the demise of the Manstone youth centre, Sidmouth has seen the excellent work carried out by that centre either fold or, at least, move elsewhere in the town. The closure of this youth centre is symptomatic of the demise of youth services that we have seen over the past 15 years.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the fact that the Conservative Benches are empty reflects the conscious choice they made to underfund youth services, which is why many of us find our youth services in this position?

Richard Foord: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Devon county council was run by the Conservatives from 2009 to 2025, over which time we saw a staggering 76% real-terms cut to youth services.

Despite that, we have some really dedicated volunteers who are doing their very best with very limited means. In Cullompton, the John Tallack youth and community centre offers weekly youth club sessions through Involve Mid Devon, providing space for young people to connect, be heard and develop together.

With the shared prosperity fund, we have seen that it is also possible to serve young people on the cusp of adulthood. We have youth and adult employment hubs, including those at Cullompton library and Honiton's Beehive community centre, which, through the shared prosperity fund, provide one-to-one advice for people aged 16 and over to help them gain confidence, develop skills and find employment or further training.

At least, that is what we had until March 2025, when the shared prosperity fund ran out. We are now very concerned about funding for youth services in Devon. Devon county council spends just £39.30 per young person, which means that the county ranks 105th out of 174 local authorities for spend per person. According to the *Totnes Times*, more than 10,000 children and young people in Devon are currently waiting for mental health support. Made early, this sort of investment can alleviate concerns downstream, and indeed can actually save the state money spent on other services later on. This is demonstrated in academic studies, with a review of evidence from 74 academic studies finding that youth work produces a social return on investment of up to £6.40 for every £1 spent.

I urge us to build on what is already working and expand the brilliant examples that we have across Devon, but we need to do this through long-term, sustainable funding. We need to join up youth services with mental

health and education provision and create a more integrated, co-ordinated approach, enabling our young people to get the help and support they deserve.

3.44 pm

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for securing this important debate.

The long-term funding of youth services is not just an issue of public spending; we are talking about an investment in the next generation, and in building a future in which all young people can thrive. As colleagues have said, we face a mental health crisis. According to recent NHS data, one in five children now has a probable mental health condition. I was really saddened to read the latest UNICEF data, which places the UK near the bottom of the league table of high-income countries for the wellbeing of children and the happiness of teenagers. The UK ranked 27th out of 36 on child mental health, and British teenagers were joint second from last for overall happiness.

The economic consequences are stark, too. According to the Government's "Keep Britain Working" report, young people with mental health conditions are nearly five times more likely to be economically inactive. Since 2015, there has been a surge in the number of young people with work-limiting health conditions to 1.2 million, and more than half a million of those cases come down to poor mental health.

Although there has been welcome progress from this Government—they have launched the national youth strategy, committed to ensuring more mental health support teams in schools, and increased investment in early intervention—the pressures on young people continue to grow. Young people face challenges that were never encountered by previous generations, including the impact of smartphones and social media, which bring increased social pressures. However, over the past decade, local services have been decimated; they have lost more than £1 billion since 2010.

In my constituency, I recently met Tahlia, who attended one of my surgeries to talk about the lack of support for her children with special educational needs, and the lack of youth services in our community. Rather than wait for action, Tahlia took it upon herself to connect with organisations to explore how best to support the youth of Horsforth. She is working with others to transform a derelict building into a community hub for young people, with a focus on supporting neurodiverse needs. That is a powerful example not only of community leadership, but of unmet need. I would like us to do more to support meaningful local consultation. We should bring together young people, parents, schools and community groups to ensure that long-term funding is targeted at youth services where they are needed most. The investment should align with the Government's goal of improving mental health support in schools, not as a stand-alone fix, but as a broader part of our strategy.

My questions for the Minister are: how can we better support community-wide, wraparound services, ensure direct funding, and bring together schools, parents, youth workers and local organisations to meet that need? What further steps can we take to limit the negative impacts of smartphones and social media on young people's mental health, beyond supporting the

ban on phones in schools and raising the digital age of consent? If we want a prosperous and productive future, the most powerful investment that we can make is in the opportunities, wellbeing and potential of our young people today.

3.47 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): The simple truth is that the money we invest in our youth services and young people today will save hundreds of millions of pounds tomorrow. More than that, it will save lives, futures and entire communities. Across Leicester South, we are proud to have incredible grassroots youth organisations changing lives. Pedestrian allows children with special educational needs and disabilities to express themselves and build confidence through youth music sessions; it even helps them to feature in exhibitions. Shubaan youth project is a beacon in the Highfields area of the city, offering a safe space, a sense of connection, and even a football club. The Eyres Monsell club for young people stands tall, mentoring, supporting and empowering the next generation.

Those examples are all too rare. Too many young people have nowhere to go and no one to turn to. As the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Katie White) said, today we learn of the alarming statistic, published by UNICEF, that the UK ranks 21st out of 36 in the happiness and wellbeing league for children. That is simply unacceptable for one of the richest nations in the world.

In the past 15 years, local authority spending on youth services in England has been slashed by £1.2 billion in real terms. That is a 73% cut. As provision shrinks, violence rises. In areas where youth clubs have closed, people aged 10 to 17 are 14% more likely to commit a crime. Why? Because if we do not offer them real role models, as we used to in youth clubs, they will find toxic ones on social media. When there is no safe space, isolation takes root, mental health declines, physical health follows, and hope disappears.

Youth work is a lifeline. Government-funded research shows that young people who access youth work are not just happier but healthier. Investment in it is smart economics, because for every £1 invested in youth work, the social return is anywhere between £3.20 and £6.40. Youth work saves us more than £500 million a year in costs from knife crime, antisocial behaviour and criminal justice. This is not spending; it is saving. But this robust sector is under threat. Funding is short term, insecure and skewed towards buildings, rather than people, but buildings alone do not change lives. Youth workers do, yet more than 4,500 youth workers have left the sector in the last decade. A third of those who remain are on zero-hours or temporary contracts, earning an average of just £21,000 a year—far below the UK average.

There are several actions we can take. First, we could have a national youth strategy with long-term, measurable plans to protect and strengthen youth services. Secondly, we could have a dedicated youth Minister in Cabinet to ensure that youth is not an afterthought but a priority across all Government agendas. Thirdly, we could have a long-term youth workforce strategy to recruit, retain and properly pay the skilled professionals our young people rely on. Finally, we should have ringfenced, sustainable revenue funding—not just capital investment—for open-access youth services in every postcode.

3.50 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): When we talk about youth services, we are really talking about the kind of country we want to be. We often discuss crime prevention, education and mental health in silos, but the thread that runs through all those issues is clear: we need to invest in our young people through properly funded, long-term youth services.

Scotland has a proud tradition in youth work. In my constituency, youth work takes many forms, from council programmes to community-led projects in our towns and villages. In every case, the services work to address inequality, isolation and opportunity gaps. Let me highlight two examples. The Callander youth project has turned a former hotel into a thriving hostel and social enterprise, and offers employability programmes and training opportunities to young people. In Bannockburn, the Eastern Villages sports hub delivers sport and community activity in partnership with Milton football club, Bannockburn rugby club and St Modans cricket club. That shows how sport, youth work and community development can go hand in hand.

Those are fantastic examples of grassroots ambition, but behind the energy and creativity lies a deep sense of fragility. Too many projects rely on a patchwork of short-term funding. I want to recognise the role of organisations such as the National Lottery Community Fund and many others that have stepped in to keep services running.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a passionate speech, and is showing why Scotland produces some of the greatest footballers of all time, like Billy Bremner. He mentioned the short-term funding of youth projects. My experience from my work with young carers is that part of the issue is that new projects need to be funded. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need long-term funding for not just existing projects, but new ones, too?

Chris Kane: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I thank him for recognising Billy Bremner—a very good Stirling man.

As I was saying, many projects rely on a patchwork of short-term funding, but that reliance points to a deeper problem: the retreat of local government, especially under the SNP Government in Holyrood, who have delivered a real-terms cut of over 15% to core budgets for local authorities. That makes it near impossible to deliver on statutory obligations, let alone expand services for the future.

When youth services are cut, the impact is not abstract. We see it in worsening mental health, rising youth crime and lost opportunities. We know what works. Youth services build confidence, boost attainment, improve wellbeing and support employability, and those are generational investments, not optional extras. That is why I welcome the UK Labour Government's commitment to embedding youth services alongside mental health and careers support in communities. However, Westminster action only goes so far when Holyrood is pulling in the opposite direction. If the SNP is serious about equity and opportunity, it must properly fund councils and commit to long-term support for youth services. This is not just about budgets; it is about hope, and acting on our belief in the potential of every young person.

3.53 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): As a mother of four born Devonians, I know that my constituency is a wonderful place to grow up. It embodies the best of England's green and pleasant land. It is also home to a vibrant network of youth circles. I pay tribute to the fantastic sports clubs, big and small, across the patch, the strong presence of the young farmers clubs, and to the cadet branches of our armed services in Minehead, Uffculme, Doniford—though they meet in Watchet—and Tiverton. I also pay tribute to the myriad scout and guide troops across my constituency, and the King's award-winning Exmoor Young Voices, whom I very much look forward to welcoming to Parliament next week. I apologise if I have left anybody out.

In an age when screens are increasingly a fixture in daily life for the young generation, the chance to spend time in the countryside is becoming all the more important. It boosts mental health, encourages exploration and lays the foundation for a lifelong appreciation of our natural environment. I sometimes wonder whether the greatest youth service in my constituency is the natural environment. I am keen to ensure that young people appreciate nature's grounding force.

However, opportunities sometimes lie elsewhere for isolated and distant communities. That is a direct result of the underfunding of youth services—a short-changing of future generations. I was shocked, but not entirely surprised, when I saw the figures for 2023-24, which indicated that Somerset funded a youth service for 11 to 19-year-olds to the tune of only £4.21 per young person. Compare that to Hull, which provided £287 per 11 to 19-year-old. If only the Conservatives had not run Somerset into the ground, and underfunded local government across the country.

Finally, as we consider the future of youth services, we cannot ignore the benefits of adopting an EU youth mobility scheme. This initiative would allow young people in the UK greater access to work placements, study exchanges and cultural experiences in Europe. It would broaden horizons and foster international co-operation. Giving our youth the ability to explore, grow and develop skills beyond our borders is not just beneficial to them; it strengthens our economy and enriches our society. Surely that scheme would represent one of the greatest services to the young people of Tiverton and Minehead. Either we get serious about the issues facing our youth services, or we fail to tackle them head-on and risk losing what we have, which would be detrimental to all.

3.56 pm

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for securing this fantastic debate. I experienced the youth work profession as a young person through my local youth club, and as a member of the UK Youth Parliament in its early days, so I know first hand how important youth work is, and how much of it has been cut due to austerity. Only last week, I went to see Gravesham Youth Council, which has been running for 25 years—an incredible achievement, given what has been going on. I ran a session on the national youth strategy called “Deliver You”, a consultation in the form of a delivery service for young people. In the spirit of food delivery, I present some ingredients.

First, young people should be truly listened to, engaged on matters that affect them, and empowered through youth voice mechanisms at each level of government. In that, they should be supported by youth work. There should be a legal duty on Government and local government to support youth work. Secondly, we need long term, fully funded, preventive, universal, open-access youth work in all areas, not an early help or social work-lite model, although those can be used for targeted help.

Thirdly, we need a trained, qualified and invested-in youth work profession, in which qualifications are recognised. The term “youth worker” should be protected in the same way as the term “doctor” is, or “lawyer”. Fourthly and finally, we need in primary legislation a duty on local authorities to provide youth work, so that it is never seen as an easy cut again. Now that is a delivery order that will truly nourish our young people across the land. Through a statutory youth service Act and a long-term workforce strategy, we can address shortages and upskill youth workers, so that they can deliver for young people. I hope the Minister will agree that that would be a step in the right direction.

We have listened as a Government to the votes at 16 campaign. Twenty years ago, I was at the forefront of the campaign, and at a recent Liaison Committee hearing, the Prime Minister and Government committed to delivering votes at 16 as part of our manifesto commitments. There have been so many years of campaigning on the issue, and I pay tribute to all the young people who have joined in that effort. We should welcome those who are joining the campaign now, and jumping on the bandwagon at the last minute. We need to reverse the trends and see good, open-access youth work return to Gravesham and the country. Youth work works, and I hope that the national youth strategy will deliver the hopes of so many young people.

3.59 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber today. Youth services are not a luxury; they are a lifeline. At their best, they provide young people with a safe place to go, trusted adults to talk to and opportunities to grow, learn and thrive. Yet all across the country, we are seeing those vital services hollowed out, stretched thin or shut down altogether.

I want to share an example from my constituency. Sussex Community Development Association, or SCDA, a respected local social enterprise based in Newhaven, has recently had to take the painful decision to close its regular youth club sessions at Newhaven youth centre. That was not due to a lack of demand—far from it. Indeed, some of the young people who use the service credit the youth workers with saving their lives.

Like so many organisations, SCDA is being squeezed by rising wage bills and the knock-on effect of national insurance changes. It is now facing an additional £20,000 in costs from the increase in the minimum wage alone and a staggering £70,000 in NI contributions. That is £90,000 in total for a not-for-profit organisation that supports young people in one of the most deprived communities in the south-east of England. Furthermore, because it is a larger non-profit employer, it does not even qualify for the employment allowance that was

meant to cushion the blow. It is being penalised for doing the right thing, creating real jobs and reinvesting in our communities.

SCDA is trying to keep the flame alive by continuing to support youth voices through the Newhaven young people's forum, offering digital resources and making sure that Newhaven youth centre remains a youth hub. However, without secure, long-term funding, SCDA and so many others will be constantly forced to make impossible choices.

That story is not unique to Newhaven. In recent years, more than £1 billion has been cut from youth services across the UK. According to the YMCA, local authority spending on youth services has dropped by more than 70%. We do not need another round of bidding wars for limited funds. Instead, we need a proper long-term settlement that recognises that investing in young people prevents future crises in mental health, crime, education and employment. It is not only the right thing to do morally; it makes economic sense too.

I also urge Ministers to review how changes in employment policy, from the national insurance thresholds to minimum wage differentials, are impacting voluntary and community organisations. Social enterprises such as SCDA should not be left to bear disproportionate burdens because they choose to create good, permanent jobs. If we are serious about giving young people a stake in their future, we need to give youth services a stake in ours. We need not just warm words, but funding that matches the scale of their impact.

4.2 pm

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) on securing this important debate. I also want to take this opportunity to congratulate a leading youth provider; I congratulate Aspire in Arts in Nuneaton on its 10-year anniversary. From numerous conversations with the leader of the youth group, Amina, I know about the organisation's struggle over the past 10 years. The success of its projects is truly a testament to the dedication of the staff; it is a true labour of love. Given that the YMCA has estimated that Warwickshire county council has cut a staggering 84% from our youth budget since 2010, it is amazing that Aspire in Arts has developed a fantastic local asset that provides support for hundreds of young people. It adds value to our young people's lives with art, games, cooking and health provision and education. The music provision is incredible and is about to get even better, as performance spaces and a recording studio are established. The organisation is building the capital culture and creative industry talent that we need for the future, while truly enhancing lives and broadening horizons.

Crucially, Aspire in Arts provides a safety net, an open door and a safe place for young people who have nowhere else to go; those who need support and those at risk of bullying, harassment and exploitation. It also gives a positive choice to those at risk of entering into criminality. Indeed, we already know that youth provision reduces the rate of youth reoffending by 13% and reduces the severity of the crimes.

The positive impact of youth services transforms lives and maps out a pathway to embracing passions and nurturing talent, supporting young people to learn the skills that they need to live successful lives in the future. In Nuneaton, more than 20% of our young

people are economically inactive. Youth crime, antisocial behaviour and youth violence are enormous issues that have resulted in tragic outcomes in recent weeks. Aspire has been holding the frontline, supporting these young people through unmet mental health and SEND needs and providing alternative provision when the barriers to attending school are just too great.

Chris Vince: I was waiting for an opportunity to mention young carers, who are a hugely important part of the greater picture of young people and who often face many barriers to education. Does my hon. Friend agree that any consultation with young people should include young carers, as has my consultation in Harlow?

Jodie Gosling: Absolutely. It is clear from interactions with young carers and parents of children who are not in school that the gratitude for youth services and the value they add is immense.

The casework stories from youth provision in Nuneaton are often harrowing: young people in crisis and on the edge of suicide, self-harm and mental health episodes, and victims of violence and abuse. The open-door policy means that we have a safety net to catch and support them. The net that the organisation provides saves lives, helps them rebuild and offers support for a brighter future.

Evidence suggests that £1 invested in youth provision results in £3.40 to £6 for the taxpayer, but I think the value it adds is incalculable, especially when we consider the impact on other services, such as health, education, policing and justice. Aspire in Arts works collaboratively with other youth groups to provide services across the north of Warwickshire and to establish ambitious, inspiring plans to support our young people. It would like to do more, and with secure funding instead of piecemeal, day-to-day, hand-to-mouth funding, it would be able to secure a place for young people across Nuneaton and to support everyone.

4.6 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) on securing this timely and essential debate. I know she is a champion of not just young people but local government, and her speech eloquently demonstrated the urgent need for action to build a fit-for-purpose youth service.

Rather like "Star Wars", my youth feels a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, but I was one of those young people living in a village that benefited hugely from the presence of a bricks-and-mortar youth centre staffed by highly skilled youth workers—a profession that has been demonstrably under-appreciated and wrongly devalued for the past decade and a half. As a young man, the centre not just gave me a secure space to play games, learn skills and socialise, but—thanks to the support workers—gave me support through challenging times in my life. We did not talk in such terms then, but it was accessible and non-judgmental mental health support available on my doorstep—something not available to my Redditch and villages constituents now.

Perversely, as the internet, social media and YouTube influencers have emerged, with the challenges that that has posed to our young people, we have witnessed the dismantling of our youth service. If we combine that with the impacts of the cost of living crisis and covid-19,

[Chris Bloore]

we cannot ignore the fact that our young people face far more challenges than we did growing up. As a parish, district and county councillor—albeit one of the younger ones—I have witnessed how local government cuts have decimated our youth service.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a passionate speech about the importance of youth centre provision. Does he agree that the Conservatives' dismantling of Oxfordshire county council youth services by closing 19 of the 25 youth centres that existed prior to 2010 did irreparable damage to young people in Oxfordshire?

Chris Bloore: Every council that I served on was also Conservative, and they decimated our youth services. It is a real shame to see the Conservative Benches empty today.

I am grateful for the fact that the Government have listened to the voices of young people and launched the national youth strategy, but let us not be under any illusions: there is a lot of work to do. The benefits of youth services and youth work are painfully obvious and fit perfectly into this Government's missions of economic growth, safer streets, an NHS fit for the future, and breaking down barriers to opportunities. I have spoken many times in this Chamber about mental health, especially raising concerns about young people. A fit-for-purpose and accessible youth service could make significant progress in addressing these growing challenges. We can give young people a space and the support they need in their communities to drown out the voice of misogynistic influences, which are poisoning our young men's minds and putting our sisters and daughters at risk. It can be a place for education and aspiration that protects our young people from the nefarious actors promoting violence and crime.

Let us be bold and decide to invest appropriately in our youth services for the long term. Let us replace the opaque statutory minimum with a specific investment minimum, ensure accessibility for all young people, including those with neurodivergence challenges, and set greater standards for those delivering services in order to protect the youth worker profession. Surely there can be no greater or more important investment in our nation than an investment in the next generation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am keen to get everybody in, so I will have to reduce the speaking limit to two minutes.

4.9 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for securing this critical debate. Youth services are integral to enabling young people to live safe, healthy and happy lives, but we cannot deny that issues and policy relating to children and young people often get pushed aside. We must recognise the contribution that they make and will make to our society by ensuring that they have access to youth services.

I was so pleased to hear the Government's announcement earlier this year on developing a new national youth strategy. Just last week, I held a strategy session in my

Ribble Valley constituency and heard from the fantastic Bowland high school council about what young people in my area need and want. It was a chance to hear them talk openly about their concerns. I was taken aback by the number of students who discussed the stress, worry and pressure that they felt, particularly in relation to their exams—I wish all those starting their GCSEs this week good luck. That emphasised the need for youth services to support young people through these big life stages. They also discussed the lack of places to go where they could feel truly safe.

Youth provision is personal for me. I have been a member and volunteer of Girlguiding since I started Brownies when I was seven, and I served on the Girlguiding national board for six years, so I have seen at first hand the impact that such youth movements can have on young people. I would like to think that my confidence and self-belief as I stand in this House today come from that provision. That is the power that good youth services have.

I highlight to the Government how powerful investment can be when it follows existing infrastructure and good practice. Many organisations, such as guides and scouts, have existed for over a century, but they are reliant on volunteering, and modern lifestyles cannot sustain that. The frameworks that those organisations have developed are cutting-edge, however, so I welcome building on those provisions.

One young woman I spoke to recently said that the private stage school she had enjoyed proved too expensive for her in the long run. I would love it if we subsidised great local youth offers where possible, rather than reinventing the wheel. Doing so would also support local businesses. We must ensure that youth provision is extended to our rural communities and can be accessed across the country. I would echo my—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Warinder Juss.

4.12 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Some 93% of young people who have attended a youth centre say that it has made a positive difference to their lives. They have come away happier, healthier and more confident in themselves and their futures. From reducing levels of knife crime and antisocial behaviour to improving the education attainment levels of our young people, youth services not only deliver outstanding benefits to our children but provide exceptional value for money.

The Way youth zone in my constituency is a clear example of the value of long-term investment in youth services. I have visited the Way many times and seen at first hand the extraordinary impact that the service has had on our young people. They have overcome their fears, discovered their passions and feel ready to make a positive impact on the world. One attendee said that the Way had inspired her to study cyber-security at university, while another confided that the Way was the only place where they could manage to get a hot meal for the day.

Those services are too fragile under the current funding system, however. They cannot survive on good will alone; they need consistent long-term funding. Over the past 14 years of Conservative government, when Government funding plummeted by more than 70%,

750 youth clubs have been lost in England. Our young people are paying the price: one in eight young people are not in full-time education or training, one in five have mental health conditions, and one in five are consistently absent from school. We must now make investment in our young people and youth services a priority.

The Way youth zone delivers an impressive return of £13 per £1 invested in children's wellbeing. I support the Government's plan for change, but I ask them to commit to sustainable, long-term funding for our youth services.

4.14 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) on securing this debate and on her excellent speech. Youth services are fundamental in my constituency, where in some wards, one in three children are living in poverty. That is completely unacceptable and shows how important the work of the child poverty taskforce will be.

Of course, funding for these vital services was cut by the Tories, but in Scotland, too, under the SNP there has been a 27% decrease in funding in real terms for youth work since 2015-16. This is failing the young people of Scotland who most need our support. Instead, the work of charities such as Fife Gingerbread and Includem should be supported with long-term funding arrangements. Includem's "Keeping Connected" project, delivered with Our Minds Matter, supports young people in Fife to promote positive mental wellbeing and reduce stress. Such support is all the more important when I understand that in some health board areas in Scotland, children and adolescent mental health services are no longer offering a pathway to a diagnosis of autism, which can cost more than £4,000 to secure privately. That is shocking.

The Scottish Government have been promising to deliver multi-year funding settlements for youth services for nearly 20 years but have failed to deliver beyond isolated examples—welcome as they are—including in Glasgow, and a national fair funding pilot. After 20 years, this should be the approach across the whole sector. Year-to-year funding is a barrier to recruitment and retention of staff, and their ability to build the trust and familiarity that is so vital to the young people they support. If we are to achieve a fairer, better society for all our young people, sustainable funding for these vital services will be essential at all levels of government throughout our country, and in particular those communities, including my own, where too many young people today still do not have the life chances that should be their right.

4.16 pm

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) on securing this debate. In Derby, there are so many organisations that work really hard with our fantastic young people, whether that is Children First Derby, which provides mentoring services and support for vulnerable young children and their families, or Community Action Derby, which, through its Derby Youth Alliance, brings together partners to support vulnerable young people in our community.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that we have some incredible youth services in Derby. He has mentioned some, but there is also the local YMCA, the Derby Youth Alliance and DE23 Active. Does he agree that it is disgraceful how many other services have closed because of Tory austerity cuts?

Baggy Shanker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The austerity cuts have affected so many groups in Derby that either no longer exist or have had to scale back their services, and it is truly shocking.

The Derby County Community Trust does fantastic work. Safe and Sound also does excellent work in our city. The Derby promise, which we recently launched, works so hard to offer aspirational experiences to young people in our communities but could do so much more if properly funded. We know that investing in the future starts with investing in our young people—charities such as the ones my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) and I have mentioned in Derby do exactly that—but the Tories ignored this. They decimated funding for youth services, as we have heard from speaker after speaker this afternoon. Derby is no different, with youth service spending falling by a staggering 81% since 2010. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that longer-term funding for youth services is crucial, so that we can enable every young person in Derby and across the UK to thrive?

4.18 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): In 2008, the then Labour Government launched the Myplace fund for the development of world-class youth centres in some of the most deprived areas of England. Thanks to that fund, and the vision and commitment of local businessman Brian Scowcroft, the Carlisle youth zone opened its doors in April 2011. Since then, the young people at Carlisle youth zone have hosted royal visitors, designed the livery for a local bus and put politicians like me through their paces.

But Carlisle youth zone is not just a place for young people to enjoy activities and socialise; it is also a place for parents, with its newly launched parent zone giving local parents a forum to discuss the issues affecting them, and it is a place for business, with a thriving patrons programme providing much-needed funding, as well as directly linking businesses with their potential future employees.

Carlisle youth zone shows what funding and partnership with business can achieve, and the impact that it can have—an impact that is best described in the words of one young user, who said:

"I have done so much independently that I did not think was possible outside of the Youth Zone. Without the support and encouragement from everyone, I do not think I would have had the confidence to go to university, work and interact with people...or learn so many skills."

That is the impact that good youth services can have, the opportunity they can deliver, and the potential they can unlock.

4.20 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): Let me start by recognising the work of local youth workers in Huddersfield. Despite the financial outlook, there are many incredible

[Harpreet Uppal]

organisations, including Positive Stepz, Conscious Youth hub, Central Stars youth club, Team Kick Start, Yorkshire Community Development, Empower, Boxpower, Temple Well-Being, Kirklees youth alliance, and Kirklees council's detached youth team. I also want to mention the foundations of Huddersfield Town football club and Huddersfield Giants rugby league club, which work with young people across our communities. Those organisations deliver outstanding services, offering young people opportunities to thrive. However, they continue to face financial constraints and constant short-term funding rounds.

We are seeing the consequences of the reduction in youth service provision, as organised criminal gangs lure young children into county line networks and organised criminality. Sadly, we have seen the devastating consequences of knife crime in Huddersfield, with young lives lost, too many parents dealing with consequences that no parent should ever face, communities broken, and too many children and young people left with mental scars. To recover from those years of neglect, youth services need sustainable long-term funding. When I met young people from Huddersfield, they said they have found it increasingly difficult to access work experience opportunities since the covid pandemic. They also told me that too many of those opportunities came down to informal parent networks, which see those from the lowest-income backgrounds lose out.

In his Labour conference speech in 2023, the Prime Minister said:

"Imagine if a whole country said we back your potential... Then look what we could build. A country where every contribution is equally respected. Where you don't have to change who you are just to get on. Where whatever your background you feel secure."

We must now make that our driving ambition.

4.22 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for securing this debate, in which we have very much been reminded of the importance of making choices, including political choices. I pay tribute to North Lanarkshire council and the community learning development team, because they have continued to invest in youth work. In the last year alone, 1,200 young people have been involved in localised groups in my community, accessing Scottish Qualifications Authority qualifications that they are not able to do outwith.

I particularly pay tribute to the group of people who are not accessing youth centres and emphasise the importance of being able to engage with young people where they are. Detached youth work is growing again for young people who have no desire to be inside those buildings—the most vulnerable people. Building positive relationships with youth workers can help them to make better-informed choices, reduce risk-taking behaviour, lower complaints of antisocial behaviour, close pathways to criminal activity and make our communities safer. That is happening in the Carbrain part of my constituency.

In the brief time available to me, I also want to talk about Kirkintilloch high school, which has seen the benefit of a youth development worker working alongside teachers. Youth development workers are trusted professionals in a different way, and they work closely

with young people who do not engage with the people they have to call "Miss" or "Mr"; they get those relationships, and they should also be valued in this debate.

4.24 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for securing this important debate. The issue is close to my heart because I spent many years as a youth worker in Norfolk, including working for Norfolk charity the Benjamin Foundation, as the manager of the Meet Up café in Thetford. I pay tribute to youth workers across the country, including in my county of Norfolk. It is a rewarding job, but it comes with many challenges and frustrations.

Youth work has borne the brunt of many cuts, and in too many places services are now a shadow of their former selves. Under the previous Government, there was a real-terms cut of more than £1 billion in spending on youth services among local authorities in England, so no wonder more than 50% of all council-run youth centres closed. I watched in disbelief in Norfolk as our Conservative-controlled county council entirely scrapped the county's youth services, including important detached youth work, and closed the Connexions training and careers advice service.

Filling that void in many places were charities, including the Swan youth project in Downham Market in my constituency, which I have visited on a number of occasions. It provides a whole-system youth group, helping with a variety of needs. Anna and the team at Swan provide a crucial service for young people in that area, helping to provide support not just for young people, but for the whole family, offering a truly holistic service.

I am pleased that this Government have a bold ambition to remove barriers to opportunity for young people. We need to respond through both national and local government, and under this Labour Government we are meeting the challenge head on.

4.25 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for securing the debate.

Far be it from me to come to the Chamber and speak only about myself, but I want to share my personal experience. I have often said that, had it not been for the youth workers in my community, I would not be stood here as the Member of Parliament for Hertford and Stortford. I dropped out of sixth form at 17 and went straight to work in Hertford town centre. I wanted to find my path, but I was left feeling directionless, struggling to connect with the right opportunities. I cannot put into words the difference that the support of local authority youth workers—like Russell, who I have mentioned in the Chamber before—made to me, as a young person who could not see the way forward.

A young person in the same position today will not have access to a similar level. Why is that? It is not because our youth workers are any less passionate or determined to support our young people. No, it is because when the cuts came under the last Government, youth services were first on the chopping block, leaving a generation of young people behind.

In Hertfordshire, there has been a 50% real-terms cut to youth services spending since 2010-11. One in eight young people are not in employment, education or training. They are at the sharp end of crises in mental health and in provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, with charities and voluntary organisations straining every sinew to fill the gaps and ensure that our young people do not miss out. That is the legacy of the Conservative party when it comes to young people, and it is a real disappointment to see Conservative Benches so empty this afternoon.

In my remaining time, I would like to pay tribute to the Thirst youth café and the FUTUREhope group—charities and voluntary organisations that have provided fantastic support in our community. It was a pleasure to visit them when we were hosting consultations in my constituency on the national youth strategy. I hugely welcome the work that this Government are undertaking to support our young people, and I hope to play a role in that.

4.27 pm

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): As a maths teacher, a former councillor and a dad of two wonderful children, I know the importance of youth provision. We have heard from Members from across the House that the 73% cut in youth funding since 2010 has had devastating consequences; in Leeds, that figure is 83%. Leeds has managed to negate some of the consequences with excellent work through the Child Friendly Leeds initiative, and our youth service workers know how to squeeze their budgets until the pips squeak—they know how to stretch out their finances and deliver for young people in my area—but they can only do so much. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) said, a patchwork of organisations has come in to fill the gaps. There are many such organisations in Leeds South West and Morley that I want to pay tribute to, including volunteer-led sports teams that have offered provision for young people, such as Wortley football club, East Ardsley cricket club and Morley rugby club—I could go on.

I also pay tribute to Leeds United football club. Over the past few years, I have worked with the club, which has agreed to purchase a piece of land in my constituency that it is going to transform into Wortley's Wembley. It will provide training opportunities for young people and a hub for so many in my community to come together and play sport. We might find the next Calvin Phillips—who knows? Hopefully this time he or she will stay at Leeds.

I would like the Minister to consider several recommendations on youth provision. We need stronger statutory protection: “as is reasonably practicable” is the ultimate get-out clause, and local authorities do not necessarily have to follow it, so we must consider changing that. We need to increase funding—the 6.8% increase in funding was welcome. We need to ensure that we tailor our services towards special educational needs students and young people, because they deserve youth provision too.

4.29 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons), a fellow ageing millennial, for securing this

debate. I speak not only as a parent who would love to see well-funded youth services, but as somebody who has witnessed the consequences of short-term thinking when it comes to youth services.

In 2014, Conservative-led Staffordshire county council took the callous and short-sighted decision to close our youth service completely. The complete emptiness of the Opposition Benches speaks volumes about whether the Conservatives' attitude to youth services has improved in the past 11 years. For them, this was a line on a budget sheet, but for communities in my county it was the closure of 38 youth clubs and the loss of 400 jobs. However, the real cost of these decisions lies not in numbers but in the experiences of young people in my constituency. The day-to-day impact of cuts often goes unnoticed, but the long-term impact is impossible to ignore.

As an antidote to the gloomy picture that I may have painted, I will mention a couple of the incredible organisations that, despite the closure of our youth service, are doing incredible work. The Staffordshire Council of Voluntary Youth Services, fondly known as SCVYS, offers practical support to charities and local groups and ensures that the voices of children and young people are heard. The VYSIONS youth service was created by children and young people in Brereton and Rugeley and provides a range of programmes and activities, from shooting and fishing to arts and crafts, in some of our most deprived white working-class communities.

I welcome the investment announced by the Government but, in closing, I urge the Minister to ensure that that funding is front-loaded in areas, such as Staffordshire, that have no council youth services left whatsoever. I sympathise with colleagues who represent inner-city areas and have seen deep cuts, but I ask them to imagine a world in which their youth service no longer exists at all: that is the world that my constituents have lived in for the past eleven years. All of us here have the highest hopes for our young people, and I am incredibly glad that once again we have a Government that do too.

4.31 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Let us be frank: this generation has been robbed of the opportunities that it deserves. Let us think about the record of the last Government, because others have touched on it: child trust funds were cut, Sure Start centres were closed, school budgets were cut in real terms, playing fields were sold off, and free swimming, the education maintenance allowance and Connexions were cut. That is terrible.

The statistic that stands out to me the most is the fact that youth services in County Durham were cut by 80% between 2010 and 2020. It is no wonder that one in eight young people are not in education, employment or training, that we have a five-year waiting list for CAMHS and that one in five people have a mental health condition. That has to change. I pay tribute to some of the excellent people and groups in my constituency who step up, such as the Auckland youth and community centre, led by Maxine Jordan and her team; those who run the scouts, the guides and church groups that provide youth services; and the parents who simply stepped up to fill a gap. However, the truth is that that is not enough, and we know that.

[Sam Rushworth]

I call on the Government to get to grips with this issue. I know that this Government have had a terrible economic inheritance, with higher debt and tax and nothing to show for it in public services. *[Interruption.]* I think the shadow Minister is pointing out that growth is up under this Government. This will take funding and legislative change on statutory duty, because we cannot allow this generation to be wasted. We owe it to this generation to keep the promise of Britain that it will do better, not worse, than our generation.

4.33 pm

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Having dedicated spaces, support and community for young people can transform the trajectory of someone's life. I and many Members here, I am sure, benefited from having a youth provision. I took part in activities that I would not have done otherwise. The previous Government stripping funding away from local authorities was a travesty, because it meant that youth services, which are vital but mainly discretionary spend, were often one of the first things to be cut. Our child and adolescent mental health services are overstretched, and too often young people have been left to fall through the cracks. Investment in youth services is therefore not an extra; it is a form of frontline mental health support.

The need for funding for youth services in Derbyshire Dales is particularly clear. Since 2010, spending on youth services in Derbyshire has fallen by two thirds in real terms. Those cuts have had particularly damaging implications for rural areas, as young people in rural communities face limited public transport options and more challenging access to employment. Young people today are growing up experiencing the negative impacts of social media addiction alongside the loss of youth services. As a result, they are experiencing a toxic cocktail of challenges that are having an impact on their wellbeing. A YouGov poll found that more than 65% of adolescents said they had felt alone "often" or "sometimes" in the last fortnight. With youth centres and community spaces being closed across the country, it is no wonder that young people are crying out for support.

Since 2010, there has been a fall of more than 50% in the number of young people admitted to A&E with injuries sustained outside. Of course, that is a good thing, but it implies that young people are just not going out and participating activities as they used to. Youth services do not just provide a lifeline for young people; they also set them up with skills and support for life. Very often a youth worker could be the one who turns around a person's life. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker—I have run out of time.

4.35 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Youth services across our country have been decimated, and we all see the consequences unfolding, often tragically, on our streets. Since 2010, funding for youth services has fallen by 73% as a direct result of austerity. This issue is deeply personal to me, as I grew up with a youth club on my doorstep in Ashmore Park, one of around 30 local youth centres that we have lost over the past 15 years. The closure of that safe space left a real hole in the community, one that I was proud to serve years later as a deputy headteacher.

Despite that widespread loss, there are still community efforts that forge ahead, such as the Loft youth club at the Hive in New Invention. That youth club is run by people who care deeply, who know our community and who keep going, often without the security of long-term funding. A shining example city-wide is The Way youth zone. The Way offers more than just activities; it offers friendship and opportunity and makes memories. It is powered by passionate staff who believe in our youth.

I think of my young constituent Kira, who found her safe space, her voice and her confidence through The Way. Through inclusive programmes and nurturing mentors, Kira has grown into an incredible young person who is determined to give back. Her story is one of many, and it is testament to what is possible when we invest properly in our youth.

We must shift from crisis response to prevention, which means a dedicated, long-term funding stream to protect youth services.

4.37 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): For many of our communities, youth services are a lifeline. They provide essential support to young people, helping them to navigate the complexities of adolescence and the transition into adulthood, but unfortunately those services have disappeared across the country. The decline of youth services in towns such as Halesowen has not made headlines, but it is being felt every single day.

I recently sat down with young people aged between 16 and 25—school leavers and graduates, some with master's degrees, all full of ambition but struggling to find support. These are young people who have worked hard, who have dreams and aspirations and are eager to contribute to society, yet they find themselves facing barriers at every turn. They told me that there is nowhere safe to go after school, that mental health services take months to access, and that they are sending out CV after CV but getting nothing back. One young woman said:

"It feels like we're expected to survive, not succeed."

In many ways, she is right.

In Halesowen there is no council-run youth centre. That is not a coincidence; it is the result of political choices. Under Conservative-run Dudley council, over £42 million has been cut from local services. In 2023 the borough's youth service was shut down entirely, with youth workers redeployed, outreach teams cut and community assets sold off. Council documents show 157 service reductions, and youth provision was the first to go. We know that such cuts have real-world consequences.

The National Youth Agency has found that youth workers play a critical role in preventing crime, improving mental health and keeping young people in education, training or work. When that support is taken away, the risks grow. We see higher rates of youth unemployment, increased mental health issues and a rise in antisocial behaviour.

The young people I spoke to are not asking for favours; they are asking for fairness and a Government who have not given up on them. They want to be seen, heard and supported. They want to know that their future matters. We owe them better, and it is time that we delivered.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank hon. Members for working with me—we got all the Back-Bench contributions in. We now come to the Front Benchers. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.40 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) on securing this debate, because youth services are critical infrastructure in our communities. They are not luxuries, or a nice-to-have; they are a vital lifeline, offering young people safety, support and opportunity at the time they need it most.

There can be no doubt that we are, perhaps more than ever before, engaged in a battle for the hearts and minds of young people. There have been debates and panics in this place and throughout the nation for generations concerning the challenges facing young people, but what is different in this moment is the sheer scale of the collapse in physical community spaces and, as we are here to focus on, youth services.

Many great points have been raised already, but I will focus on the most egregious consequence of not protecting and enhancing youth services: knife crime. In the fight against knife crime in London, these services are vital, because knife crime is not only a criminal justice issue but a public health issue. Like any other public health crisis, the solution lies in early intervention, community-based support and sustained investment. That starts with our youth services. In the past 15 years, youth services across England have been cut by more than 70%. That is more than half of youth centres gone, thousands of trained youth workers lost, and communities left to pick up the pieces.

Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that when a youth centre closes, young people aged 10 to 17 become 14% more likely to commit a crime. In areas already battling poverty, inequality and deprivation, a youth centre can mean the difference between safety and tragedy. In London we saw more than 16,000 incidents of knife crime last year. That is thousands of families affected and lives changed forever.

We know that young people susceptible to committing this form of violence require sustained relationships with services that can help them choose safer paths and that can offer children that vital third space when schools are struggling to maintain a learning environment and home is a worryingly hostile place. They are services that protect young people's mental health in such troubling environments, and it is fitting that we are having this debate in Mental Health Awareness Week. Perpetuating the situation by failing to boost local council finances, whereby many councils have no choice but to cut youth services, is worse than short-termism; it is a failure to allow councils and other key stakeholders in the community to do what they want to do: invest in young people's futures and keep them away from crime.

In Sutton and Cheam I have heard that many skilled youth workers are deterred from working in these declining services, and not just because they are not equipped to do their jobs properly, but because the financial pressures mean short-termism in grants from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and a reliance on temporary contracts.

We all know that local authorities are under immense pressure. Many are on the brink and, without proper funding from central Government, they simply cannot deliver what our communities need, so that must come first. But we Liberal Democrats are calling for more. First, we are calling for a statutory duty on all local authorities to provide youth services and pre-charge diversion schemes for young people up to the age of 25. Right now, access to youth diversion—the very intervention that steers young people away from offending—is a postcode lottery. That is utterly unacceptable. By making it a statutory duty, we would ensure that every young person in every community can access support before it is too late, not just after a crime has been committed.

We also want to see a national youth strategy that is co-produced with young people themselves, not cooked up in Whitehall without their voices. If we are serious about solving the knife crime crisis, we must treat young people not as risks to be managed, but as partners in prevention, with huge potential to be realised. The public health approach demands early intervention, but early intervention cannot happen if youth services are simply not there any more.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

4.43 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for securing this debate. I know that she has regularly championed this issue since coming to this place. As Lord Cameron famously said,

"I was the future once."—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 294.]

Although I am no longer viewed as one of the younger Members in this place, I am grateful for the opportunity, on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition, and in the limited time available, to close today's important debate on the long-term funding of youth services. This subject goes to the heart of how we support the next generation to thrive, contribute and belong, and it is crucial to the future of our great country.

In government, we allocated £560 million over three years to the national youth guarantee, which ensured that every young person in England aged between 11 and 18 had regular access to clubs and activities, something to do after school, experiences away from home, and opportunities to volunteer. As part of that, we allocated £300 million to youth facilities, improving and developing over 300 of them. My right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) always made sure that young people were around the table when we made decisions that would affect them. We made sure that young people were not just talked about but listened to, and next week the shadow ministerial team will host a youth roundtable as part of our wider policy renewal.

I want to be clear that Conservative Members believe passionately in the power of civil society. We believe in the social fabric that holds this country together—not just the big institutions of state, but the small charities, volunteers, faith groups, sports coaches and mentors who give their time not for profit, but for purpose. They include such organisations as the National Citizen Service, which the Labour Government have cancelled. More

[Mr Louie French]

than 750,000 young people participated in that programme over 13 years, and it had a 93% satisfaction rate, which is something that this Government can only dream of.

We recognise the vital role of youth workers, who are often unsung and under-resourced, but who are always on the frontline. We must be honest: money alone will not solve all the challenges facing young people. A cheque from Whitehall, however large, will not guarantee that a child finds a mentor, stays off the streets or gets a first step on the ladder. However, since coming into office, this Government have made it more difficult for every single charity in this country to provide their essential services. The hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) recognised that in his speech, and he was the only Member who spoke about the national insurance hike.

As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, and as the Chancellor knew when she made her decision, youth charities, like all employers, pay national insurance contributions, and they need to find additional funds to cover the rise in those contributions. According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the changes could cost the charity sector an additional £1.4 billion per year. For smaller charities with limited reserves and limited core funding, that will seem like an insurmountable challenge. Yesterday, we heard from representatives of Place2Be, a leading children's mental health charity that has provided expert, school-based mental health support over the past 30 years. They told us that thanks to this Labour Government's national insurance hike, they now have to find an extra half a million pounds every single year, just to pay tax. As a direct result of this Government's decisions, it is likely that fewer children will receive the care and support that they need in an environment that is familiar to them.

That is why we supported exempting charities with an annual income of less than £1 million from the national insurance rise. However, Labour Members cruelly voted against that, and they must reflect on that, now that they are in government; they are in control. When the Conservatives were in government, we did not just talk about aspiration; we built the conditions for it. We empowered local communities and launched countrywide programmes, such as the National Citizen Service, which had a proven track record of success before this Government closed it down. The Labour Government are dismantling the NCS. In doing so, they are actively and deliberately limiting the life chances of this generation and generations to come, without giving us any answers on what comes next.

I hope that this Government will start to think properly about young people. Instead of making young people's lives more difficult, the Government should put them at the heart of policymaking, and should reverse their callous tax on charities, youth organisations and businesses, which will likely mean a rise in youth unemployment this year. It is time for actions, not words.

4.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) on securing this important debate on long-term investment in the youth sector, following a similar debate

in Westminster Hall a few months ago. I am grateful to all Members who contributed to this debate. The shadow Minister perhaps did not read the room again—although it is rather empty on his side of the House. I will address some of his points later.

I want to make it clear that this Government value youth services. We know that they can play a vital role in young people's lives, supporting their health, wellbeing and personal development. We also know that the support that youth services provide is under pressure. Since 2010, local councils have reduced spending on youth services by 73%. That is equal to the sector losing over £1 billion. That has meant fewer jobs, less co-ordination and too many young people missing out on the benefits of high-quality youth services. We are of course navigating a challenging financial period, but even in tough times, our commitment to finding long-term, sustainable ways of delivering effective support remains the same.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East opened the debate by painting a very powerful picture. She spoke about having the freedom to fail, and speaking as someone who grew up just before social media, I really appreciate that point. Perhaps, in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), that makes me an ageing millennial; I am not sure how I feel about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East also spoke about the huge mental health challenges, about one in five young people having a mental health condition, and about 16 to 24-year-olds being the loneliest people in society. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) echoed that, and this is of course Mental Health Awareness Week.

I recognise the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East made about opportunity existing everywhere, but too often support is a postcode lottery, and we want to change that. As this debate has highlighted, young people face increasingly complex challenges, from mental ill health and the cost of living to worries about crime and violence. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), made that point powerfully.

Supporting young people and ensuring that their voices are heard is a challenge not just for national Government, but at every level of government. Strong local leadership is of course essential to delivering high-quality youth services. That is why, in the coming weeks, we will launch the local youth transformation pilot, working with approximately 12 local authorities and their partners across England. The pilot will support councils to take a leading role in planning and providing youth services that meet the needs of their communities. It will offer tailored support to rebuild local capability, improve co-ordination and ensure that services are aligned with councils' responsibilities and young people's wellbeing.

Many hon. Members have mentioned examples from their constituency, including my hon. Friends the Members for Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis), for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane), for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker), for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) and for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger). My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) spoke very powerfully, and I was pleased to visit the Way Youth Zone with him last year. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) gave an impressive list of groups in her constituency, and I know she is really passionate about this subject, as she led a recent Westminster Hall debate on a similar

topic. I heard Members' speeches, but as I have not responded to all of them individually, I am happy to meet or write to them.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Stephanie Peacock: In the interests of time, I will not.

As the Member of Parliament for Barnsley South, I know from my area about the huge contribution and value that youth services and provision bring. I am thinking of organisations such as the Barnsley youth choir, through which hundreds of young people are given amazing experiences, opportunities and skills. Over the last couple of months, I have met the Barnsley Youth Council, the Barnsley YMCA and ChileyPep to hear their ideas for how the Government can support young people. Those conversations have made it clear that we need a long-term national direction. That is why we are developing a new 10-year national youth strategy, which will set out a clear vision for supporting young people now and in the future. The strategy will guide work across Government Departments, and it will help make sure that policies and services that affect young people are better joined up. It will also move us away from a one-size-fits-all approach. We know that what works in one area may not work in another, and the strategy will support flexible solutions that reflect local needs. That important point about joined-up services was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Katie White).

We are co-producing the strategy with young people. Their voices are shaping the priorities and the outcomes. We want to put more power in the hands of young people and their communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) spoke about the power and role of the youth voice. Over 14,000 young people filled in our survey as part of our youth strategy work, so I assure the shadow Minister that we are putting young people at the heart of our approach.

A long-term approach is essential. Young people deserve consistent support now and over the next decade. Of course, youth workers, both paid and voluntary, are central to delivering that support. They build trusted relationships, strengthen communities and provide the vital support that young people rely on. However, after years of cuts, the workforce is under pressure and secure roles are harder to find. As we develop the national youth strategy, we are focused on rebuilding the workforce through better training, recruitment and long-term support. This is our chance to ensure that youth workers and volunteers are equipped, supported and recognised for the important work that they do. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) spoke powerfully from his experience. In partnership with the National Youth Agency, we are helping more people, especially those from under-represented backgrounds, to gain recognised qualifications.

It is clear that youth services need stable, long-term funding to thrive. Today, the Secretary of State has announced our funding plans for this financial year. I direct hon. Members to her written ministerial statement for further details, but I would highlight the £28 million that we will put into programmes that help young people to grow, gain confidence and feel connected. That funding will expand access to trusted groups, such as the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and Uniformed Youth; go towards exploring and outdoor learning

opportunities; and boost open access to local youth services. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) spoke about the huge benefit of being outside. Over £85 million in capital funding is being allocated to the better youth spaces programme, including £26 million in new funding to renovate and equip youth centres across the country. That, of course, builds on the work being done through the youth investment fund.

The future of Government funding beyond this financial year will be shaped by our work on the national youth strategy and dependent on spending review outcomes. We want the funding to be as impactful as possible, which is why we are looking at what young people need most. In addition to Government funding, £100 million from the dormant asset scheme is being invested in youth outcomes between 2024 and 2028. All the measures that I have outlined, from strengthening the workforce to creating safe spaces and developing a long-term national youth strategy, reflect this Government's commitment to young people. The work of my Department will allow the development of the young futures hub, the youth guarantee and the curriculum review, to name just a few initiatives. We are committed to working across Government for our young people. We owe it to this generation to keep striving for a system that is there when they need it, not just now but in the future.

4.55 pm

Natasha Irons: I thank the Minister for her response. It is amazing to hear about the extra funding going in, and the Government's approach to ensuring a long-term sustainable future for our youth services. It is a different approach from that taken by the previous Government, who ripped apart that network. Given the themes of today's debate, and the piecemeal, patchwork approach taken by the previous Government, it is great for us all that this Government are taking such a different approach.

I pay tribute to Members from across the House—although obviously not those on the Conservative Benches, because they could not be bothered to turn up. I will not name everybody individually, because I think we had over 26 contributions, but I would like to highlight some of the key themes that came up, including the need for a long-term strategy, which the Minister spoke about, and the need for statutory back-up. None of us wants a repeat of previous years and the mistakes of the previous Government, who took away support and the cover that youth services provide. We need to give them statutory back-up. The Minister is putting extra investment into this space; I urge her to really back up these services with the statutory protections that they deserve.

I will end with an African proverb:

"If a child is not embraced by the village, it will burn it down to feel its warmth."

If we do not learn the lessons of the past, we will continue to see the mental health of our young people decline, and their experience will continue to be the unhappiest in Europe. No one who attended today's debate wants that to continue, so let us learn the lessons and have long-term sustainable funding for our youth services.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Very touching.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the long-term funding of youth services.

Coroner Services: West Midlands

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)

4.58 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to address an issue that continues to cause deep pain and disruption to our communities across Birmingham and the west midlands, and to speak about an under-appreciated service that we will all turn to at some point in our life. The amount of time that passes between death and burial is not a matter of mere procedure or bureaucracy; it is, first and foremost, a matter of dignity, faith, and human decency, so we must afford our coroner services the urgent and serious attention that they deserve. For many, the news of a loved one passing brings not only sorrow, but an immediate sense of duty. In both the Muslim and Jewish traditions, burial cannot be postponed without consequence. It is a religious imperative to bury the deceased as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours. That is a fundamental and non-negotiable feature of those faiths. When that process is delayed—not for hours, but for days and sometimes weeks—it causes a deep wound. These families are not just dealing with a loss, but being kept in suspense, both spiritually and emotionally, unable to complete the final rites that bring the peace, closure and healing that we all deserve when we lose a loved one.

What is worse is that these delays have become commonplace. They are no longer the exception; increasingly, they are the norm. Every week, I hear from grieving families in my constituency—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)

Ayoub Khan: Every week, I hear from grieving families who are tired, frustrated and often feel helpless. Their stories are heartbreaking. Many do not know where to turn. They call their councillors and their MPs, and they are right to do so. When the system fails them, it is our job to listen, to act and to advocate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): On coroner services in the west midlands, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: I spoke to the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) before the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker; he and I were in a debate in Westminster Hall just this afternoon. Coroner services, whether it be in the west midlands or anywhere else in the United Kingdom, are an issue. I told the hon. Gentleman what my intervention was going to be, by the way, and he okayed it; I was happy to do so.

The hon. Gentleman may be aware that there are only three full-time coroners in Northern Ireland. With the historic legacy of the troubles taking up time and the coroner stepping outside his remit, does the hon. Gentleman not agree that, in both his constituency and mine, the need for the coroner must be focused on and

that they should be available to those who need them most? Furthermore, does he agree that there is a need to increase the number of coroners in order to allow families to have the facts of the case when they need them, to allow the healing to begin?

Ayoub Khan: I really appreciate the intervention from the hon. Gentleman, who makes a poignant point. The service does require modernisation. In Birmingham and Solihull we have one senior coroner, two area coroners and seven assistant coroners to look after a population of approximately 1.5 million, according to the 2021 census. In comparison, in the hon. Gentleman's patch, there are four coroners for 1.9 million people, which is simply not enough.

As I said, these families are not just dealing with the loss of a family member, but being kept in suspense, both spiritually and emotionally.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): In May 2024, more than 6,000 inquests in this country had been delayed by more than a year. As the hon. Gentleman appreciates, each of those inquests represents a grieving family unable to find closure, plan funerals or settle estates. Does he agree that this Government should now act to clear the backlog and to provide extra funding? This situation is nothing short of a crisis.

Ayoub Khan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; I was going to quote those figures in my speech. He is absolutely right that those 6,000 delays have a direct impact on not just families who want closure, but current cases that need to be worked on. The time spent by the coroner on inquests will naturally impact the basic sign-off of documents in other cases, and where the coroner is not available to sign off, families will have to wait to effect burial. We need modernisation, of course, and I seek support from the Minister on how we can modernise the service.

As I said, I hear of grieving families every week. They are tired, frustrated and often feel helpless, and turn to elected representatives for intervention. I want to share a story from my constituency that highlights the human impacts of these delays. A prominent brain surgeon had lost his father. The funeral, which should have taken place within a day, was delayed for over a week due to coroner backlogs. That surgeon, bound by faith and family duty, remained in mourning and could not return to work until the burial had taken place. His father's death was more than a personal loss; it had a professional consequence, too. Appointments were cancelled and surgeries were delayed. There are countless examples of where family members, and extended family members, have to remain in mourning, which means that they are not able to do the work that they would ordinarily do.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for his very powerful speech. Does he agree that any death is very stressful and distressing, but when it is a child, everything becomes amplified? A child's post-mortem requires a specialist paediatric medical examiner, and a shortage of them in the east midlands, rather than in the west midlands, means that bodies are sometimes taken to other cities, and this is further stressing and distressful for the family. More paediatric medical examiners are required.

Ayoub Khan: I had not actually thought about the loss of a child, but, of course, that must be extremely distressing, especially if the family have to wait for a child's body to be sent to another part of the country for examinations to take place. In raising this matter in the Chamber today, I hope the Minister will take on board the points that I have made and understand why we believe that there is a desperate need for modernisation, which deals with the issues felt by communities up and down this country.

Let me return to my personal experience. Patients were left waiting because the brain surgeon was unable to attend to them while he was still in mourning. This is what happens when we allow systemic inefficiencies to go unaddressed. They begin to erode the very services on which we all rely and impose hidden costs that cannot be measured, but are there none the less.

This brings us to the heart of the issue: what is causing these delays. There are several factors at play here. Among them is the state of our coroners service. Quite frankly, it is under-resourced, understaffed and overstretched. The people working in this sector are not to blame. They are doing incredible work under immense pressure, but the system is in desperate need of transformation. Let us look at the facts across England and Wales.

Shokat Adam: My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. I would like to echo that fact: Leicester's coroner services are doing an excellent job. One reason is that the community and any burial committee, especially in the Muslim Burial Council of Leicester, have created a real relationship, thereby overriding any misunderstandings and improving proficiency.

Ayoub Khan: Of course, it is important that all communities form a bond with their local coroner, but, ultimately, if the coroner and their staff are limited in numbers, there is always going to be a backlog and delay in processing the very important work of identifying the cause of death and then releasing the deceased.

Let us look at the facts. Across England and Wales, more than 6,000 coroner cases were pending for more than a year—four times higher than in 2017. Birmingham and the west midlands were among the worst affected. Our population is growing. Our communities are increasingly diverse, with more residents who require specific religious considerations, yet the infrastructure has not kept pace. The Government's funding commitments have not matched rising everyday demand. We do not have enough pathologists and we do not have enough administrative support. We do not have the essential tools that could make a significant difference—tools such as MRI and CT scanning machines, which are used for the sole purpose of conducting non-invasive autopsies. However, we do have access to these facilities, but they are not dedicated to the coroner. It is by taking advantage of technological innovations such as those that we can make life easier for families whose faith prohibits invasive post-mortem procedures. With the right equipment, we can respect those beliefs and still get the data required by law.

Another major issue is the absence of weekend services. In most parts of the country, coroners offices operates Monday to Friday, but people do not stop dying on Fridays. Deaths occur every day. When services close

for the weekend, a death that occurs on Friday night may not be processed until Monday or even Tuesday. For families who are religiously obligated to bury their loved ones immediately, the delay is deeply distressing. Introducing weekend operation for coroner and burial services is not a luxury but a necessity. In Birmingham we did have a coroner who would give up his time on weekends, but that has stopped.

To speak plainly about another area of concern, MPs are increasingly being told not to contact a coroner's office on behalf of constituents. We are told that it constitutes interference. In fact, that is set out in the code of conduct for parliamentarians. I reject that completely. MPs are not asking coroners to change their findings or trying to influence investigations. We are not questioning their professionalism or their judgment. We are simply asking for speed, efficiency and compassion. To suggest that this is interference misunderstands both the role of an MP and the seriousness of the issue. We must be allowed to advocate for our constituents.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his wise words. We are all of different faiths, whether Christian or other faiths, and some people have no faith. A person's religion must be paramount when it comes to the coroner's work, and the coroner must ensure that a burial can take place within the period of time that the person's faith indicates. I would have thought that is something that cannot be ignored under human rights and equality. Perhaps there is another way of looking at that.

Ayoub Khan: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. There is significant case law that identifies this specific need, and coroners do abide by that and try their best to assist when expediency is required because of religion. Unfortunately, it comes back to the bottleneck, where coroners want to do the best they can within the structure in which they are working, but they are limited by resources. That comes down to issues such as staffing.

When families have nowhere to turn, it should not be inappropriate for parliamentarians to contact the coroner to assist the suffering or grieving family. Will the Minister please review the part of the code of conduct for parliamentarians that relates to communicating with a coroner?

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): One way that we in Dewsbury and Batley try to overcome this restriction—a rule I also could not understand—is by working with our not-for-profit and charitable funeral services, especially in religious communities. Organisations such as Fisabilillah and Sadaqah Jariyah build a relationship with the coroner to try to facilitate communication with families who reach out to MPs. Does the hon. Member agree that these organisations in communities should be congratulated and thanked for their service, and that the communication channel he speaks of should be formalised and made permissible?

Ayoub Khan: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member. Up and down the country many organisations such as undertakers provide that support mechanism. Unfortunately, from my personal experience—this is certainly the case in Birmingham, and I am confident it is in the west midlands region too—a family's first port of call is their local councillor or parliamentarian, and there is an expectation from the community or the

[Ayoub Khan]

family that they will make representations to the coroner. If elected representatives are unable to have that communication because of the code of conduct, our very function is undermined. It is important that organisations maintain the relationships that they have with coroners, but it is also important to give parliamentarians the ability to communicate with the coroner directly. To ensure that the services meet the demand of their communities, they need additional funding. Coroner services require transformation, but resourcing for that transformation is important. That means hiring more pathologists.

Warinder Juss: I am grateful to the hon. Member for allowing me to intervene again. Apart from him, I think I am the only Member from the west midlands in the Chamber; my constituency is Wolverhampton West. Does he agree that there appears to be a postcode lottery, as the time it takes to process an inquest ranges from 10 weeks to 76 weeks depending on where a person lives? If we do have a postcode lottery, does he agree that we must address that by having a national performance framework for our coroner services and targeting funding for underperforming areas?

Ayoub Khan: Of course, if there is a disparity in the level of service received, there ought to be some mechanism for identifying where that is occurring and an understanding as to why. If it is because of resources and manpower, that must be addressed. I fully agree with the hon. Member's analysis. It is a shame that we do not have other parliamentarians from the west midlands in the Chamber. I am confident that some will have received an enormous amount of contact and huge numbers of calls throughout their tenure, as I do.

One of the issues is resourcing, including those MRI and CT scan facilities available for post-mortems and dedicated to that purpose. Although our coroner in Birmingham and Solihull has access to those devices, unfortunately they are not dedicated to that task, and a deceased may lie in the coroner's mortuary until a facility becomes available, which can take days, and sometimes even longer.

A transformation also means ensuring that services operate not just five but seven days a week, because death, grief and religious obligations do not adhere to the normal working week. We also need to develop a clear protocol across all local authorities that recognises the need for expedited burials in line with religious beliefs. There must be training, awareness and sensitivity in coroner services.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): As I recently had the experience of bereavement in the family, may I ask the hon. Member to join me in recognising the exceptional service of the Blackburn coroner service and its vital contribution to our community?

Ayoub Khan: I can say confidently that the coroners I have worked with work tirelessly, and often outside their working hours, to deliver the best possible service, but the limitations on them are of concern. Although coroners are doing their level best, they are limited—certainly in Birmingham—in what they can do if they

do not have the resources. I hope that the Minister can take that issue away for review and support. I agree with my hon. Friend about the good work that coroners do up and down the country.

There must be training, awareness and sensitivity within coroner services, registrars and local councils. For example, in Birmingham we have a relationship whereby there is a rapid release system as hospitals understand the sensitivities and do their utmost to ensure that a body is released. Unfortunately, to give another example, one family were left grieving because a deceased's body could not be given to the undertaker at Queen Elizabeth hospital because there was no individual who could do the handover. The family had to wait over the weekend just to get the deceased's body. We need to look at how we can work across all sectors to ensure that they are properly resourced and we avoid any unnecessary delay.

Iqbal Mohamed: The lack of resources and coroners across the country has a knock-on effect on the NHS. There is an additional administrative and logistical burden from holding bodies and dealing with families who are getting in contact every hour, many times. That takes staff away from frontline services. Does the hon. Member agree that having the right level of coroner services would reduce the burden of knock-on costs on the NHS?

Ayoub Khan: I agree, but I am conscious of the time, so I will swiftly wrap up my speech.

This is not a partisan issue. It is not even a religious issue. This is a human issue. It affects people of faith and of no faith. No one deserves to wait weeks or longer to say goodbye to those they love. Let us act not just with policy, but with purpose. Let us fund, reform and rebuild a system that respects every community, honours every tradition and puts compassion first once more.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With my own father's Islamic funeral taking place very recently in Birmingham, I too am very interested in the Minister's response.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): My condolences to you on your loss, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on securing this important debate. I thank him for his emotive speech, and all hon. Members who contributed, representing the views of bereaved families, sometimes including their own. It is appreciated and they have done so dutifully.

The House will be aware that although the Ministry of Justice is responsible for coronial law and policy in England and Wales, it does not have operational oversight of the coronial system. Coroner services are not centralised as part of His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, and are instead administered and funded through the relevant local authorities for each coroner area. The chief coroner provides judicial leadership for coroners. I take this opportunity, as other Members have, to express my thanks to all coroners, their officers and their staff, as well as the chief coroner and her team for

their tireless and expert commitment to their work. We are all extremely grateful to them for the vital service they provide to the bereaved and to the justice system.

Coroners are independent judicial office holders. They are specialist death investigation judges and part of the wider death investigation, certification and registration system. Their statutory duty is to investigate any death of which they become aware if they suspect that it was violent or unnatural in its cause, its cause was unknown, or it occurred in custody or other state detention. They also have an ancillary duty to ensure that, in appropriate cases, action to prevent future death is identified via prevention of future deaths reports.

The needs of the bereaved, particularly where there are faith concerns in respect of a death, should remain central to the coroner process. Both the Lord Chancellor, as a west midlands MP, and I are very aware of local concerns about coroner provision for communities that require swift burial or cremation. Clearly, decisions about the release of the body, including whether to hold a post-mortem examination, are independent judicial decisions for the coroner. However, I know that in many jurisdictions, including in the west midlands, families have experienced real delays. Sometimes, that is because the coroner needed to gather further evidence to support the investigation. I fully understand that, regardless of the reason, delays can cause real distress for bereaved families, particularly when faith requirements are dependent on the timely release of a loved one's body.

We are working hard to cut delays wherever possible and to ensure that families are properly communicated with and supported throughout the process, particularly so that we can ensure that any religious ceremonies or faith requirements can be met, as they should. There are already a range of measures in place to help guide coroners as to best practice in terms of early decision making once a death has been reported, in order to ensure that families can be given certainty as soon as possible.

The chief coroner has issued detailed practical guidance for coroners in dealing with requests for urgent consideration of a death and early release of a deceased body, including on religious grounds. The guidance sets out that legal framework and states:

"Coroners should pay appropriate respect to those wishes, within the framework of their legal duties and in the context of other responsibilities."

In addition, the chief coroner has issued guidance on the use of post-mortem imaging, including CT scanning, and on pathology more generally, which emphasises that the family should be kept fully informed throughout. I regularly meet the chief coroner to ensure that we have a shared understanding of the issues with the coroner system, including this one. I am also happy to engage with representatives of faith communities to understand their concerns and to meet hon. Members to discuss the matter further.

As the House will know, the Justice Committee undertook an inquiry into the coroner service in 2021, with a follow-up in 2023-24. The Government responded to the Committee's letter of May 2024, summarising their findings in December 2024. That letter has been published by the Committee. It is right that our focus should be on ensuring that the bereaved are at the heart of the process. I hope the House will find it helpful if I set out a number of steps that the Government are taking to address the issues raised by the Justice Committee, other stakeholders and hon. Members.

After just a few months in office, in September 2024 this Government implemented the statutory medical examiner system in England and Wales. It represents the most fundamental change to the end-to-end process of death certification and registration in recent times. The new system means that every death is subject either to the scrutiny of a medical examiner or to a coroner's investigation, thereby fulfilling the long-standing ambition of successive Governments to introduce a robust system whereby all deaths, without exception, are subject to an independent review.

Medical examiners and coroners have distinct roles. The new arrangements will ensure that cases are managed in the right part of the system and that only those deaths that require a judicial investigation are referred to the coroner. That will enable better focusing of coronial resource, which in turn is expected to support the reduction of inquest backlogs and delays. I hope we are already seeing the evidence of that. Just last week, the Ministry of Justice's coroner statistics were published: 174,900 deaths were reported to coroners in 2024—the lowest level since 1995 and down 10% compared to 2023. That is because, following the creation of the new system, only those who genuinely need to go to the coroner will do so. In addition, 81,200 post-mortem examinations were ordered by coroners in 2024—a 6% fall compared to 2023.

Iqbal Mohamed: To reduce the burden and time it takes for post-mortems, does the Minister agree that we should use technology, and MRI and CT scans, wherever possible, which will also speed up the release of the body?

Alex Davies-Jones: I appreciate the hon. Member's contribution. As I have said, that guidance is there and that equipment is available to coroners if they deem it necessary. Of course, we want to see anything that will help speed up the process for families.

Although we want to wait a full year for the proper data next May, the early evidence is encouraging that the new arrangements are working as intended. Reducing the number of unnecessary cases being referred to coroners means that coronial resources can be focused on the most complex deaths, while reducing the impact and burden on families. It also means that the number of post-mortem examinations that subsequently reveal a natural cause of death may also be reduced, since those cases may be identified by better surveillance and scrutiny much earlier in the process.

More widely, we recognise the concerns expressed by the Justice Committee and hon. Members present about the shortage of pathologists, particularly child pathologists, available to undertake coronial post-mortem examinations. That is a long-standing and complex problem, and its resolution requires a cross-Government approach. I am happy to reassure hon. Members that such an approach is taking place. I am meeting my counterparts in the Department of Health and Social Care to look at how we can fix the issue in the long term. Coroners rely on the pool of pathologists working in the wider medical system, including the NHS, to perform those examinations. We are carefully considering the views of the Justice Committee in its report, as well as the data we have gathered from our call for evidence on coronial pathology, which was issued in late 2023, with a view to publishing a new strategy for improving coronial pathology in due course.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

We recognise the impact that inquest hearings are having and are doing all we can to process that backlog as quickly as possible. We will work with the chief coroner to continue to build on the foundation that has been put in place to reduce the time. I know that coroners in the west midlands are well below the national average, as we have already heard. The Black Country coroner area completes inquests in an average of 11 weeks, and Birmingham and Solihull, and Coventry, complete inquests in an average time of 17 and 18 weeks respectively. Bereaved families should not be left waiting longer than is necessary for inquests to be completed.

We are working on a number of areas, including on a guide to make coroner services more accessible. We are considering all we can do and all the recommendations, and I am happy to come back to the House in due course. We will work with the chief coroner on the content of all material, and to reinforce the use and dissemination of these guidance documents.

The hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr spoke about MPs making representations, MPs are elected to this House to represent their constituents, and they should be able to do so. I will raise his point with the chief coroner when I meet her soon.

I recognise the concerns expressed today, as well as the wider concerns expressed by the Justice Committee and other stakeholders, about the importance of an effective coroner service. We will continue to do all we can to ensure that the system continues to put its focus on finding answers on behalf of the deceased, that bereaved families are always at the heart of the process, that lessons are learned from any death and that this learning is disseminated as quickly and as widely as possible to protect the public.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 May 2025

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

Accountability for Daesh Crimes

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): We begin with the Select Committee statement. Tom Gordon will speak on the publication of the Joint Committee on Human Rights' second report of the Session "Accountability for Daesh crimes" for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Tom Gordon to respond to these in turn. Questions should be brief, and Members may only ask one question each. I remind Members that they should bob if they wished to be called to ask a question.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine, and a privilege to speak on this important statement on the Joint Committee on Human Rights report "Accountability for Daesh crimes". The report represents the shared conclusions of a cross-party group of parliamentarians from both Houses, a rare show of unanimity in one of the most disturbing human rights failures of our time.

Let us begin with the facts. Between 2014 and 2017, Daesh—also known as Islamic State—waged a campaign of brutal violence and terror across Syria and Iraq. They targeted ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, Muslims and particularly the Yazidi people, with a clear intent to destroy them as a group. Thousands of Yazidis were executed. Women and girls were abducted, raped, sold and enslaved, and many remain unaccounted for. Children were indoctrinated or taken for use as child soldiers. These were not isolated atrocities. They were systematic and intentional. They were acts of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

In 2023, the UK Government formally recognised that Daesh had committed genocide against the Yazidi people. That recognition matters, but recognition without justice is not enough. The uncomfortable truth is that nearly 3,000 women and girls were taken by Daesh and that, while a number of UK nationals were involved in these crimes and some have since returned to this country, not a single one of them has been prosecuted in the UK for international crimes such as genocide. Only around 32 returnees have been prosecuted for terrorism-related offences. Although it is welcome that those prosecutions have taken place, they fall short of the accountability that the scale and the nature of these crimes demands.

Let me be blunt: it is a stain on the UK's human rights record that we have not prosecuted a single individual for some of these crimes, despite having the legal tools and the moral obligation to do so. Other countries have stepped up; in Germany, several Daesh perpetrators

have been successfully prosecuted for war crimes and genocide. There is no reason the UK cannot do the same, except for a failure of political will and legal infrastructure. Our report makes a series of clear, practical recommendations that would begin to put that right.

First, we call for a reset in the UK's approach to investigating and prosecuting international crimes. The current emphasis by UK law enforcement is overwhelmingly on terrorism offences. While that focus is understandable, it is currently insufficient. Genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity are distinct crimes under international law and must be treated as such. The Government must develop a strategic framework that enforces and ensures that law enforcement, intelligence and prosecuting agencies work together to gather the necessary evidence to bring these cases to court. This is not just about justice for victims abroad; it is about our credibility at home too. British citizens should not be able to participate in genocide abroad and return to the UK without facing the full weight of the law.

Secondly, we call for a change in the law. At present, under the International Criminal Court Act 2001, the UK can only prosecute individuals for international crimes such as genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity if they are UK nationals or residents. That is a major gap in our legal framework. Those are not crimes that should be subjected to jurisdictional loopholes. We urge the Government to amend legislation, specifically the Crime and Policing Bill currently before Parliament, to enshrine universal jurisdiction for those crimes in UK law. Doing so would mean that anyone, regardless of nationality or residency, could be prosecuted in the UK courts for the worst crimes known to humanity. That is not a radical proposal, but a long-overdue alignment of our legal system with our moral and international obligations.

Thirdly, we raise serious concerns about the deprivation of citizenship. The Government have used their powers to strip some individuals, particularly those suspected of involvement in terrorism abroad, of British nationality. We are concerned that in some cases the power has been used as a substitute for prosecution—in effect, removing people from our jurisdiction without holding them accountable for the crimes that they have committed. We call for greater oversight of the power. It should be subject to independent review and transparency mechanisms. Citizenship deprivation should never be used to avoid prosecution, nor to wash our hands of British nationals involved in the most serious international crimes.

Fourthly, we cannot ignore the humanitarian and security crisis in Syria. There are still UK nationals, including children, detained in camps that are overcrowded, dangerous and inhumane. Children face the daily risk of malnutrition, disease and violence. The camps have been described as, in effect, open-air prisons. They are not places for recovery or rehabilitation. The UK cannot simply look away; these are British citizens, many of whom are minors. Some of them were taken to Syria by parents, while others may have been born there. None of them should be condemned to a life of statelessness or radicalisation. We call on the Government to identify the number and status of those children, and to bring forward proposals for their resettlement and care.

Where British adults in these camps are suspected of involvement in Daesh crimes, the UK must take all steps to prosecute them here at home, in accordance with due process and the rule of law. The failure to prosecute those crimes sends a dangerous message to

[Tom Gordon]

perpetrators, victims and the world. It tells perpetrators that they can get away with genocide if they are clever about which passport they hold, it tells victims that their suffering does not matter unless it happens within our own borders, and it tells the world that the UK is willing to tolerate impunity for the worst atrocities committed in modern times.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights believes that Britain must do better. Justice delayed is justice denied, and impunity is injustice enshrined. Let us be clear: the UK has the legal tools, the institutional capacity and the moral responsibility to act. What we need now is political leadership from the Government.

I thank everyone who gave evidence to the Joint Committee, whether written, in person or in any other form. I also thank those people who were brave in speaking out and sharing the situations that they and their families had been through. I acknowledge the work of the Committee support staff throughout this inquiry. I commend the report to the House and urge the Government to implement its recommendations without delay.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): More than 900 people left the UK to engage in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. There was a lot of media attention at the time on the case of one of them, Shamima Begum, who was 15 when she left the UK to join Daesh. Did the Joint Committee consider her case in particular, and does it have any recommendations for the UK Government?

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. Throughout our discussion, our deliberations and the formulation of the report, the Committee talked extensively about that. A number of issues pertain to the rights of a child, and one of the key structural points of the report is the deprivation of citizenship. We tried to avoid talking about specific individuals, but the report clearly sets out what we think the appropriate mechanisms are for the Government: namely, that the power should not be used as a tool routinely and that, where it is used, there should be review, accountability and scrutiny.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The violence against and the murder and rape of Yazidi women has been truly horrendous. Way back in 2010 or 2012, I had a chance to meet some of them. Yazidi women who survived have a story to tell against their Daesh perpetrators. Has every effort been made to collate the evidence and pursue the perpetrators? The testimonies of the victims must be used to condemn the perpetrators to a long and very, very painful time in prison.

Tom Gordon: The Government could do more to look at, collate and document that information, so that we have something that we can refer back to for similar situations that may, sadly, occur in the future. The evidence sessions were carried out in the last Parliament, before my election, but I have read some of the transcripts, and they were truly harrowing. I cannot imagine what it must have been like for people who had to listen to that evidence, or for the people themselves giving it. We owe it to them, and to all victims of such crimes, to ensure that we never allow their words to be forgotten.

1.40 pm

Sitting suspended.

Backbench Business

Gavi and the Global Fund

1.50 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Global Fund.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Jardine. I want to start with a quote from Gavi's inaugural board chair, Nelson Mandela, over 20 years ago:

"Life or death for a young child too often depends on whether he"—

or she—

"is born in a country where vaccines are available".

It is the injustice that he spoke of that the organisations we will talk about today—Gavi, the Global Fund and others—have fought against since Gavi was established in 2000. The fight has led to more than 1 billion children being vaccinated, and more than 18 million avoidable deaths prevented in low-income countries.

This is also a Labour and UK story. We had a consensus, but it was Tony Blair's championing of Gavi at its launch in 2000, and Gordon Brown's leading role in the creation of the international finance facility for immunisation, that helped to fund Gavi's work at the start, and the organisation continues to turn to our Government—a Labour Government—for global leadership.

Through these organisations, we have cut the combined death rate from AIDS-related illnesses, tuberculosis and malaria by an incredible 61%, saving 65 million lives. Childhood mortality in under-fives has been reduced by over 50%, and vaccine-preventable deaths by over 70%, in the places where Gavi operates, and the coverage of key treatment and prevention interventions for HIV, TB and malaria has increased significantly in countries where the Global Fund invests. We saw TB treatment coverage increase from 45% in 2010 to 70% in 2022. In 2010 the percentage of the population with access to long-lasting insecticide-treated nets to prevent malaria was only 30%; in 2023 it reached 57%. In 2010 only 22% of people living with HIV were on antiretroviral therapy; in 2023 it reached 78%. That is the UK's legacy.

We hosted the first replenishment for Gavi in 2011, we hosted the last one in 2020, and we will co-host the Global Fund replenishment this year alongside South Africa. This is not just about helping other countries; it is about the UK's own soft power and security and the resilience of the NHS.

Let us talk a bit more about the UK's contribution, because it is not just the Government's contribution, but the contribution of amazing life sciences companies here in the UK. The UK Vaccine Network helped to develop life-saving vaccines such as the RTS,S malaria vaccine and the Oxford-AstraZeneca covid-19 vaccine, which have both been procured and rolled out by Gavi worldwide. Between 2016 and 2022 we invested £134 million to develop new vaccines for epidemic-prone diseases. An additional £103.5 million was committed in 2023 to support affordable vaccine development. Three billion doses of the covid vaccine have been supplied globally, which is estimated to have saved over 6 million lives in the first year of roll-out.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does she agree that it was work on malaria vaccines and others that enabled us to move quickly when covid and other infections occurred, and that investigations into neglected diseases have been the springboard to create vaccines for many other diseases that threaten the entire world?

Emily Darlington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is through such programmes that we developed the expertise and the ability to rapidly create mRNA-based vaccines, which led to the creation of our own vaccines here in the UK and allowed us not only to protect our own population but to contribute to protecting biosecurity globally, by ensuring the fast spread of those vaccines.

Similarly, 18 million doses of the RTS,S malaria vaccine created here in the UK have been allocated to 12 African countries. We have administered the vaccine to over 1.7 million children in pilot countries and consequently we have been able to reduce malaria cases. We know that malaria is moving north as climate change hits, so this is not just about protecting children in those countries; it is also about protecting children here at home.

I want to share some of the quotes that were sent to me when scientists at AstraZeneca and elsewhere heard that I had secured this debate. They wanted to send a clear message. Sandy Douglas at the University of Oxford, one of the six scientists who created the covid-19 vaccine developed by AstraZeneca, said:

“Gavi brings Britain’s scientific leadership to the world, and this brings investment back into the UK’s world-leading research, generating a virtuous cycle of innovation.”

GSK also reached out because it wanted its voice to be heard in the debate. It said:

“UK life sciences are a critical economic driver to improve health outcomes and transform lives in the UK and around the world, including in the Global South. Scientific innovation underpins national and global health security and economic prosperity at a time of growing uncertainty. GSK and its HIV business...are proud of the contribution we make to deliver these priorities.”

Most importantly, it said:

“The UK’s 2025 investment in Gavi and the Global Fund will be critical in building long-term sustainable access to health technologies at scale.”

This is not just about what we are doing in the global south and in other countries that need our partnership; it is also about what we are doing to build economic growth, which is the single most important mission of this Government.

The reality is that this mission is not over. I could go through many of the numbers, but I know that my hon. Friends will pick up some of them. What I will say is that across the US, the UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands, which provide 90% of the HIV funding response, there could be cuts of between 8%—if we do our job well—and 70%. Modelling by the Burnet Institute estimates that such cuts would result in between 4.4 million and 10.8 million additional HIV cases, and between 770,000 and 2.9 million HIV-related deaths in children and adults, by 2030.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and I congratulate her on securing the debate. Gavi has been one of the most successful development initiatives ever; more than 1 billion children are being routinely

immunised against some of the world’s deadliest diseases. Despite its success, however, each year more than 1.5 million children continue to die from vaccine-preventable diseases. Does she agree that the UK needs to show leadership in ensuring that immunisation remains a funding priority for the UK, and that the Government, as a board member and a strong donor, should continue to fund Gavi and prioritise life-saving vaccinations?

Emily Darlington: I absolutely agree. That reminds me of something my gran always said to me: “If you don’t have your health, what do you have?” I know this issue sounds quite niche, but health is something we all understand. If we do not have our health, we cannot talk about improving the economies of countries around the world and improving global security. That is why this is such a crucial initiative.

These diseases cross borders. Milton Keynes’s HIV rate is among the highest in the UK, so this is also about protecting our constituents. If we can reach the levels that we need to reach on HIV transmission, we will be protecting the UK population too.

I am really encouraged by the UK’s commitment to co-host the Global Fund’s eighth replenishment, alongside the Government of South Africa, and by the Prime Minister’s statement that, although we are cutting official development assistance, we will continue to support global health. These partnerships are the best and most efficient way of getting money to the ground. They bring an estimated £530 million of investment into research and development in the UK, and they balance investment by ensuring that the countries that can contribute to the programmes do so. This is not charity, but true partnership. It is about us working together to build capacity.

These programmes have public support. Various polls show that about three quarters of the British public support using our R&D and our expertise in life sciences to save lives here and abroad.

I will conclude, because a lot of other Members want to speak. This year is pivotal. Gavi, the Global Fund, Unitaid and others are requesting partnership money, but it is about not just cash but the partnership and leadership that the UK Government provide. I say to the Government and the Minister, who cares a lot about this issue, that, despite the short-term cuts—the Prime Minister said that it is one of the most difficult decisions he has had to make, and that we will look to increase funding in the future—we must not use the fact that the replenishment comes at a time when our budget is at its lowest not at least to match what we have pledged in the past.

Several hon. Members rose—

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. Unfortunately, because of its popularity, I will have to impose a time limit of three minutes from the beginning. I intend to go to the Front Benchers at 2.38 pm.

2.3 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am grateful to you for stepping into the Chair, Ms Jardine. I was due to chair this debate, but that would have meant that I was unable to contribute, which I very much wanted to do.

[David Mundell]

Given the restricted time, I do not want to rehearse the discussions that we had with Baroness Chapman in the International Development Committee earlier in the week. Like the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), whom I congratulate on securing the debate, I want to say that a contribution to Gavi and the Global Fund is not charity but a strategic investment by the United Kingdom. Although we have to deal with the reality that, as Baroness Chapman set out, the cuts are happening, we have to make the case about what should happen in that environment. I have always believed that aid spending should have maximum impact and maximum returns. Moreover, it should be in keeping with public expectations of food in bellies and shots in arms, and the Global Fund and Gavi deliver both.

As the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) said, Gavi has immunised more than 1 billion children, reducing vaccine-preventable child deaths by 70% in the 78 low-income countries in which it operates. That is 18.8 million lives saved and children growing up healthy, going to school and contributing to their communities, which is a huge impact. The Global Fund has saved an estimated 65 million lives since 2002. It has cut the combined death rate from AIDS, TB and malaria by 61%. These are staggering achievements and they should not be discounted.

Gavi and the Global Fund are two of the most successful and impactful health programmes in history. They clearly meet the requirement for maximum impact and return, but they are possible only because of sustained, co-ordinated international investment. Alongside Unitaids, they are part of a habitat of organisations that have sustained progress in our understanding of diseases, and our ability to deploy medicines and improve health systems.

I join the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central in encouraging the Minister to sustain the existing contributions to both Gavi and the Global Fund. He will be aware that in the last Parliament, I lobbied my own Government very hard to get that £1 billion into the Global Fund. Let us keep it at that at least, and keep the contribution to Gavi. These programmes make a difference.

2.6 pm

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) on securing this debate. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am proud to co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on nutrition for development, alongside the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell). Nutrition and immunisation are closely linked. Children with poor nutrition are often those who are most vulnerable to infectious diseases and need protection from vaccines, yet vaccines are less effective in malnourished children and often do not trigger strong immunity.

The children whom specialised immunisation programmes are trying to reach are also the least likely to have access to food and nutrition services. Immunisation has the most impact when it is delivered alongside other interventions and integrated into primary health systems. By addressing under-nutrition and under-immunisation

simultaneously, we can significantly improve health outcomes and vaccine efficacy, as well as provide interventions in the most cost-effective way.

I saw this for myself on a recent visit to Isiolo in Kenya, hosted by UNICEF and organised by United Against Malnutrition and Hunger. We saw how in rural areas, nutrition interventions are delivered alongside vaccinations, healthcare education and maternal healthcare, to ensure that people have wraparound healthcare interventions that save lives. That was funded by UK development assistance and delivered by partners including Action Against Hunger. If a woman walks for 20 km or more with her children once a week for nutrition, they are less likely to walk the same distance, at a different time, to a different place, for vaccines. Integrating the services is paramount to good healthcare.

This February, ahead of the Nutrition for Growth summit, I met the chief executive officer of Gavi, Dr Sania Nishtar, to discuss the important role that Gavi is playing in delivering these integrated services. Dr Nishtar spoke about the new \$30 million programme to integrate nutrition and immunisation interventions in Ethiopia through the UK-founded Children's Investment Fund Foundation, as well as UNICEF Ethiopia and Gavi, with support from the UK through Gavi's matching fund mechanism.

Ethiopia has one of the highest numbers—a staggering 1.1 million—of zero-dose children, who have not received a single dose of routine vaccines. That statistic is exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic, conflict and displacement. The pilot programme aims to reach around 140,000 of those zero-dose children in areas with the highest dual burden of malnutrition and infectious disease, providing cost-effective and efficient interventions to help children to survive and thrive.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree that even before the devastating cuts to UK foreign aid, there was instability in funding for global vaccination programmes? We have already heard that over 1.5 million children die from preventable diseases. Does he agree that the reduction in UK foreign aid will have a devastating impact on the ability to provide vaccines to these children, and will end up costing lives?

Steve Race: I will let the Minister answer that question, but I hope there will be an impact assessment to properly map our interventions in future.

Integration costs money and Gavi cannot do it without financial support. I hope that when the Minister is assessing our contribution to this year's Gavi replenishment, he will look at including support for nutrition integration. What plans does his Department have to integrate nutrition and immunisations more widely?

I want to touch on one issue briefly. The UK's contribution to Gavi has not only helped to save lives but contributed to the UK's health security by reducing the risk of global health emergencies and pandemics. It has brought money into the British economy through reputational research returns, and it showcases the UK's leadership on the global stage.

In my constituency, the Medical Research Council-funded Centre for Medical Mycology at the University of Exeter works closely with Gavi, carrying out world-leading research into deadly fungal diseases and developing

vaccines for some of the most widespread causes of death and disablement in developing countries. Does the Minister agree that the UK's continued participation in Gavi and the Global Fund not only is the right thing to do because it saves lives around the world, but is strategically sound, as it supports our growth strategy and is an important part of delivering both our industrial strategy goals and our national health goals?

2.10 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship for the first time, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) on securing this important debate.

It is just six months shy of five years since I had my own Backbench Business debate on global vaccine access—albeit in the context of the global covid-19 pandemic. I look back on what the then shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), said with interest. I found in her remarks a consistent emphasis on working bilaterally to tackle global health crises, and through those efforts, to tackle poverty and inequality. She said that this was not just the practical but the moral thing to do.

I hope that we have not forgotten what we should have learned from the covid pandemic about how fast a disease can turn into a global threat, about how good health produces safe and secure countries, and about how terrifying it was to reckon with the realities of the pandemic in all aspects of our lives. I do hope that the Government will think about that as they approach the spending review.

Gavi and the Global Fund have been an incredible success, and we ought to celebrate that. The UK has been a leading force in these efforts on the international stage, and that is something to be proud of, because it bolsters our reputation and our standing and forms part of our global soft power.

We will not need to fund such programmes forever. Fifteen years ago, lower income countries were able to fund, on average, only 10% of the costs of their vaccine programmes. Over the next five years, it is estimated that they will cover up to 40% of the costs on average. Some countries are already there, with Indonesia now a donor to Gavi rather than a recipient.

Let us not forget that we need the world to be vaccinated. Disease knows no borders. Disease leads to poverty, which leads to global instability. We also have seen the more immediate and direct effects of global vaccine and treatment availability, through the demand and growth of our life sciences sector here at home—will the Minister tell me that that is not the sort of growth that this Government are looking for? At best, these investments benefit us up and down the UK. In my constituency, the University of St Andrews reported just last month that its infection and global health division had been awarded early career funding to identify new therapeutic strategies for infectious diseases.

I have almost reached the end of my remarks, but I must mention the elephant in the room: the shrinking ODA budget. I have read the statistics, as others have, that show that spending on Gavi and the Global Fund gives some of the best financial returns. Just a few weeks ago, I attended a meeting in Parliament with the chief executive of the World Bank. He was clear that his

role and that of his organisation is to create opportunities in the global south to develop their economies and reduce emigration from there.

Given the Government's other priorities, such as immigration, investing in multilateral ODA activities makes sense. I really urge the Minister to look again at that cut and how long it is needed for, and to engage openly with the ONE Campaign's pre-action letter questioning the legality of the current cut to 0.3%.

2.13 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) for securing this debate.

Let us be honest: most of the public do not know what Gavi or the Global Fund are, but they do know the lifesaving power of vaccinations because they, like all of us, will have benefited from them when they were children, as will their children. But we know that for too many children around the world, those lifesaving vaccinations are not available. In these debates we must remember that people's lives are at the heart of the issue. I worked for Save the Children for many years, and I saw at first hand the impact of immunisations and the progress that has been made. Some of that is at risk in the light of what is happening around the world, so this is a really important debate.

We have covered many of the areas that I want to talk about, but 1.5 million children continue to die from vaccine-preventable diseases. That is more than the population of Cyprus—an entire island of children dying every year. Vaccination and ending AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria are not only the right thing to do but, as we have heard, in our national interest and the smart thing to do.

Vaccinations stop disease reaching our shores. They help to support healthy and prosperous nations, and they help to prevent future pandemics. They are also vital in the context of climate change, as many of the world's deadliest diseases are susceptible to climate change, which increases the risk of them spreading. Tackling those diseases is best done—with best value for the British taxpayer—through Gavi and the Global Fund. We know we have to maximise our aid budget at this difficult time and invest it in the right things that will deliver the best value for the British taxpayer. Investing in Gavi and the Global Fund is therefore simply a no-brainer.

I asked the Minister earlier this week if investing in women and girls remained a priority for this Government, and I was reassured by his answer. I then raised that with the Minister for International Development at the International Development Committee, and we heard that the approach is more about mainstreaming gender equality—women and girls were not listed as one of our three top priorities. Although I accept that we can mainstream gender, I hope that the Minister will reply on how we will ensure that women and girls remain at the heart of programmes such as Gavi and the Global Fund.

Every week, 4,000 adolescent girls and young women between 15 and 24 become infected with HIV globally, and 3,100 of those infections are in sub-Saharan Africa. As we look at our aid budget, we know it has to be focused on tackling extreme poverty, and Africa is one of the areas that we need to focus on.

Iqbal Mohamed: The hon. Member talks about vaccine inequality in women and girls, but would she agree that the global Gavi programme helps to address the inequalities that people face? During the covid pandemic, it was clearly reported that richer and more affluent countries had priority for vaccines when compared with low and middle-income countries. Gavi is essential to help to perpetuate equality.

Alice Macdonald: I totally agree with the hon. Member. In fact, what we have seen with Gavi is that countries that were primarily recipients before have now become donors, such as Indonesia. Gavi is a clear pathway for countries to transition into different roles in the global economy as well.

Other Members have mentioned brilliant examples of science and innovation in their constituencies. I want to mention the John Innes Centre at the Norwich Research Park, which is not technically in my constituency, but is in Norwich. It is doing pioneering work, particularly around malaria. As we have heard, that work is helping to save lives internationally, as well as creating jobs at home and generating economic growth.

We need a new architecture for international development. We have to accept the world that we are in, but we also have to challenge ourselves as to why some of the public support for aid has been lost—although, some of the polling shows there is a lot of support for lifesaving interventions such as vaccines. Both Gavi and the Global Fund show us what that new architecture could look like: working together globally through multi-lateral institutions and pooling our resources to maximise our impact.

This is not the time to take our foot off the accelerator. We have made huge progress in this area, both in tackling disease and protecting our own health security. I am sure that the Minister will reaffirm our commitment to improving the health of some of the poorest communities in the world and to delivering a safer and more prosperous future for us all.

Several hon. Members rose—

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): We are going to struggle to get everybody in, so can Members please keep any interventions brief?

2.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) on setting the scene so well. It is an incredible debate, which is why Members are here to make a contribution.

Gavi has so far immunised 1.1 billion children, and it is estimated to have averted more than 18.8 million deaths globally. If we want a success story and something that is worth investing in, this is the scheme. Childhood mortality in under-fives has been reduced by over 50%, and vaccine-preventable deaths are down by 70%. That is another reason for supporting Gavi and the Global Fund.

Like the hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), I will focus on women and girls, because it is important that we look at the impact on them. It is a fact that women and girls are disproportionately affected by infectious diseases, and targeted investments in their health can drive broader social and economic progress. Indeed, vaccination results in better health, which in

turn supports gender equality by enabling women and girls to learn, work and take an active role in their community, promoting them as individuals.

Women and girls accounted for 63% of all HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa. Malaria in pregnancy leads to over 10,000 maternal deaths and 200,000 infant deaths. These are not just figures but families, individuals, mothers and children. Tuberculosis remains a leading infectious cause of death among women of reproductive age. The Global Fund provides 76% of all international financing for TB vaccinations. However, cuts to the US Agency for International Development, and the UK Government's decision to cut ODA, will knock back the very scheme that has done so much to advance the cause. I look to the Minister, who is always very responsive. I know he does not hold the purse strings, but I am sure his response will be helpful.

Gavi also funds maternal tetanus immunisation and has helped to eliminate maternal and neonatal tetanus in over 20 countries. All of those things are happening because of Gavi and these organisations. Its work to prevent malaria in children and pregnant women cannot be ignored either.

To conclude, I ask the Minister how the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is making the case in spending review process for the work that the Global Fund, Gavi and Unitaids do in prioritising women and girls' health and supporting gender equality. If discussions are being held about a change in investment in those funds, how can Government ensure that women and girls, so often ignored and put down in their own communities, have access to the most basic immunisation? Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the Government play their part for the most vulnerable women and children throughout the world?

The UK has done good work. We must continue that in the most cost-effective way possible. I believe the Minister is seeking that balance, and I wish him and the Government every success in that endeavour.

2.21 pm

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): While noting the excellent work that Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the Global Fund do in the fight against AIDS and malaria, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for global tuberculosis I want to focus my remarks on the need to secure continued funding for programmes to tackle tuberculosis.

TB remains one of the most significant infectious diseases worldwide. It was responsible for the deaths of 1.25 million people in 2023. The World Health Organisation says it is highly likely that the disease has

“returned to being the world's leading cause of death from a single infectious agent, following three years in which it was replaced by...COVID”.

TB is a preventable and curable disease, but if it is not treated, someone who has active TB can spread the disease to as many as 20 people each year. Given how quickly covid spread across the globe, ending TB is critical for all of us in today's globalised world. Indeed, TB cases in this country are currently on the rise.

As we heard at the APPG's meeting earlier this week, the latest figures indicate that there was a 13% increase in reported cases in England last year. That takes TB numbers above pre-covid 19 levels and reverses the

previous downward trend. The latest figures also show that the city of Leicester has the highest rates of TB, overtaking the borough of Newham in London. Although the focus of this afternoon's debate is global health, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the Government have inherited a steady increase in the number of TB cases domestically since 2022. It is therefore in our own interests to continue to work to eradicate TB.

As the leading international funder for TB programmes, the Global Fund is a critical partner in helping to achieve the goal of finding and treating 45 million people between 2023 and 2027. "Missing" people with TB—people who are not diagnosed, treated or reported—are a major challenge in the fight against the disease and help to contribute to drug-resistant TB.

Drug-resistant TB does not respond to standard first-line antibiotics, so treating it is costlier, more complex and more prolonged, and it can take three to four times as long to treat it. If cases of drug-resistant TB continue to increase, it could eventually pose a risk to global health security, including in high-income countries.

The Global Fund is the largest external source of financing for drug-resistant TB responses in low and middle-income countries, and its work in this area is important. Work is being done to safeguard the decades of progress that have been made in the fight against the disease. Thanks to the work of the Global Fund, 7.1 million people with TB were diagnosed and treated in 2023. I therefore ask the Minister to reassure the House that the Government will continue to fund the Global Fund to eradicate TB from the globe.

2.24 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) for introducing this vital debate.

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria has saved over 65 million lives since its inception. It remains one of the most effective mechanisms we have to combat infectious diseases worldwide—diseases whose death tolls continue to rise every year, especially in some of the world's poorest regions. Gavi supports the immunisation and vaccination of almost half the world's children, and has prevented over 18.8 million deaths across the world.

The United Kingdom has historically stood at the forefront of global health. From pioneering the invention of the vaccine and life-saving medications to supporting the NHS, our commitment to science and health has shaped the world. Continuing our support for Gavi and the Global Fund is not only morally correct but strategically wise. Why? Because disease knows no boundaries. We all learned that lesson with covid. Infectious diseases not only cause individual tragedy but threaten global development and stability, and rock economies to their core.

When we invest in global health systems and these organisations, we do not just save lives abroad but protect our citizens—our constituents—by preventing future outbreaks, strengthening early-warning systems and developing research that will benefit everyone. Every penny that the UK invests in Gavi and the Global Fund yields incredible returns. It provides antiretroviral therapy for people living with TB and HIV. It creates global stockpiles of vaccines for Ebola, cholera and yellow

fever, so that any emerging pandemic can be stamped out quickly. It provides mosquito nets to protect children while they sleep.

Gavi and the Global Fund help to build and strengthen health systems, empower communities and promote gender equality. They give people a chance to live and work without risk of needless infection. Failing to fund these two vital organisations would risk reversing decades of progress and letting preventable diseases kill thousands of people each year. If we step up and maintain our support, the UK will send a clear message that we will not turn our backs, and that we believe in a society where no one has to die from a disease that we can treat.

Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine, said:

"The reward for work well done is the opportunity to do more."

Let us help Gavi and the Global Fund to do more.

2.27 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) for securing the debate. I want to speak in strong support of continued investment in these organisations, but particularly the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. As my hon. Friend said, it is one of the most impactful partnerships in global health history.

Since its founding in 2002, the Global Fund has saved more than 50 million lives. That is 50 million mothers, fathers and children who are alive today because of international collaboration, targeted investment and shared resolve. The death rate from AIDS, TB and malaria has been halved in the countries where the fund operates. That is a success that we should all be proud of. In an era when, as colleagues have mentioned, global co-operation seems to be going out of fashion, that is a living, breathing example of it working.

The UK has played a major role in that success but, as hon. Members have said, with the next replenishment fast approaching, we must reaffirm our commitment. The needs remain urgent and the case for investment remains overwhelmingly strong. I am proud that the fund has been a cross-party endeavour, but I want to acknowledge, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central did, the crucial role that Labour has played in establishing and supporting it. Under Tony Blair, the UK helped to found the fund in 2002, recognising that tackling the world's deadliest diseases required global leadership. Under Gordon Brown's leadership, both as Chancellor and, later, as Prime Minister, the UK strengthened its support, with a focus on long-term funding and international co-operation. That legacy of action, compassion and multilateralism is one we will all want to uphold.

Like colleagues, I want to speak about my constituency's role in this issue. I am proud to represent Macclesfield, which people will know is a thriving town, with a brilliant grassroots arts and culture scene, nestled on the edge of the Peak district. But it is also a key centre for UK life sciences, with AstraZeneca, the major employer in the town, playing a vital role in the production and distribution of life-saving medicines. However, AstraZeneca's contribution goes beyond local jobs, and it has supported the wider global health agenda, particularly through working on the covid vaccine and other initiatives

[Tim Roca]

to improve treatments in low and middle-income countries. We know that our life sciences sector across the country, anchored by companies such as AstraZeneca, benefits from the innovation, data sharing and global networks that initiatives such as the Global Fund foster. This is what is called win-win.

Let us not forget that the diseases we are talking about have not gone away. As has been pointed out, TB is one of the world's deadliest infectious diseases. Malaria continues to kill a child nearly every minute. Although AIDS is more manageable, it still devastates millions of families. Our support is therefore as important as ever. I urge all Members, and especially the Government, to continue to recognise the fund's enormous value. From the laboratories of Macclesfield to the clinics of Malawi, let's continue to make a difference.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Apologies, but I will have to reduce the time limit to two minutes.

2.30 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) for introducing the debate. I declare an interest as the former UK executive director of the International Rescue Committee. I will focus on why Gavi and the Global Fund are so critical in humanitarian crises. I also want to be clear about why this issue matters and why the role those organisations play in the world matters.

I am extremely proud of the principled role that UK aid allows us to play, and that British NGOs play, in parts of the world that are riven by conflict, poverty and climate change, where we save lives and prevent future suffering. But this is not just about charity; it is about global stability and security and, in turn, about our own stability and security. When diseases are left unchecked in fragile states, they do not stay contained; they cross borders, they become pandemics, they threaten and harm us all as human beings, and they demand costly emergency responses here in the UK and abroad that could have been prevented through earlier interventions.

I saw at first hand, particularly through the IRC's partnership with Gavi, how Gavi and the Global Fund work in humanitarian crises. In east Africa, despite insecurity and limitations on humanitarian access making vaccine delivery difficult, the IRC was able to expand vaccine coverage. In 19 months, an IRC-led consortium funded by Gavi and powered by local partners administered 9 million vaccine doses and put nearly 1 million children on the path to full immunisation, including 376,000 zero-dose children. As of January 2025, 96% of the 156 target communities had access to vaccines—before the intervention, only 16% had—and the cost of delivering that was just \$4 per person. That shows how, by institutionalising this model of providing doses and funding directly to frontline actors, we can reach people outside of Government control and deliver real impact, even in some of the toughest and most fragile humanitarian settings.

2.32 pm

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) for securing this crucial debate. I am proud to be the co-chair of the APPG on HIV, AIDS and sexual health, a role the Minister held and carried out with distinction for more than six years. Through the APPG, we are fighting to keep the Global Fund at the top of the agenda in the Foreign Office and the Government.

At a reception in this place a few weeks ago, I was inspired by the fact that we were joined by so many people who have spent so much of their time fighting for the Global Fund and the critical work it does. I was particularly delighted that we were joined by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West). That was a demonstration of the UK's commitment to this cause. We were also joined by deputy high commissioner Dineo Mathlako from the South African high commission, which likewise demonstrated South Africa's resolve.

As was said earlier, since its inception in 2002, the Global Fund has helped to save 65 million lives around the world, and if we are to continue to save lives from treatable diseases, the Global Fund must be replenished with critically needed funds this year. The Global Fund represents a coalition of the willing, and that coalition needs us all to play our part. Constant action is required, or we can and will fall back in our battle against HIV and AIDS.

I agreed to become the co-chair of the APPG, alongside a brilliant team of cross-party parliamentarians, some of whom are present, because this fight matters and we must win it. AIDS is no longer an unrelenting reality that we have to endure, but a consequence of our collective failure to share the necessary knowledge, protection and medication with everyone who needs it.

I am delighted with the leadership shown by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary in co-hosting the replenishment this year. As Nelson Mandela said,

"AIDS is no longer just a disease; it is a human rights issue."

Let us heed Mandela's words and do all we can to secure a successful replenishment of the Global Fund this year.

2.34 pm

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesend) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) for securing such an important debate, and I am proud to sit with her on the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for his tireless work in this space.

Before I became a Member of Parliament, I was a scientist. I worked on neglected diseases—in particular, human African trypanosomiasis, which is also known as sleeping sickness. I made a diagnostic test field-ready, and it is out there diagnosing people as we speak. More recently, I moved on to work on understanding the immune responses to malaria at the Francis Crick Institute

with Dr Jean Langhorne. On a recent visit to the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, we saw amazing science and innovation in relation to lymphatic filariasis, and to potentially using a device like this watch to detect it. That is now being looked at for diabetes.

That builds on the amazing scientific work we have in this country. A recent report from Impact Global Health in collaboration with the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine showed that a global societal return of £1.4 trillion could be generated, and that there could be an extra £7.7 billion for the UK economy. So this is not just about protection and saving lives across the globe; it is about our industry here in the UK.

Malaria has been eliminated in nine countries since 2015. That is incredible. We must go further and we can get the job done, so please let us replenish that fund.

2.36 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) for securing this debate. I am here to speak on behalf of my constituents who have asked me to call on the Government to continue Britain's global leadership in fighting and eradicating killer diseases. That requires a commitment not only to ongoing investment in the Global Fund, Gavi and Unitaid, but to leading other nations to do likewise.

There is often far too much doom and gloom about international aid and what it has achieved. Let us remember that in 1991, one in five children born in sub-Saharan Africa died before they reached their fifth birthday. Today that is one in 16, which is still too many. As many know, I spent a portion of my life living in sub-Saharan Africa, including as a schoolteacher. My own eyes have wet my pillow at night because one of my students died from a preventable illness, because they were not able to access the treatment that they needed. When I multiply that by the millions of children who have had that fate, I think what a tragic loss that is for the world.

Let us be clear: a child born in a Gavi-supported country is 70% less likely to die from a vaccine-preventable disease before their fifth birthday. The Global Fund has saved 65 million lives. As impressive as that is, there is also the investment that this brings to Britain by supporting British science. I say to the Minister: let us not roll back the progress of a quarter of a century.

2.37 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) on securing this debate. This year, as both Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Global Fund conduct their funding replenishments, it is more important than ever that we consider the indispensable value of their work, both for Britain and the world. Since its inception at the beginning of the millennium, Gavi has immunised more than 1 million children and saved in the region of 20 million lives.

The UK was one of the alliance's founders and has since constituted its largest single sovereign donor. In its short existence, the Global Fund has succeeded in driving down the death rates across AIDS, TB and malaria by 61%, saving 65 million lives. That is close to the entire

population of this country and would not have been achieved without British support. That manifested most recently in a £1 billion pledge to the Global Fund's seventh replenishment. That money is likely to avert around 1 million deaths. We have made so much progress, eliminating many diseases in some countries and reaching the edge of success in others.

However, the work of Gavi and the Global Fund is being placed at risk by short-sighted cuts to international development spending. President Trump has gutted USAID, shattered the fund that fights HIV and AIDS and is poised to eliminate much American funding for global immunisation efforts. Following that playbook, this Government have decided to slash British development spending to 0.3% of our GNI, its lowest level this century.

I, like many others, still remember the optimism of the last Labour Government, who pledged to make poverty history and funded Gavi and the Global Fund when they were created. This Government have rejected so much of the proud 1997 legacy, and they must not do so when it comes to global health. I hope that they put money behind their pledge to prioritise global health and vaccinations. There are so many strong and resonant moral arguments for Britain, but at the same time, the fight against disease serves concrete British interests.

The war against infection is currently facing an alignment of factors that make victory more challenging than ever. Climate change is amplifying disease risk. Higher temperatures are opening up regions to mosquitoes, and the incidence of dangerous weather conditions is on the rise. Pakistan's catastrophic 2022 floods, for example, have since led to almost 7 million additional malaria cases. At the same time, the disturbing spread and intensification of conflict across the globe is impeding efforts to treat and prevent disease. Increasingly, civilian populations are being deliberately cut off from aid, while healthcare facilities are being not only disrupted, but targeted. Consequently, we are seeing the return of once-controlled diseases like polio and upticks in those like cholera, which emerge from degraded sanitary infrastructure.

Why does this matter for Britain? It is because, as we have heard, disease does not respect borders. Since covid, we are all only too aware that disease can reach our shores, putting both our NHS and our health security at risk. Resistance, particularly in strains of TB and malaria, is also an increasing threat. Both Gavi and the Global Fund are working on the development and deployment of new generations of TB vaccines, even in the face of these new headwinds. Existing interventions for fighting malaria are also seeing their efficacy decline in the face of insecticide and drug resistance. Better, sharper tools have been developed. The challenge now is getting them to where they are needed, and for that we need the Global Fund.

Iqbal Mohamed: Before I came to this place, I worked in the pharmaceutical industry in safety, efficacy and regulatory compliance. Does the hon. Member agree that the leadership role that the UK has played to date is not just limited to financial contributions and support, but has ensured that the vaccines that are rolled out in third world and low and middle-income countries are as safe as they can be?

Monica Harding: I absolutely agree, and I was about to come on to the economic benefits of Gavi and the Global Fund. There are economic benefits: a study of Gavi-supported countries showed that, through healthcare savings alone, each dollar spent returns \$21. When wider social benefits are considered, that rises to \$54. Accounting for trade opportunities, healthcare savings and other economic boosts for Britain, both Gavi and the Global Alliance have generated value equivalent to hundreds of billions of dollars. So we are talking about neither a charity nor a giant cash dispenser in the sky, but instead, a deposit account for the security, health and soft power of our nation.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On the point about soft power, China tends to deploy its vaccines in accordance with its regional influence and global standing, rather than on the basis of where there is the greatest need. Does she share my concern that the withdrawal of western funding from vaccine alliances could clear the way for China to engage in further vaccine diplomacy?

Monica Harding: I thank my hon. Friend for a well-made point. I have consistently said that cuts to our international aid and development spend create the space for rogue actors to move in, including China and Russia. I know that the Government like polling, so I am happy to share that the British people understand the value of spending on vaccination. Recent Adelphi polling found that 70% of our people believe that supporting global vaccine access benefits Britain.

This is about not only British funding, but British leadership. Our expertise and convening power have been continuous assets for Gavi and the Global Fund. I fear that the Government's aid cuts have put that leadership at risk, so they must work to reverse that trend. This year, Britain will, along with South Africa, host the Global Fund's replenishment efforts. As host nation, other countries and non-governmental organisations will look to us for leadership in making a significant pledge. I hope we will step up.

In closing, I want to say a little more about what Britain's support means to others. I recently met Botswana's Health Minister and the special ambassador of the African Leaders Malaria Alliance. They shared with me their pride on the progress made on AIDS—with related maternal mortality falling by 80%—and on how malaria is now on the threshold of elimination. They told me that Britain's work in this success is “always felt very warmly,” that it “ties” the two peoples, and that it is ultimately an expression of “humanity.” They told me that the collaboration fuels trade and partnership. The Minister and the ambassador worry that so much progress and so much investment risks going into reverse in the wake of the global aid retrenchment, including by Britain. They do not expect global support to last forever, but wrenching it away before countries have fully built up their own capacity is a destructive mistake that they, and we, will pay for.

From the Liberal Democrat Benches, I encourage the Government to reaffirm our commitment and pledge generously to Gavi and the Global Fund. I encourage the Government to reaffirm our commitment and leadership in aid, and to reverse the savage cuts to our aid budget. This still-new Government must decide the Britain they

want to deliver. Our wish is to bestride the world stage as a development superpower, consolidating our massive progress and gains, affirming our friendship, acting with compassion while delivering for our own people, providing security from conflict and disease, and controlling upstream migration to these shores. The space for leadership is now vacant, and I urge the Government to fill it.

2.46 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) on securing this debate. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), who is a powerful advocate for global health—I think we can all see why he prefers to be on this side of the dais today rather than where you are, Ms Jardine.

Global health is everybody's health. This year we have significant replenishments for two organisations: Gavi and the Global Fund, which work on the frontline to secure our population against diseases, which do not respect borders. Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, is a unique alliance of Governments, private sector foundations, civil society organisations and vaccine manufacturers. As we have heard, Gavi has vaccinated more than 1 billion children in 78 low-income countries and saved more than 18.8 million lives.

In 2025, Gavi is seeking its eighth replenishment for its five-year strategic period, from 2026 to 2030. It is an impressive organisation; since becoming a shadow Minister in November, I have been pleased to continue to meet Gavi regularly and participate in roundtables as it approaches this crucial milestone. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria invests in sustainable health systems to eradicate those three diseases. It has saved an estimated 65 million lives. The Global Fund's eighth replenishment is also happening this year, and it will cover the funding period from 2026 to 2028.

Global health is a good example of a positive impact that we can have through aid. If we look, for example, at neglected tropical diseases, we see that our science, technology and research sectors produced both of the world's first malaria vaccines to be recommended by the World Health Organisation: Mosquirix and R21. During my time as Minister with responsibility for global health, I was fortunate enough to see the UK expertise in infectious diseases at first hand during a visit to the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, back in 2020. At the time, it was a Conservative Government who announced £15.5 million to support the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine in its research on preventing the spread of infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, and in strengthening health systems in fragile countries.

The UK is often cited as a leader in global health. In answers to several of my written questions on the topic—the Minister knows this well—Ministers start by saying:

“The UK is one of the largest donors to Gavi”.

They then give the reply that many right hon. and hon. Members will be accustomed to—that we need to wait until the spending review, and that all global health investments are being looked at in the round.

Iqbal Mohamed: Gavi relies heavily on philanthropic foundations, notably the Gates Foundation, but there are concerns that they may have a disproportionate influence on setting the priorities for global vaccine programmes. Does the right hon. Lady agree that any reduction or pulling back of the UK's support of those programmes could exacerbate those concerns?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that Gavi has the ability to pull in many different donors, but perhaps the specific questions following the ODA cut should be directed to the Minister. Gavi is a good example of how partnership can deliver for the benefit of the most vulnerable.

Conservative Governments made significant interventions that contributed to the UK's reputation as a global health leader. In 2015, we pledged £1.44 billion to Gavi over five years, and in 2020, when we hosted the global vaccine summit, we committed a further £1.65 billion. During the last two Global Fund replenishments, we pledged £1 billion in 2022 and £1.46 billion in 2020. Those pledges to Gavi and the Global Fund were just one part of our leadership and efforts to strengthen global health, and an incredibly important one at that.

I note from responses to my written questions that Ministers are often quite keen to highlight our record on global health, but I would like to take this opportunity to ask some questions about the Government's record to date. Following the reduction in ODA to 0.3% of GNI, I ask the Minister: what does global health now look like from the strategic level of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office? It would be helpful to know where the priorities are and whether the Government plan to continue the emphasis on multilateral NGOs such as Gavi and the Global Fund, or whether other models are to be considered.

Although the approach to global health may be changing under this Labour Government, the replenishment periods for Gavi and the Global Fund are rapidly approaching—in fact, Gavi's is literally weeks away. I would therefore welcome some clarity from the Minister on the discussions he has had with representatives of both funds and other donor nations. I want to press him a little about the absence of any UK pledges to date. I have previously had no luck getting an answer on that through my written questions, so I will have another go today. Has he considered the impact of the UK's apparent delay in pledging on our international reputation and our standing as a leader in global health?

Sam Rushworth: Does the right hon. Lady agree that the UK's track record on this has been quite impressive, given that other countries frankly punch below their economic weight, so this is not just about the UK's contribution but about the role we play in ensuring other countries shoulder the burden?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I recall that during the last replenishment, there were many conversations going on to encourage other countries and partners to step up to the plate. The UK's leadership had a real impact at that time. In a similar vein, what is the potential impact on other countries' pledges? Is the Minister thinking about making a reduced commitment or no pledge at all? Rather than ongoing uncertainty, it would help other donors and NGOs to know what the UK is doing, so that they can plan.

The Minister will be aware that there is a range of financial instruments available to him. One is the international finance facility for immunisation, through which £590 million of our £1.65 billion pledge in 2020 was distributed. IFFIm accelerates the delivery of vaccines by making the money from long-term Government donor pledges available immediately, allowing Gavi to vaccinate more individuals, faster. I would be grateful if the Minister updated us on any discussions he has had with Gavi and with IFFIm about its potential use to front-load any UK commitments.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I agree what a good model that is. Does the right hon. Member agree it is a model the Government could consider using for other things? An international finance facility for education has been released in the last few years. Does she agree that the Government could consider adopting this model across a range of different issues as we look to find alternative methods of development finance?

Wendy Morton: That is a really interesting point, because IFFIm has proved what can be achieved by working with other instruments. I hope that the Government will examine the options. The Minister may be able to share that information; it is not for me to say what the Government should do, but perhaps the Minister can do so in his response to the debate.

The global landscape of development is changing; we can see that across the rest of the world. For example, the US, which for so long has been an important anchor donor to a number of global health initiatives, has made dramatic reductions to USAID, so it would be helpful to know what discussions the Minister has had with his US counterparts and with other donor countries about co-ordinating our efforts, so we can maximise value for money in global health spend.

I will conclude as I started, by saying that global health is everybody's health. I pay enormous tribute to the Global Fund and Gavi, which harness the power of donations from taxpayers in countries like the UK to end preventable deaths from treatable diseases in some of the most vulnerable parts of the world. Global health may sometimes seem like an abstract concept, but we only have to look back at recent history to see that infectious diseases do not respect borders and that global solutions are needed to keep us all safe.

2.56 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Jardine, and to respond to such a passionate and well-attended debate on a subject that many Members here in Westminster Hall today know is close to my heart.

I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) for securing this debate. Of course, as well as being an excellent representative for Milton Keynes, she has many connections with me and with my constituency in Penarth, and I have connections with Milton Keynes that link to the subject of this debate, because it was in Milton Keynes that I first worked for World Vision, the international humanitarian and development NGO.

At that time, I worked in particular on issues related to HIV and AIDS. On a visit to Malawi with World Vision back in the early 2000s—they were very different times,

[Stephen Doughty]

when we had not made the progress that we have made today—I saw for myself the devastating impact that HIV and AIDS had on communities in southern Africa. I remember sitting in a village with a woman who had had to take on the care of her sister's children after her sister had died in her 20s. She had already been struggling to make ends meet, but then took on the children of her sibling on top of that. That was really stark stuff that I will never forget.

I have worked on these issues throughout my career. Indeed, I was at one of the early launches of the IFFIm bonds with Gordon Brown and at many of the other events and efforts organised by the last Labour Government that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central rightly said we should be very proud of. I also served as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV, AIDS and sexual health, and it is fantastic to see some of my successors in that role here in Westminster Hall today. That APPG is one of Parliament's longest-established APPGs and I can genuinely say that it has also been one of the most impactful over many decades, and is still doing important work today.

This is absolutely a timely moment to debate these issues, with the Gavi and Global Fund replenishments coming up later this year, and I am hugely grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members here today for their contributions. I can absolutely assure them that the Government hears those communications and that they will be communicated to Minister Chapman, my colleague in the other place. We will look very closely at a number of the points that have been raised today.

We should be very proud of our remarkable achievements over the last 20 years and we must maintain that positive trajectory, which includes increasing life expectancy and stopping the spread of pandemics. As has been said many times, disease respects no borders, and of course it has a devastating impact, not only on lives but on economies. Of course, the life-saving research to fight disease also has a benefit economically, as many hon. Members have already pointed out.

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

I can confirm, Dr Huq, that the UK will continue to champion global health, with the sustainable development goals as our lodestar and anchoring our work. Our partnerships with Gavi and the Global Fund are crucial to maintaining—indeed, to accelerating—progress. Of course, we are founding members and committed supporters of both organisations.

The Global Fund plays a crucial role, and I have worked with it many times on strengthening health systems and combating HIV and AIDs, tuberculosis and malaria. Of course, it also supports the UK's goal to end all new HIV cases in England by 2030 and efforts across the United Kingdom to end new HIV infection. Malaria, which has been rightly referred to today, primarily affects women and children. It puts a significant strain on health systems and hinders economic growth. Nigeria, for example, accounts for more than a quarter of global malaria cases and loses more than \$8 billion annually to the disease. There is also the devastating impact on lives and families. Our partnership with the Global Fund demonstrates the importance we place on working in

partnership with others around the world and in the global south. Together we have saved a remarkable 65 million lives and reduced AIDS, TB and malaria deaths by more than 60%. We have also built more resilient and sustainable health systems and accelerated progress towards universal healthcare coverage.

Gavi is a hugely important organisation whose work I have had the pleasure of seeing in this country and elsewhere. It is of course a public-private partnership with national Governments, the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and civil society, which is critical. Many Members mentioned those connections in procuring and providing affordable vaccines. Through Gavi, more than half the world's children are now vaccinated against some of the world's deadliest diseases, such as measles, malaria and meningitis, saving more than 18 million lives. It has been pointed out that a child born in a Gavi-supported country today is 70% less likely to die from a vaccine-preventable disease before their fifth birthday than a child born before that crucial alliance came into existence.

Every investment brings economic benefits, too. For every £1 of investment in immunisation, we see £54 in wider economic benefits. We are working with Gavi and other donors, including the Gates Foundation, to reach more children with lifesaving vaccines than ever before. Investments in Gavi and the Global Fund also drive real innovation. British expertise has transformed the fight against HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria through licensing and technology transfer, and by developing innovative technologies such as new dual active ingredient bed nets, which were piloted with support from Unitaids and the Global Fund and are now being rolled out at scale by the Global Fund.

Investment has also supported the development of vaccines such as MenFive to protect against the five main types of meningitis. Gavi delivered 5.1 million doses of MenFive in Niger and Nigeria.

David Mundell: The Minister made a passing reference, as other Members did, to Unitaids. Will he more formally acknowledge the huge importance of Unitaids in ensuring the delivery of medicines in some of the most difficult environments around the world?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely will. It is referenced throughout my briefings because of the important partnership and contacts that we have with Unitaids. I have seen its work as well.

We are delighted to be co-hosting the Global Fund's eighth replenishment with South Africa. We aim to attract and deepen investor engagement, sustain collective investments, and collaborate with the private sector on financing, innovation and supply chain support. We will do everything possible to ensure the success of that replenishment. Last month, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation made an impressive first pledge of \$150 million, a fivefold increase of its previous investment. That extraordinary commitment underscores the significant role of private philanthropy in advancing global health equity and highlights the power of partnership. As countries work to increase domestic financing, we must stand together and strive for success in those replenishments. We know this is an incredibly important moment for all these issues.

Many Members have rightly asked me about financial commitments—I have heard the voices around this room. Members will understand that we cannot make any financial commitments for the next replenishment until after the spending review is complete, but I assure them that we will continue to champion the Global Fund and Gavi and the people they serve, as well as the issues that have been raised today. Members' voices and those of their constituents have been heard. None of us want to make decisions about cuts to the ODA budget, not least because of our record of success on these issues, but when I look at some of the things I do every day, I can say that they are the right choices, although difficult. We remain committed, however, to international development and particularly to global health. The number of interventions on these issues have made that very clear across the House.

I will reply briefly to some specific points made. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central spoke about the wider benefits not only to the economy, but in terms of our research and the links to the covid vaccine research. I saw some of the pioneering RNA vaccine research in visits with the all-party group years ago. To then see that expertise used to combat a deadly pandemic was extraordinary.

The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell)—my successor on the all-party parliamentary group on HIV, AIDS and sexual health—rightly talked about this being investment, not charity. I think there is a consensus across the House on the proven track record of the Global Fund, Gavi and Unitaid.

My hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race) mentioned his visit to Kenya and the links with nutrition as well. He knows the Government's commitment to the global compact on nutrition and the work that was done around the summit and indeed the research in his own constituency. I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for her contribution. Her constituency is a place I know well, having done my masters at the University of St Andrews. Important work is being done at that university and at many institutions across the UK.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) asked important questions about women and girls. I can assure her that women and girls remain at the heart of our global health work. Gavi supports countries with vaccines that directly benefit girls and women, for example those against HPV, which we know is one of the leading causes of cervical cancer. Shockingly, over 85% of cervical cancer deaths are in low-income countries, and it is the main cause of death among many young women in Africa. Women and girls therefore remain at the heart of these partnerships going forward.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer here, as ever spoke passionately on the issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) spoke about the importance of work on TB. We are absolutely committed to this, whether through the Global Fund, Stop TB Partnership or our work with the TB Alliance. We are doing many pieces of research and operations work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) spoke about malaria, as did others. On that, there is really remarkable process being made on vaccines. Some of

the early findings from the malaria vaccine implementation programme show that an additional one in eight children can be prevented from dying if they receive vaccines in combination with other malaria interventions. We are carrying on the important work on anti-malarial bed nets and other interventions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Michael Payne), another of my successors in the APPG on HIV/AIDS, again spoke of the importance of the Global Fund, and I completely agree with him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) spoke about her experience working at the Francis Crick Institute, another leading institution doing incredible work. We should be very proud of our academics and researchers in this country for what they do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), a powerful voice for his constituents, also spoke of his own personal experiences in sub-Saharan Africa.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Doughty: I will not, because we are about to run out of time and I need to leave time for my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central to wind up.

The shadow spokespeople raised a number of choices. I do have to gently say to the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) that we are not in 1997. We are in a very different set of world circumstances. That is tough, but I believe in being honest with this House about the challenges we face. That does not mean we lose our commitment to development or global health, as is clear from what the Government are setting out, and I have listened carefully to what Members have said today.

Not only did the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) serve as the Minister; we also served on the International Development Committee together. She rightly talks about the important role that IFFIm and others can play—I might write to her more specifically on the plans on IFFIm. She asked me lots of questions about the spending review. I would love to be tempted into answering her, but I cannot, so I refer her to my previous answers.

The UK will continue to champion global health at a critical moment. We will work hard, together with our partners. We have heard about some fantastic work we have been responsible for and about some fantastic organisations. I can assure Members that the Government hear all of those voices, and they will be contemplated as we make some challenging but important decisions over the weeks and months ahead.

3.7 pm

Emily Darlington: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Dr Huq. I do not have much time to wind up, so I will not respond to each and every intervention, but let me say a huge thank you to Members. I am so pleased to hear that we continue to have a cross-party alliance and support for our work on the Global Fund and Gavi. The reason for that support, as we have heard, is that this is about our health, global health, and our growth in this country. We are world leaders. Given that the Prime Minister has said that, in the light of the cuts, we will work to increase the ODA

[Emily Darlington]

budget as soon as possible, I do not want us to make decisions today that put at risk not only our global leadership, but the lives of millions of people. That is something echoed by the 150 scientists who signed a letter published this week, by UK companies that support the jobs in the UK on this, and by the various interventions that we have had, including by the Minister and the ambassador from Botswana, who I have also had the pleasure to meet.

This is an opportunity for us to decide: are we going to continue to be a UK that looks out, understands that we live in a global world and puts biosecurity, the health of our population and the health of the world at the heart of our strategy? Or are we going to step back from that global leadership? I hope that we will be at the forefront of this debate and show leadership, ensuring not only that our contribution stays the same, but that each and every other country's does, as well as those of other donors. I thank the Minister for responding today; I know how much he agrees with many of the comments made, and I look forward to us continuing to work together.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered funding for GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Global Fund.

World Asthma Day

3.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Asthma Day.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. We had a very productive parliamentary visit to Egypt to promote freedom of religious belief. I commend you for that publicly today in the Chamber.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for accepting this debate. I am pleased, as always, to see the Minister in her place. I will come to my request to her later. My speech has been given to her staff and, I understand, to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), and to the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller).

I am pleased and privileged to be the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for respiratory health. I have a deep interest in respiratory health. It is probably because my second son was born with asthma. From a very early age, he was on medication. He had some psoriasis as well; there is an association between the two. He seems by and large to have grown out of it, but even now, at the age of 34, he depends upon the inhaler. Therefore, I have a personal interest in the issue, as most people do when they talk about asthma.

I am delighted to sponsor the debate for this year's World Asthma Day, which was on 6 May. This year's theme, set by the Global Initiative for Asthma, is "Make inhaled treatments accessible for all". GINA emphasises the need to ensure that everyone, regardless of their global location or socioeconomic status, has access to the inhaled medications that they need to control the underlying disease and to treat asthma attacks. I will be looking at that and other aspects of asthma care and treatment today. It is a pleasure to do so, and to see other Members who have been able to turn up to participate in the debate.

This may be my first occasion where the Minister has responded specifically to my debate. I wish her well in her role, I wish her well personally—she knows that—and I wish her well in the debate.

I am indebted to Asthma + Lung UK for its outstanding help and ongoing support. It has been enormously helpful to me and to the APPG. I welcome the work it does to serve the needs of people living with respiratory ill health. I also put on record my special thanks to Jonathan Fuld, the national clinical director for respiratory disease in England, for his expert advice, counsel and wisdom. I pay tribute to our expert stakeholder groups, which comprise senior clinicians, industry, professional bodies and other experts, for their ongoing work. The APPG has regular Zoom meetings, and Jonathan Fuld is always there to guide us and help us through the process.

The APPG has welcomed the improvements in inhaler technology, specifically the move to combination inhalers, which will ultimately eliminate the use of twin inhalers. That is a significant step and one that we should welcome. As highlighted in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence asthma guideline and by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency in its safety warning, SABAs—short-acting beta 2 agonists—should

not be used by people with a diagnosis of asthma. Therefore, there are and will always be treatments that we need to be careful with for safety reasons. Combination inhalers combine two kinds of medicine in one device, helping to keep inflammation in the lungs at bay while giving relief from symptoms such as breathlessness and tight chest.

I will come on to some figures later on, as we need to be reminded in this debate that, with asthma, it is not just that the inhaler saves someone and they are okay. There have been a number of deaths, which I will refer to later on.

The availability of inhalers in the UK ensures that people with asthma get the most clinically effective treatment and also allows the NHS to take a step towards its net zero targets, given that they are low carbon. It is therefore right to acknowledge that the first inhaled respiratory medicine using next-generation propellant with near-zero global warming potential was approved this week. That is a step in the right direction. Although it is for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, the technology offers great promise for other inhalers in the future.

It is wonderful to look back at all the advances made over the years in cancer treatments, or on diabetes or cardiovascular disease. They are trying to find a cure for dementia and for Alzheimer's, and there are some ideas for how that could be progressed, so there have been advances.

I am sure we have all seen the latest statistics on respiratory conditions and asthma—I will touch on them briefly. Lung conditions are the third biggest killer in the UK. Hospitalisations have doubled in the last 20 years and there has been little improvement over that time. I mentioned some of the improvements with inhalers, but there is still a long way to go.

Some 7.2 million people in the UK live with asthma; 2 million children live with asthma. That represents one in nine adults and one in eight children. The UK has a higher death rate due to respiratory illnesses than the OECD average, and we have the highest death rate in Europe. Asthma kills four people in the UK every day and someone has a potentially life-threatening asthma attack every 10 seconds. These are the stats, but they are not just stats—they are families and individuals, and people who deal with this every day. The children and the parents worry, the adults worry and the families worry.

Over the past 10 years, more than 12,000 people have died from asthma. Almost all of those deaths were preventable. The National Review of Asthma Deaths report, "Why asthma still kills", published by the Royal College of Physicians in 2014, found that two thirds of asthma deaths were preventable. If they are preventable, why can we not do more and make that happen? That is one of my requests to the Minister.

Some 66% of people are not getting an appointment with a GP or an asthma nurse within the recommended 48 hours after an emergency admission. Between 2012 and 2020, deaths from asthma have increased by 26%. The number of people who have died due to asthma attacks is very cruel.

The costs to the country associated with asthma are substantial. Asthma and COPD cost the NHS some £9.6 billion in direct costs each year, representing 3.4% of total NHS expenditure, and they cause wider reductions

in productivity due to illness and premature deaths, totalling £4.2 billion a year, with an overall impact of £13.8 billion on the economy. In my country, my region of Northern Ireland, asthma costs £178 million a year alone. These costs cannot be ignored.

I will put forward some ideas that the Government and the Minister can hopefully take on board to reduce the expenditure and the death toll. Adding up the cost to the NHS and direct costs from the loss of productivity and the monetary value of people suffering lung conditions, the cost to the UK economy is some £188 billion a year. The annual estimated cost of asthma and COPD to the NHS is £4.9 billion, with an estimated 12.7 million lost workdays per year. There is a financial cost, a loss of workdays and a cost to the productivity of our nation.

The impact of asthma on the NHS is considerable. Respiratory conditions are a major cause of avoidable hospital admissions. If we can avoid hospital admissions, that is a strategy and a way forward. There were some 56,853 admissions due to asthma in 2022-23. Waiting lists for respiratory care have risen by 263% over the past 10 years. Those are worrying figures. There is a need to have this debate, and today is the opportunity to do that and to look forward.

Lung conditions, including COPD, asthma and respiratory infections, place a huge burden on the NHS, especially in the winter months, when it is always worse: respiratory admissions increase by some 80%. Breathing issues are the leading cause of all emergency admissions in England, and in common with other respiratory illnesses, asthma is hit hard by inequalities and deprivation.

There is a link between poverty and asthma, so I hope that the Minister can give some encouragement in relation to that. The burden of respiratory disease disproportionately affects the most deprived. Those from the poorest communities are three times more likely to die from asthma, compared with those in the richest—that is another worrying trend. Children living in the most deprived 10% of areas are four times more likely to require emergency admission to hospital due to asthma than those living in the least deprived areas. Again, there is a clear statistical difference between those who live in deprived areas and those who do not.

The findings of the national child mortality database report on child deaths expose the inextricable link between poor lung health and deprivation, with more than half—56%—of the children who died in the period that the report covers coming from the poorest communities. I know that when the NHS was set up, this would not have been the policy of the Government, but if there are more deaths among children who just happen to live in deprived areas, we really need to address that.

I welcome and support the Government's commitment to reducing inequalities and deprivation—in particular, inequitable asthma outcomes. We hope to run local meetings in the most deprived areas of the country to try to determine some of the causes of the variation in asthma outcomes. I would like to offer the Minister our support in any way that we can help. We are pleased to have here today representatives who carry out the admin for the APPG on respiratory health. We thank both of them, and others, for their contributions.

There have been some welcome developments in respiratory health recently, including the introduction of a new integrated guideline for asthma, which was a

[Jim Shannon]

joint collaboration by NICE, the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network and the British Thoracic Society. It is being rolled out across the country. They are good steps in the right direction to try to do even better, but I urge the Minister to make sure that there is no implementation hesitancy across the integrated care boards, with uneven take-up. I also ask what steps she will take to ensure that it is rolled out equally across the country. That is one of our requests.

The APPG also welcomes and supports the three shifts announced by the Secretary of State: analogue to digital, hospital to community, and treatment to prevention. I suggest that respiratory health outcomes could benefit significantly from all three of those commitments from him. I also welcome the upcoming neighbourhood health services, in principle. Although we do not know all the details yet, there is an agreement in principle for that work to happen. I ask the Minister what future she sees for the community diagnostic centres, following the transition to the abolition of NHS England?

The APPG has already sent a submission for the 10-year plan, which we hope will deliver what we all wish to see. I welcome the Government's commitment to investing £26 billion of extra money for health. I welcome the positive stance that the Secretary of State and the Minister have taken in relation to that. However, we feel that respiratory health should be key and in the centre of the 10-year plan. I understand that that plan is likely to have cancer and cardiovascular disease plans associated with it, and I hope that respiratory health conditions will be prioritised in the same way. Could the Minister ensure that respiratory health will be prioritised in national strategies and NHS guidance, including in the 10-year plan and the life sciences sector plan, which are in development, and in future winter resilience guidance?

One major issue that we see every year in the NHS is winter pressure. We cannot deny it, and it is not anybody's fault; it is a fact of life. Vaccines for flu and other respiratory infections are enormously helpful, of course, but ensuring that patients are on the right treatment can also contribute to reducing these pressures. The transitions from hospital to community and sickness to prevention are essential to making this happen. The question is, how best can it happen? Again, I hope that the Minister can give us some thoughts on that.

The APPG will hold a roundtable in the next few weeks to discuss how good respiratory health measures can help to ease winter pressures. It might be helpful to consider those at this time of the year, long before we get to that stage in the latter part of the year. The APPG will report its findings to the Minister directly. A previous Minister agreed to a meeting with us, and I am quite sure that the Minister today will do the same, so I ask whether we could have that in the diary.

Severe asthma affects up to 5% of people with asthma, and is associated with frequent exacerbations, hospital attendances and steroid use. Biologics have been described by leading clinicians as lifesaving for severe asthma patients, yet an Asthma + Lung UK report suggested that in June 2020 only 23% of eligible patients were receiving a biologic for their severe asthma. Those figures worry me. I understand that that was five years ago, but again I seek some positivity in relation to it.

A recent poster at the European Respiratory Society congress showed that the uptake of biologics for severe asthma is low and variable in the UK. That has to be addressed, and I seek the Minister's thoughts on it. The national median uptake of biologics by patients with severe asthma in England between 2016 and 2023 was 16%. ICBs are not maximising the uptake, which varies widely between 2% and 29%, against a target of 50% to 60%. That does not cut the cake. Based on current regional use of biologics in England, modelling forecasts that it will take 37 years for only 50% of eligible patients to be on biologic therapy. That cannot be satisfactory. We must do better.

At present, with the existing severe asthma service specification, patients can wait years for access to these treatments. There is limited awareness of severe asthma and insufficient capacity in the system, and unnecessarily complicated multidisciplinary teams hinder timely access. This must not be ignored. We must not have a postcode lottery, with some parts of the United Kingdom providing the correct standard of asthma care and other parts falling behind.

We await the publication of the new service specification, which I hope will minimise delays for patients who really need the biologics. In other areas, such as dermatology or rheumatology, secondary care clinicians can prescribe biologic medicines to patients who fit the relevant criteria without the patient requiring assessment at tertiary level, so can secondary care prescribing be introduced for severe asthma? I have had a lot of asks of the Minister, but they are positive, constructive asks that seek to move us forward, save lives and help those with asthma.

Time is going far too fast, but the facts are clear: too many people living with lung conditions are missing out on the treatments that they desperately need to live and stay well at home. Current access is limited, patchy and being held back by workforce shortages. Severe asthma accounts for only around 4% of the total asthma population, but this is still almost 5,000 people, and they are probably the ones who will contribute the most to asthma deaths in a year. Such is the severity of their symptoms that this group is estimated to account for at least half of all expenditure on asthma—some £38 million a year.

I want to give an example of what we are doing in Northern Ireland and show what it would mean here on the mainland. I know that this is not the Minister's responsibility, but thousands of people across Northern Ireland are missing out on key diagnostic tests because of disagreements between primary and secondary care about who should deliver the services. If, for example, fractional exhaled nitric oxide were made available to all GPs across Northern Ireland, its use could save £4 million by optimising asthma treatment. An uptake in spirometry testing in primary care to just 40% of eligible patients would result in £1.7 million in direct health service cost savings in reduced COPD exacerbations—a reduction of 1,778 hospital bed days, of which 605 would be winter bed days.

I used an example from Northern Ireland because I have access to those figures, but were we to replicate that for each healthcare trust or board in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the improvement to health and freedom from financial weight would be

massive. It is not just about the money saved, or the lives saved; it is about the care of those with asthma. If we can make it better in any way through today's debate, it will have been worth while. I look forward to everyone's contributions. I believe that changes can and must be made. I look to the Minister to begin that process today.

3.31 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): It is a privilege to speak under your chairship, Dr Huq. I am deeply grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate, which is crucial—not only for my constituents of Birmingham Perry Barr and the city of Birmingham, but nationally and internationally.

Last week, we marked World Asthma Day—a moment of reflection that should fill us with not only resolve but deep discomfort. Asthma is one of the most common health conditions in the UK, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, affecting over 7 million people, yet all too often it is also one of the most fatally overlooked. Every eight hours, someone in this country dies from an asthma attack. In 90% of those cases, their death means a life cut short, a family devastated and a future lost due to what should have been a manageable condition. Such people are dying not because we lack treatments but because our holistic healthcare system is failing them.

This crisis is particularly felt by my constituents in Birmingham Perry Barr. Ours is a proud industrial city, but that legacy comes at a cost. Poor air quality continues to fuel respiratory illnesses, and too many of my constituents are left battling the consequences. I received a deeply moving letter from a constituent who has lived with asthma for years. Despite managing her condition to the best of her ability, she suffers asthma attacks constantly, leaving her in constant agony. Unfortunately, her words echo the experiences of many up and down the country. Let us be clear: asthma may be common, but it is no less deadly for that, and no less deserving of urgent, focused attention.

I commend the tireless work of people such as Kim Douglas, who is a constituent of mine, after the tragic loss of her three-year-old son George to undiagnosed and untreated asthma. She founded the George Collier Memorial Fund in his memory. That foundation is now calling for two vital reforms that could save lives and ease the burden on our health system. First, it is calling for inhalers to be made free of charge for all patients; 57% of those who end up in emergency care for asthma have skipped their medication because they could not afford the prescription, and almost half missed appointments out of fear that they would not be able to pay for the medication afterwards. In one of the richest countries in the world, that is simply indefensible. A child's ability to breathe should never depend on their parents' ability to pay.

Secondly, the foundation is calling for all emergency inhalers to be fitted with a dose counter. Inhalers are often relied on in moments of life or death—in emergencies—yet nearly three quarters of patients cannot tell when their inhaler is empty. They go on using them, trusting them, only to find when it matters most that they offer no relief. For too many families, that avoidable failure has had devastating consequences.

Those two simple changes could prevent thousands of hospital admissions every year and, importantly, they could save lives. I ask the Minister whether she will meet with me and the George Collier Memorial Fund organisers to discuss these vital recommendations? Will she commit to a 10-year respiratory health plan that finally treats this crisis with the urgency it demands?

3.35 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this debate to mark World Asthma Day.

There are two reasons why I wanted to speak in this debate. The first is personal: I developed asthma as a child, almost certainly as a result of the pollution of the Milan of the early 1990s, and living down the road from the Alfa Romeo factory. While the condition improved for me, unfortunately my younger sister suffered severely with it and continues to suffer today.

The second reason reflects the changes that my constituency has faced. Bournemouth was founded as a wellness resort, and back in the day visitors would come to take the air. In fact, one of our most famous residents, Sir Merton Russell-Cotes, who went on to become mayor and own the Royal Bath hotel, was sent to the south coast of England because he had chronic respiratory conditions, and ended up living in Bournemouth. It is still a place where people move to improve their quality of life and to live a healthier life—but Bournemouth was recently ranked as the 14th worst location in the UK for air quality. A staggering 83% of residents with lung conditions in my constituency say that poor air quality has made their conditions worse.

The hon. Member for Strangford has already pointed out that respiratory deaths are strongly linked to deprivation, more so than any other condition, and people living in the poorest areas of the UK are three times more likely to die from asthma than those in the wealthiest. That national injustice is reflected starkly in my constituency, where areas in the less affluent north, such as Alderney, West Howe, Kinson and Branksome, have asthma rates significantly higher than the national and regional averages.

If we are serious about improving outcomes for people with asthma, we must take a cross-departmental and holistic approach—one that addresses not just healthcare, but pollution, housing, transport and lifestyle. That is why I welcome the Environment Secretary's commitment to improve air quality across the country, including in Bournemouth West; cleaner air saves lives and it must remain a top priority.

I welcome the Government's broader efforts to tackle the root causes of respiratory illness: cutting emissions and improving public access to air quality information; the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and the Government's ambition to create a smoke-free generation; and key legislation such as the Renters Rights' Bill—specifically the inclusion of Awaab's law, which is vital for my constituents. I am regularly contacted by residents, who are living in substandard conditions, plagued by mould and damp. These environmental hazards are not just unsightly, but dangerous. Mould is a known trigger for asthma and other respiratory conditions. With a clear link between asthma and deprivation, improving housing standards is a matter of not just fairness, but health.

[Jessica Toale]

Our national health service is in need of fundamental reform. We must move away from a system that reacts to ill health towards one that prevents it. I support the Government's vision to shift more care into the community and tackle the backlog in treatment. In Bournemouth West, the challenges are particularly acute: 32% of respiratory patients are not seen within the 18-week NHS target and, worryingly, 60% of people diagnosed with asthma are not receiving even the most basic asthma care. Those outcomes place us among the worst-performing areas in the south-west. Meanwhile, over 90% of COPD patients in Dorset are not receiving the standard of care—the worst figure in the south of England.

We must end the postcode lottery in NHS services. Access to care should not depend on where someone lives. Is the Department aware of the issues facing my constituents in Bournemouth and people across Dorset? What can be done to improve access to healthcare for people with respiratory conditions in my area?

As the Health Secretary develops the NHS 10-year plan, I also urge the Minister to seriously consider the proposals set out by Asthma and Lung UK, which include: establishing national targets to reduce preventable asthma deaths, improving access to biologic medicines, supporting the use of digital monitoring tools and reviewing funding for asthma research.

In the spirit of World Asthma Day, let us recommit to ensuring that no one dies from preventable asthma attacks and ensure that every person, regardless of postcode or background, can access the care, medicine and environment they need to breathe freely.

3.39 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, and always a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important and timely debate to mark World Asthma Day, which took place last week. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for respiratory health, he is a tireless advocate for the millions of people across the UK living with lung conditions—and, indeed, multiple other conditions. As my party's health spokesperson, I have been in this Chamber many times for debates that he has secured. He is certainly a credit to the less-spoken-about health conditions. His commitment to raising awareness and driving change in health is deeply appreciated, and I commend him for his leadership.

To mark World Asthma Day 2025, the Global Initiative for Asthma has chosen the theme “Make Inhaled Treatments Accessible for ALL”. It is pertinent that this debate follows one on international development and global health—a powerful reminder of the need to ensure people with asthma have access to the treatments they need, not just to manage their day-to-day symptoms, but to prevent life-threatening attacks.

Asthma remains one of the most common chronic health conditions worldwide, yet, as the hon. Gentleman clearly set out, progress over the past two decades have been slow. Lung conditions are now the third biggest killer in the UK. Hospitalisations due to respiratory illness have doubled in the past 20 years, and the UK has seen little improvement in outcomes over that time.

Those are not just statistics—they are people, and they reflect a systematic failure to treat respiratory health with the seriousness it demands.

There are 7.2 million people living with diagnosed asthma in the UK today, including 2 million children—one in nine adults and one in eight children. The UK's asthma death rate is higher than the OECD average, and the highest in Europe. Every day, four people in this country die from asthma attacks. Every 10 seconds, someone experiences an asthma attack that could be life-threatening. That should be a wake-up call.

In my constituency of Chichester, 7.5% of GP patients aged six and over have been prescribed some form of asthma-related medication in the past year. That statistic is higher than the national average, and it represents hundreds of families trying to manage a condition that, with the right support, should not prevent anyone from living a full and active life. Yet time and again those are the families let down in other areas, by poor housing, air pollution—as the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) mentioned—inconsistent care and a public health system that has been hollowed out over the past decade.

The UK should be a world leader in public health. We have a long history of innovation, grassroots sports, high-quality food production and leading medical research, but, thanks to the previous Government, we now lag behind our international peers. It is profoundly troubling that our children experience some of the worst asthma outcomes across Europe and other high-income countries. The Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to take urgent action.

First and foremost, we must reverse the Conservative cuts to public health funding, but we must not stop there. We need a comprehensive approach that tackles the root causes of poor lung health, from poverty and cold, damp housing to polluted air and hazardous working environments. We want an increase to the public health grant delivered by local authorities, with part of that funding set out for communities facing the greatest health inequalities. Those communities must be supported by co-designed solutions, including better smoking cessation services, stronger action on air quality and improvements to housing and occupational health.

Prevention must be at the heart of our approach. That means investing in primary care, supporting individuals to improve their own health and giving local areas the tools they need to build healthier environments. It is one of the most effective ways that we can reduce pressure on NHS services and deliver better value for money to taxpayers.

The Liberal Democrats would also take decisive action on air pollution by passing a clean air Act based on World Health Organisation guidelines and establishing a new air quality agency to enforce those standards. We must do more to ensure access to consistent, high-quality care for those already living with long-term respiratory conditions such as asthma. That includes guaranteeing that people with severe asthma have access to a named GP so that they do not have to constantly retell their story to new clinicians, and increasing the capacity of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency so that new treatments can reach patients more quickly.

I was on a Delegated Legislation Committee earlier this week, with the Minister, where the funding for the MHRA was increased. However, it was not clear whether that would speed up the process of getting new medicines to patients. As the hon. Member for Strangford rightly pointed out, the scale of this issue demands urgency. Four asthma deaths every day and a life-threatening attack every 10 seconds are tragedies could be prevented, if only we prioritised respiratory health as we ought to.

Will the Minister, therefore, commit to setting aside part of the public health grant to support those communities facing the largest health inequalities? Will the Government propose a new clean air Act based on World Health Organisation guidelines, to ensure those with severe, long-term respiratory conditions are not breathing in harmful pollutants? Finally, when can we expect the publication of the 10-year health plan, and will respiratory health be included?

Asthma is not just a clinical issue; it is a question of justice and of whether we are willing to tackle the social and environmental factors that make people ill in the first place. I hope the Minister will reflect seriously on what has been said today.

3.45 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq.

I would also like to place on record my thanks again to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Those unkind might say he chases the spotlight of Westminster Hall, but they would be grossly mistaken: he chases purpose, which is why we find him everywhere, with boundless energy, trying to make a difference, and nowhere more so than in health. This must be the sixth debate I have had with him, if not more, so I take my hat off to him—he really is a champion in this space—and I thank him for what he does.

Asthma teaches us never to take a single breath for granted. When simply breathing becomes a conscious effort, we realise just how much strength it takes just to stay alive. I have seen that as a clinician working in A&E and as a GP; one of the scariest moments is when a child comes in having an asthma attack, or worse still, has one in the GP surgery, and having to manage the inhalers, the puffs they take and what to do when they deteriorate.

I have a personal story too—if we are declaring interests—to share with the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale). I suffered from mild asthma growing up as a child and into my teens, but I ended up in an intensive care unit after having my appendix taken out. I ended up with bilateral pneumonia. That is highly unusual in the first place, but even more so when it is a doctor involved—we seem to be the most complicated to treat. It meant that afterwards I was left with significant breathing problems and symptoms that behaved like asthma—so much so that I would need steroids to solve them. I was also under the brittle asthma clinic in Oxford when I lived there.

I know at first hand what it is like to suffer when it is impossible to breathe, when someone's ability to run is taken away or, worse still, they up in the middle of the

night in a panic. This is a very timely and important debate that the hon. Member for Strangford has brought forward, and he has my sympathies and gratitude for doing so. On that line, I also thank Asthma + Lung UK for all the work it does to highlight this issue. As we have heard, with 7 million people suffering, this is the bread and butter of the NHS: from primary care to secondary care, day in, day out, people are being diagnosed with and treated for asthma.

As we await the 10-year plan for the NHS next month, this debate provides the chance for us to ask where we have got to with the Government. The last Government had come forward with the major conditions strategy but, alas, the new Government decided to take a different direction. Of course, that is their prerogative—no Government are bound by their predecessors. However, it does raise the question: what next? The Government will need to set out what they will do as an alternative to tackle asthma and other respiratory conditions.

It would be helpful to hear from the Minister today what assurances she can give about the inclusion she may have made of these conditions in the plan. Can she also set out what engagement her Department has had with patient groups such as Asthma + Lung UK, who put a lot of time into previous submissions to ensure the last Government understood what was needed? It would be sad to see that replication being needed, but at least the work would not be lost.

Part of dealing with asthma and respiratory conditions is vaccines and prevention. Work is clearly needed to increase uptake of the respiratory syncytial virus vaccine. I welcome findings that there was nearly a 30% reduction in hospital admissions among those aged 75 to 79, thanks to this vaccine, but the UK Health Security Agency has warned that many more older adults remain unprotected from RSV. To illustrate that point, up to the end of March, only half of eligible older adults had been vaccinated and more than 1 million people were yet to receive their vaccine.

I think we all share concerns about the significant increase in the number of bed spaces occupied by people with flu in the 2024-25 winter. That was partly due to vaccination rates among eligible groups being below what we would hope for. This winter, three times as many people as in the previous year were hospitalised because of the flu, which contributed significantly to waiting times in A&E departments. Without a clear increase in vaccination, the NHS will continue to face difficulties in urgent and emergency care. What steps will the Minister take over the next few months to increase the uptake of RSV, flu and pneumonia vaccines, particularly by those who suffer with asthma and COPD?

As a clinician, I remember over the years having to deal with different sets of guidelines. The hon. Member for Strangford hit the nail on the head. It was great to see the BTS, NICE and SIGN guidelines all coming together in November 2024, but there is a challenge in having guidelines, rolling them out and making sure clinicians are educated on the changes. What steps have the Government taken to ensure that ICBs and royal colleges are aware of the guidelines and that they are percolating down to everyone who might need to see them?

Access to fractional exhaled nitric oxide—FeNO—testing is an important step in diagnosis. There is also spirometry. Given the success of community diagnostic centres,

[Dr Luke Evans]

have the Government given any thought to how such apparatus could be rolled out to communities so that more people might get access to it?

One thing that is really important with respiratory diseases, especially asthma, is smoking cessation. The Tobacco and Vapes Bill is going through Parliament, but is there any targeted approach for those who suffer with asthma to help them to reduce smoking?

Much of asthma care is delegated to nurses, not doctors. How does that fit into the forthcoming workforce plan? Will special consideration be given to respiratory nurses in both primary and secondary care? After all, they have become the experts in exactly what to prescribe and when.

Finally and most importantly, what steps are being taken to reduce asthma deaths, especially preventable ones? The word “preventable” is the biggest key here. I am keen to hear from the Minister how the Government intend to tackle this problem.

Breathing: it is the first and last thing we do, but we rarely notice it until it has gone—or, in the case of asthma, until it is threatened. I know the Minister understands that, and I know the people out there watching understand it. I hope that understanding transforms into policy.

3.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this timely debate forward as we mark last week’s World Asthma Day. It shows real leadership from the chair of the APPG for respiratory health. In that spirit, I would be delighted to take him up on his offer of a meeting. We will arrange that as soon as we possibly can—I am keen to do it.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) to discuss the issues that he raised, including prescription charges. There are currently no plans to review the list of medical conditions that entitle someone to apply for a medical exemption certificate. However, approximately 89% of prescription items are dispensed free of charge in the community in England and a wide range of exemptions are already in place. Eligibility depends on factors such as the patient’s age and whether they are in qualifying full-time education, are pregnant, have recently given birth or are in receipt of certain benefits. People on low incomes can apply for help with their health costs through the NHS low income scheme. Children are of course entitled to free prescriptions.

NHS England’s children and young people’s transformation team have been working closely with the MHRA on dose counters being added to inhalers. The “British National Formulary for Children” has been updated with guidance and supportive resources for patients and clinicians, which have been widely shared. We are awaiting an update on progress on making dose counter inhalers dominant in the supply chain from the pharmaceutical industry. I will be more than happy to update the House when we have it.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale), who focused on air quality, which is a priority for the Government and part of our prevention strategy, and the technology to help to manage asthma. There are a range of technologies available to help people to manage their asthma, and NHS England and NICE are exploring the potential for the platforms for digital self-management of asthma to be evaluated, but that depends on the technology readiness level. Guidelines developed jointly by NICE, the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network and the British Thoracic Society to harmonise recommendations across the organisations were published in November 2024, and I hope they are useful.

Before I respond to the Front-Bench contributions—if there is anything I do not cover, please let us know and we will endeavour to write with the relevant details—I want to pay tribute to charities and campaigners: people who are doing the hard yards of helping to equip our hospitals and supporting people to manage their conditions in their day-to-day lives. I thank Asthma + Lung UK, Beat Asthma and the Asthma Relief Charity, to name just a few. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), asked about the contributions by charities to the major conditions strategy. I reassure him that engagement with such stakeholders has been central to the development of the 10-year plan. All submissions made to the major conditions strategy have been taken into account—nothing was wasted.

As the hon. Member for Strangford outlined, asthma is the most common lung condition, affecting nearly 5.5 million people in the UK. Just under one in 10 kids live with asthma, and more than 12,000 people have died from asthma attacks in the last 10 years. World Asthma Day is not just about treating a condition; it is about shining a spotlight on inequalities. I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman that everyone, regardless of where they live or how much they have in their bank account, has the right to access the inhaled medications they need to control their condition and treat attacks.

Nevertheless, statistics published by Asthma + Lung UK just this month show that Asian people with asthma from the most deprived quintile in England are almost three times more likely to have an emergency admission to hospital than their white counterparts. Black people with asthma from that group are also more than twice as likely to be admitted to hospital. This is a burning injustice. As if that were not enough, the annual economic burden of asthma in the UK is around £3 billion a year. Lung conditions collectively cost the NHS £11 billion annually. That is why we must act.

I will update Members on NHS England’s activities in this space before moving on to wider Government efforts. NHS England is taking steps to support integrated care systems to improve outcomes for people with asthma through its national respiratory programme by providing targeted funding, clarifying what systems should be doing to ensure that people with asthma receive a high-quality and timely diagnosis, and working with key partners, industry representatives, patient groups and clinicians to support improved respiratory disease management. That will include shared decision making on inhaler choice and making better use of inhalers to reduce the overuse of reliever inhalers and encourage the use of preventer inhalers.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised the issue of access to and roll-out of treatments. Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership, on behalf of NHS England, commissioned a national audit across respiratory care, which includes asthma, and all data from the audit is published for open access. NICE is working with BTS, SIGN, NHS England and others to review the resources available to support implementation of the guidelines, and plans to publish a respiratory toolkit. To support implementation of NICE guidance, NHS England has been engaging with health system partners across the country to co-ordinate resources and implementation efforts to make sure that patients are on the appropriate treatment regime.

NHS England is also protecting our children and young people through the national bundle of care. It is putting asthma care at the top of the agenda by giving asthma a higher priority within systems, providing funding for regional leadership, and strengthening governance and accountability to improve outcomes. It has also played a crucial role in making training easier and more readily available for staff by bringing together existing guidance and resources with a structured training scheme. Since its publication there has been a noticeable reduction in hospital admissions.

The hon. Member for Strangford and the shadow Minister both raised spirometry, a diagnostic test for asthma as well as other respiratory diseases. NHS England is working with a range of partners, including Asthma + Lung UK, the British Thoracic Society, the Association for Respiratory Technology and Physiology and clinical leads to make sure that systems have everything they need to increase the number of people receiving early and accurate diagnosis for respiratory disease. In the past year the Government have made extra funding available to make sure that staff have the proper training and accreditation to use spirometry effectively.

On inequalities, NHS England is taking steps to uplift the most deprived quintile through Core20PLUS5. That initiative focuses on five areas of improvement, of which chronic respiratory disease is a key part. There are targeted interventions to detect and treat asthma. The PLUS population groups include ethnic minority communities, people with a learning disability, autistic people, coastal communities, people with multimorbidity and protected characteristic groups. Core20PLUS5 also has a dedicated workstream for children and young people. The primary focus is to address over-reliance on reliever medications while decreasing the number of asthma attacks. That has made some progress, with clear reductions in the over-prescribing of reliever inhalers over the past few years. Between April 2022 and February 2025 the proportion of patients with asthma who received six or more reliever inhaler prescriptions fell from just under 20% to under 16%. The Government are supporting systems to take innovative approaches to expanding access to their diagnostic services, with a particular focus on addressing health inequalities.

Finally, the NHS rightly offers the flu vaccine free of charge to people with severe asthma as seasonal illnesses pose more of a threat to them than others. NHS England has been working with the severe asthma collaborative to develop the capacity of severe asthma centres to improve patient access to biologic treatments and to reduce variation in prescribing and patient management. That work has shown improved identification of patients

with potential severe asthma in primary and secondary care, resulting in referral to severe asthma centres for consideration of their eligibility for biologic therapy. For four in 10 asthma patients with severe asthma those treatments can significantly improve their quality of life. However, it is vital that biologics are prescribed only following specialist assessment. Currently, the NHS is deploying six biological treatments approved to treat severe asthma.

The shadow Minister raised the issue of vaccines. I reassure him that a strategy and action are being delivered to increase vaccination uptake, including RSV and flu, because that is a priority for the Government. Returning to biologics, significant work was undertaken to drive uptake and access to them through the NHS England severe asthma collaborative, and patient outcomes are submitted to the UK severe asthma registry. That has improved the identification of patients with potential severe asthma, and has resulted in those people being referred to the relevant care pathways.

Every member of the Government is committed to raising the healthiest generation of children in our history. We are taking steps to protect our kids from obesity and smoking, which are major risk factors; each one is responsible for roughly a third of asthma deaths. We are taking action through the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which I am pleased to say has just passed Second Reading in the other place.

In her autumn Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor took steps to ensure that the soft drinks industry levy remains effective. We have not just uprated the levy to bring it in line with inflation; we also published a consultation just last month on two proposed changes—reducing the lowest sugar tax threshold from 5 grams to 4 grams of total sugar per 100 ml, and removing the exemption for milk-based and milk substitute drinks. Finally, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero is cleaning up our air with Great British Energy and a raft of other measures.

My Department will shortly be publishing its 10-year plan for health to make our NHS fit for the future. We will shift the focus of our NHS from sickness to prevention, hospital to community, and analogue to digital. Until then, we are already taking steps on prevention by helping people to lose weight and quit smoking or vaping, and by helping to clean up our air. We are helping people to get diagnosed closer to home by requiring community diagnostic centres to provide spirometry tests. The Government remain committed to ensuring that existing CDCs, where they are not already, are rolled out at full operational capacity at their permanent site.

Dr Luke Evans: The Minister mentioned spirometry. Could she comment on FeNO, and if not, could she write to us? The guidelines are built around that, but access is going to be an issue.

Ashley Dalton: Yes, I confirm that I will write to the shadow Minister on FeNO at a later date. NHS England is also piloting a digital annual asthma check.

I am sorry, Dr Huq, this is highly irregular, but I am feeling extremely unwell; I need to go and make myself okay. *[Interruption.]* Thank you for your forbearance, Dr Huq. Crohn's is not something that we have debated

[Ashley Dalton]

in this Chamber; if we did, no doubt I would be the responding Minister, and I can assure you that I would be able to speak from personal expertise.

Jim Shannon: I used to have close contact with a guy called Simon Hamilton, who was an MLA for the constituency that I represent. He had Crohn's disease—my knowledge of it came through him—and he was caught short many a time, if that is the way to put it.

May I ask the Minister a wee question? I asked about CDCs once NHS England is abolished—[*Interruption.*] I can see that she is coming to that. That is grand.

Ashley Dalton: Yes, I will come to many of those issues.

As I was saying, NHS England is piloting a digital annual asthma check, which, if successful, will mean that fewer people miss that valuable check and will keep the monitoring of their asthma up to date.

The Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), asked about the public health grant. The grant has been increased and local directors of public health are best placed to identify where to target resources in their communities. As I have said, the 10-year health plan will be published next month. It will cover all conditions and will consider lung health. I have talked about the stakeholder engagement that was really important in that, and I can guarantee that, with the 10-year strategic plan for the NHS, we will look right across the board at how we can make sure that all conditions get due consideration.

During our short interruption, I was able to get a little more information for the shadow Minister on FeNO. Wessex Academic Health Science Network has created a FeNO rapid uptake product delivery toolkit, which is providing downloadable tools and resources to support NHS organisations with the adoption and implementation of FeNO testing to improve outcomes. Anyone can access that toolkit, which contains case studies of best practice identified through the programme. I hope that is helpful.

On the changes to NHS England, we are abolishing NHS England in itself, but none of its functions is disappearing. We are working really closely across the Department and NHS England, as well as with our ICB colleagues, to ensure that all services are transferred in an appropriate way. The purpose of the changes is to make things as efficient and targeted as possible and to ensure that they get to the people who need them the most.

Ensuring that community diagnostic centres are supported is really important to the Government, as it is very much part of one of our three shifts: from hospital to community. Those shifts—the other two are from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital—are at the very heart of the 10-year plan.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for bringing forward the debate. I am sure that he would agree that World Asthma Day is not just for raising awareness; it should also be a celebration of the great things that people with asthma have accomplished. I did not know this until I saw the research for this debate, but past asthmatics have included Dickens, Disraeli and Beethoven. If those examples seem archaic, I can also point to

Harry Styles, Jessica Alba and David Beckham, as well as to many prominent Olympic medallists. People with asthma achieve great things. It is our job in this place to help them to reach their full potential, with a particular focus on addressing how respiratory conditions affect people in deprived communities.

4.14 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all hon. Members for participating in the debate. The hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) referred to the fact that someone dies every six hours—four people in a day—from asthma. He also talked about young George Collier, and the Minister kindly agreed to meet the hon. Gentleman and the family. That is very positive; I would not expect anything other than positivity of the Minister, but I thank her for that. Such meetings help us to represent our constituents in a positive fashion.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale), who is an asthma sufferer—I know about asthma only through my son, but the hon. Lady has lived experience—talked about how asthma affects her life, and I understand that her sister also suffers from it. She also referred to the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and the Renters' Rights Bill, which are relevant to issues that contribute to asthma. Asthma goes way outside the remit of Health Ministers alone; Ministers in other Departments have to be part of addressing it.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) always brings her knowledge to the subject matter. She referred to air pollution and the Lib Dems' commitment to addressing that issue. She mentioned poor housing and healthier homes, and said that the increase in children's asthma needs to be addressed. Again, lung conditions are the third biggest killer in the UK, as others have mentioned.

I have lost count of the number of debates that my friend, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), and I have been in together—it is like a tag team here on a Thursday afternoon—and I thank him for his personal story about asthma. He referred to the work of charities and to primary and secondary care, which the Minister referred to positively in her contribution. He mentioned smoking cessation, the passage of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, and preventable deaths. I thank him for bringing his knowledge as a doctor to add to the debate.

I thank the Minister; I think that we are all impressed by her replies. She did her utmost to answer all our questions in a positive fashion. I thank her for agreeing to the meeting, which we will look forward to. It will give the APPG a chance to talk more insightfully, if that is the way to put it, about the issues.

The commitment to asthma shines out across the nation. The Minister referred to the Government's commitment to improving air quality, which we are all pleased about, and she referred to the national bundle of care—I hope I got that right—as well as regional funding. She also referred to spirometry diagnostic tests, which is an issue that the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth and I were trying to pursue.

The Minister also mentioned action for those with severe asthma—biologics—and the training of staff; her positive replies to our questions were an example of how other Ministers should reply. She mentioned the moves

from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital. She discussed ensuring, first of all, that we prevent the deaths, but also that we help those who have asthma.

It has been a positive debate. It may be a few weeks after World Asthma Day, but none the less it has been World Asthma Day for this hour or so. I thank everyone for their contributions and look forward to meeting the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Asthma Day.

4.19 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 15 May 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

National Investigation Service: Transition of Services to the Insolvency Service

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Under the previous Government, a contract was entered into with Thurrock council's national investigation service in 2020, to investigate covid-19 bounce back loan fraud. After scrutinising the recovery rates and performance of this contract, the Department for Business and Trade has decided not to renew it, and the Insolvency Service will now take over the remaining casework, due to its strong track record in handling covid-19 financial support scheme abuse allegations. To ensure a smooth transition and protect ongoing cases, NATIS's contract will continue on a rolling monthly basis until all cases are transferred or concluded. Some NATIS staff may also move to the Insolvency Service to maintain continuity and minimise disruption.

This Government are committed to recouping public money lost in pandemic-related fraud, while also taking steps to provide value for money for UK taxpayers. The Insolvency Service has a proven track record in handling complex fraud and financial misconduct investigations. Its work has resulted in director disqualifications, bankruptcy restrictions, criminal convictions, and significant recoveries related to covid-19 financial support scheme abuse allegations since 2020-21. As such, it is well placed to ensure the remaining work is completed effectively and efficiently, delivering good outcomes for taxpayers.

[HCWS638]

TREASURY

Private Intermittent Securities and Capital Exchange System

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): Today, the Government have laid the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 (Private Intermittent Securities and Capital Exchange System Sandbox) Regulations 2025 (SI 2025/583). This legislation establishes the legal framework for the private intermittent securities and capital exchange system—a new type of stock market, which will facilitate the trading of private company shares on an intermittent basis.

At spring statement 2025, the Government published a technical note detailing the tax implications in relation to employees trading their shares on PISCES^[1]. This stated that new enterprise management incentives and company share option plan contracts could be exercised on PISCES, provided that a PISCES trading event was a specified event and that other conditions were met. The Government also said that we were considering the case for legislating to allow existing EMI and CSOP contracts to be exercised on PISCES.

I can now confirm that the Government will legislate in the next Finance Bill to allow employers, with their employee's permission, to amend existing EMI and CSOP contracts to include a PISCES trading event as an exercisable event, without losing the tax advantages the schemes offer. This will allow employees with contracts amended in line with the legislation to exercise their options on PISCES and retain the tax advantages. The legislation will have retrospective effect, and in the interim HMRC will be able to use collection and management powers to not collect tax on exercise. This means that this change will benefit the first PISCES trading events expected later this year. Further information on how we will legislate to allow contracts to be amended to include PISCES whilst retaining the tax advantages will be published by the end of July.

This announcement is alongside the legislation establishing the PISCES legal framework and the Budget 2024 announcement of an exemption from stamp duty and stamp duty reserve tax for PISCES transactions. Together, these are important milestones in delivering the Government's plan to go further and faster to drive economic growth through the plan for change, by supporting private companies to scale and grow by providing a stepping stone to public markets and supporting our world-leading capital markets.

[1] www.gov.uk/government/publications/tax-implications-for-companies-and-employees-in-relation-to-employees-trading-their-shares-on-piscs/technical-note-tax-implications-for-companies-and-employees-in-relation-to-employees-trading-their-shares-on-piscs

[HCWS639]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Media Mergers Legislation

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): This Government are committed to a pluralistic media landscape, where citizens are able to access information from a range of sources in order to form opinions. The public's ability to access a wide range of news, views and information about the world in which we live is central to the health of our democracy.

I am therefore today publishing two separate but related consultation responses concerning important reforms to the media merger regimes to reflect the changing ways in which people are consuming news and which will secure the DCMS Secretary of State's powers to safeguard plural and thriving British press and broadcasting sectors.

Exceptions to the FSI regime

The purchase of UK news organisations by foreign states runs the risk of eroding trust in the press and in other news media organisations. It is essential that foreign states are not able to control or influence UK news publications and that we have strong measures in place in order to protect UK news publications from undue influence by foreign states.

The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers (DMCC) Act 2024 amended the Enterprise Act 2002 to create a new foreign state influence regime for UK newspapers and periodical news magazines. As permitted by the Act, the Government now intend to introduce a

number of exceptions to the regime via regulations, which are intended to offset potential negative impacts on inward investment into this sector without undermining the core principles of the FSI regime.

The previous Government launched a consultation on targeted and specific exceptions to the regime, which closed on 9 July 2024. We have carefully considered the consultation responses received, including those made by newspaper groups affected by the new regime. In setting out our response to the issues raised during the consultation, we have balanced the need to ensure strong measures are in place, while acknowledging the legitimate concerns raised by respondents. In response to stakeholder feedback, we have decided to set the threshold for state owned investors' investment to 15% of shares or voting rights in a newspaper or news magazine. This will simplify the regime and provide more flexibility for newspaper groups seeking investment from SOIs where control or influence over the policy of the newspaper is less likely to be a risk.

Our policy intention is to ensure that state owned investment vehicles, where they do invest, could not have influence over the business of a UK newspaper. We want to ensure that the measures brought in through secondary legislation are proportionate, and support routes for legitimate investment and growth while safeguarding UK newspapers from foreign state influence.

The draft statutory instrument making changes to the FSI regime has been laid in Parliament today.

Extending media merger regimes to include online news and other news media

The Enterprise Act 2002 contains provisions that allow the Secretary of State to intervene in mergers involving print newspaper enterprises and broadcasting enterprises which raise public interest considerations specified in the Act. Grounds for intervention are assessed against these public interest considerations.

DCMS ran a technical consultation between 6 November 2024 and 13 January 2025, on proposals to expand the scope of the media mergers regime from print newspapers and broadcasters to encompass online news platforms and periodical news magazines, and to extend the application of the media public interest considerations. These proposals followed advice from Ofcom as part of its 2021 statement on the future of media plurality.

Having taken into account views from industry, Parliament, and the public, the Government have chosen to move forward with the policy and the drafting of the definitions as outlined in the original consultation. We consider that our changes balance the need to protect the public interest in a digital age with our responsibility to support a competitive and sustainable media environment. The statutory instruments making changes to extend the media merger regime to online news and other news media will be laid in Parliament shortly.

The exceptions to the FSI regime will apply with retrospective effect from 13 March 2024, to align with the date on which the wider regime came into effect.

The amendments to the definition of newspaper for the FSI regime will also apply retrospectively with effect from today's date. This will mean that the Secretary of State must intervene in any merger involving an online news enterprise, which completes on or after the date of this announcement, or any anticipated merger which is in progress or in contemplation on or after this date, if

she has reasonable grounds to suspect a foreign state has, or may acquire, control or influence over the policy of a UK newspaper enterprise.

[HCWS640]

Youth Funding: 2025-26

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): This Government recognise the transformative role that youth services play in young people's lives. We know that being part of supportive communities and having access to youth provision can improve a young person's wellbeing, health and personal development.

On 12 November I announced the winding-down of the National Citizen Service programme and closure of the NCS Trust, and I committed to a co-production of a new national youth strategy. The strategy will allow us to put young people back in charge of their own destiny and provide them with meaningful choices and chances. It will better co-ordinate youth services and move away from one-size-fits-all approaches from central Government, bringing power back to young people and their communities and rebuilding a thriving and sustainable sector. I would like to thank the NCS Trust, including the Youth Advisory Board, for their engagement and commitment to delivering an orderly winding-down of activity, and sharing their learnings to feed into the new national youth strategy.

The new national youth strategy will help deliver on our national missions—spreading opportunities, improving growth, making our streets safer and taking pressure off health services. Since November we have conducted significant engagement activity, reaching young people across the country, to better understand their needs and priorities. This included a national survey, which collected over 14,000 responses, several face-to-face and online focus groups, regional roundtables as well as innovative hacks. We will publish in the coming weeks an interim report, "Today's Youth, Tomorrow's Nation", which will present those insights.

I previously committed to set out my Department's 2025-26 funding for youth programmes—an investment of over £145 million—to provide stability to the youth sector and ensure that young people can continue to access opportunities as we transition to the new national youth strategy.

The package of funding for 2025-26 includes:

Over £28 million to increase access to more and better enriching activities, to ensure that young people can continue to access opportunities no matter where they are from. Through these programmes, we will continue to support the fantastic organisations that engage with young people day in, day out.

£7.5 million to increase access to uniformed youth organisations, in areas of unmet demand, to provide young people the chance to access activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer.

£12 million to boost open-access provision providing youth organisations funding to deliver more youth work and activities across England where young people may be at risk of becoming involved in antisocial behaviour. Working in partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund, we are exploring matched funding options to leverage additional investment.

£4.7 million to increase access to outdoor learning, to help young people foster positive relationships with movement and physical activity and develop their socio-emotional and life skills.

£1.5 million to the Duke of Edinburgh's award to increase access to the scheme for special educational schools; alternative provision and pupil referral units; and mainstream schools in areas of high deprivation.

Over £2.4 million to give young people a voice on the issues that matter most to them through the UK Youth Parliament; and to improve local places through a new approach to our youth social action funding, working in partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund and the #iwill movement.

Over £3 million to increase sector and workforce capacity to ensure we are recruiting and training the youth workers who are a lifeline for young people.

£8.2 million to improve local youth offers—local authorities play a key part in delivering youth services, reflected in their statutory duty to provide sufficient leisure-time activities and facilities in line with local needs. We know that some areas have faced challenges in meeting this duty, yet they are key to enabling young people to unlock their potential.

£8 million for the local youth transformation pilot, which will support local authorities to build back capability to improve their youth offers and empower young people in every community.

£200,000 peer review programme, to provide local authorities the opportunity to access expert review of their youth offer as part of a model of sector-led improvement.

Over £107 million to further invest in ensuring safe, welcoming, fit-for-purpose youth centres:

£79.4 million (£59.3 million capital and £20.1 million revenue) of re-profiled youth investment fund phase 2 to ensure the successful delivery of projects scheduled for completion in 2025-26. This includes the pipeline of 25 modern methods of construction projects.

£27.8 million (£26 million capital and £1.8 million revenue) for better youth spaces, funding small-scale capital projects, including equipment, small refurbishments and other capital projects, bringing fast-paced benefits to youth organisations and the young people they work with. Support will be targeted in priority areas, with further details to be announced in the summer.

I look forward to the publication of both "Today's Youth, Tomorrow's Nation" and the national youth strategy, and I thank every young person, organisation and colleagues across Government for their input to date. Young people's needs have never been more complex, but together we will drive the transition to a future in which young people have choices and chances and local communities are empowered to support a generation to succeed.

[HCWS635]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Very Senior Managers Pay Framework

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I am pleased to announce today the publication of the NHS very senior managers (VSM) pay framework.

This Government's 10-year plan to reform the NHS will focus on three big shifts; from analogue to digital, hospital to community, and sickness to prevention. To do this, this Government believe that providers and integrated care boards (ICBs) should be given greater

freedom and flexibility to meet the needs of their patients and communities. We want to move to a system where freedom is the norm and central grip is the exception to challenge poor performance.

First-class leadership will be essential in achieving this and we will need to recruit and retain the very best to realise our ambitions. Accordingly, it is vital that we ensure the way we reward our very senior managers (VSMs) reflects the challenges they face and the responsibilities they carry while ensuring that we act where performance falls below our expectations.

This new pay framework will support the changes that we need to see in the NHS through the Government's plan for change, so we can deliver on the public's priorities to cut waiting lists for patients and drive-up standards across the NHS. It will bring together arrangements for trusts and ICBs, further driving consistency in the approach to pay across NHS organisations. In doing so, it removes the differentiation between different types of trusts and introduces pay benchmarks that account for organisational size and turnover more appropriately.

We need our very best managers to work in the most challenged NHS organisations to make the necessary improvements and turn them around. The new pay framework enables employers to apply a temporary increase to pay as a means of encouraging top talent to come and work in poorly performing organisations.

Across all ICBs and providers, employers will be able to reward the highest performing leaders with a bonus of up to 10% where they have demonstrated exceptional performance in, for example, cutting waiting times, managing finances or improving services for patients.

However, as the Secretary of State has made clear, there will be no more reward for failure in the NHS. Going forward, those very senior managers who are leading the poorest performing organisations will have their annual pay award withheld, with an exemption for those who have been newly appointed to turn things around.

The new pay framework will use the segmentation derived from the NHS performance assessment framework (NPAF). The NPAF segments providers and ICBs ranging from segment 1 to 5 with 1 being the best performing, based on their performance against published metrics. From this year those VSMs in organisations in segment 5, the lowest performing, will not be eligible for pay uplifts unless an exemption applies.

By introducing a greater focus on performance, this new framework will ensure that pay is closely aligned with the delivery of outcomes and will incentivise improvements where these are needed most.

This Government want to see trusts and ICBs deliver more efficiency, ensuring patients get more for taxpayers' money being invested. NHS organisations will be accountable to the public on very senior managers' salaries, as we will be requiring them to explain their pay decisions in annual accounts and also submit an annual pay report to NHS England. The new framework will drive consistency of pay and ensure greater transparency.

The new VSM framework is part of a broader package of reforms to ensure we support and invest in NHS managers. This includes our commitments to introduce professional standards for, and regulating, NHS managers, and establishing a college of executive and clinical leadership to help train and develop excellent NHS leaders.

We are determined to get the NHS back on its feet, and this framework aims to boost the efficiency and productivity of providers and ICBs so that they can focus on delivering the care that people need. I look forward to seeing the leadership of the NHS rise to the challenge, as we take the NHS from the worst crisis in its history and make it fit for the future.

[HCWS641]

HOME DEPARTMENT

2025 UEFA Women's European Championship: Extending Licensing Hours

The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Government consulted on, and will be proceeding with, the proposal to make a contingent licensing hours order under section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003, after the majority of respondents to the consultation were in favour of the relaxation. This order will relax licensing hours in England and Wales for the 2025 UEFA women's European championship, subject to any of the competing home nation teams (England and Wales) reaching the semi-final(s) or final of the tournament.

The order will apply to premises already licensed until 11pm for the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises in England and Wales. The order will extend the licensing hours for such premises from 11 pm to 1 am the following day on the days of the semi-final(s) (22 and/or 23 July) and final (27 July) of the tournament should the criteria of the contingent order be met.

The Government consider the semi-finals and final of the tournament to be an occasion of exceptional national significance and an extension to licensing hours will enable communities to come together at their local licensed premises to support any of the home nation teams if they reach the later stages of the tournament and celebrate any subsequent success. This will also provide support to the hospitality sector by enabling businesses to extend their trading hours if they so wish.

The results of the consultation will be published on gov.uk and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The Government are grateful to everyone who responded to the consultation. The order will be laid in Parliament in due course and an economic note will be published alongside it on legislation.gov.uk.

[HCWS644]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Pension Scheme: Member Benefits Reform

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): The local government pension scheme in England and Wales gives 7 million dedicated public servants security in their later years. The majority of its members are women on low-paid roles and often working part-time, with average pensions in retirement of £5,000 a year. These members are at the frontline of public service, working to deliver for the public in our

councils, schools, charities, police and fire authorities, and more. This Government are committed to making work pay and ensuring that those who keep our country running are properly rewarded in retirement. That is why we have today launched a consultation that would benefit around 15,000 members, and enhance the benefits open to the women who make up almost three quarters of members, by making maternity leave up to one year automatically pensionable. These proposals all align with the overall aim of ensuring the scheme continues to deliver for members, employers and taxpayers, and invests in their communities.

The Government are proposing the changes to member benefits alongside the significant reforms to investment and pooling, which are also vital. Those reforms aim to improve the long-term sustainability of the local government pension scheme, ensuring that pension promises stretching into the next century are fully funded. The Government propose to do that by strengthening asset pooling in the scheme, improving scheme governance and driving investment in local growth—all those measures ensure that the scheme, in delivering for its members, also delivers for communities.

The members of the local government pension scheme deserve a scheme that rewards their hard work and commitment to public service, and the consultation touches on a wide range of areas of the scheme. There are four proposals I would like to highlight to the House.

First, the proposals would end historical discrimination in the scheme, ensuring that when survivor benefits are calculated when a member dies, there is no discrimination on the basis of the sex of their partner. This would be backdated, correcting the historical underpayment of benefits.

Secondly, the proposals would ensure that there is a better understanding of why individuals opt out of making pension payments. The Government want a secure old age for everyone and, although automatic enrolment in the scheme has increased participation, too many people still opt out and lose the vital benefits the local government pension scheme offers in retirement. This would lay the groundwork for future support of those who feel they cannot afford their pension payments.

Thirdly, the proposals would close loopholes in current rules relating to pension forfeiture, strengthening the framework ensuring that pensions can be removed for serious offences by public servants.

Finally, and most significantly, the proposals would make concrete progress in addressing the gender pension gap. We know that there is still much to understand about the gender pension gap, but it is not fair that, across the scheme, women will on average end their working lives with less generous pension benefits than men. These proposals would see the Government make gender pension gap data reporting statutory and make the last 13 weeks of maternity and shared parental leave automatically pensionable. This would make a real difference in the pension accruals of a significant proportion of the women in the local government pension scheme, and better support them in retirement. The 13-week proposal would be the first time that a public service pension scheme makes this step towards closing the gender pension gap. It reflects that many local government pension scheme members are women in comparatively lower-paid roles, and that the overall package available

to the workforce, including pension entitlement, is vital to recruitment and retention of key roles in local public services.

Although these proposals carry costs, those costs are relatively small in the context of overall local government pension scheme liabilities and are significantly outweighed by the difference the proposals will make for members. Further, the Government are mindful that, with the current scheme valuation period, now is the right time for funds and their actuaries to factor these costs into their calculations of future employer contribution rates.

The proposals in the consultation have been tested with stakeholders and address their feedback on how to make the local government pension scheme an exemplar scheme for the public sector and beyond. I want to thank the Local Government Association, the scheme advisory board, local government pension scheme funds and others for their continued support of the Government in our role as steward of the local government pension scheme, and I emphasise the Government's commitment to the local government pension scheme being locally run.

This first consultation on member benefits in the local government pension scheme will be followed by another consultation this year, on further issues of fairness, equality, integrity and efficacy in the scheme.

[HCWS636]

Electoral Integrity Programme: 2024 UK Parliamentary General Election Evaluation Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): The Elections Act 2022 made a number of significant changes to the way elections are run in this country, and it is important that we understand fully the impact of these changes. To meet its commitments on evaluation, the previous Government appointed external and independent evaluators IFF Research to evaluate the implementation of the Act in the first standalone local election and the first general election following implementation.

In line with statutory obligations, a third and final evaluation of the voter identification measures will be conducted following the next UK parliamentary general election.

Today, I am pleased to share IFF Research's "Electoral Integrity Programme Evaluation: Year 2" report. This independent evaluation has used data gathered at polling stations, supplemented by public opinion survey results, data from the Electoral Commission and from surveys with electoral administrators, as well as qualitative research findings to provide a rich picture of how the Elections Act measures were delivered and their impact on both electors and electoral administrators. I welcome IFF Research's rigorous reflections and recommendations and thank them for their work.

Whilst it is reassuring that the overall findings in the report align with those of the Electoral Commission—namely, that the 2024 polls were well-run—I recognise the challenging circumstances under which these elections were delivered. These included multiple polls in quick succession, the implementation of several complex reforms and constituency boundary changes.

The entire electoral community demonstrated exceptional resilience and professionalism in rising to these challenges, as indeed they always do. It is encouraging, therefore, to

see many of IFF's findings highlighting the extensive preparation undertaken by elections teams in advance of the polls. I extend my sincere gratitude to returning officers and their teams for their continued dedication as well as to every volunteer who gave their time to support our precious democratic process.

I recognise that there are some recommendations in the report which are in areas where Government do not have a direct role, such as around the delivery and execution of public awareness campaigns. We will continue to support the work of the Electoral Commission, the electoral sector and their representative bodies, and other partners to understand and address the gaps to ensure the delivery of meaningful and sustainable change.

This Government are committed to strengthening our democracy and encouraging full participation in our elections and we will be publishing our strategy for elections later this year, setting out the Government's approach to elections and electoral reform for this Parliament. Several of the recommendations made by IFF will be considered within this strategy document.

The associated documents will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS643]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

UK's Future Exhaustion of Intellectual Property Rights Regime Consultation: Government Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): Our parallel importation laws, which regulate the common practice of importing genuine physical goods that are first sold in other countries into the UK for resale, play an important role in many sectors of the UK's economy. These laws are governed by the UK's choice of an exhaustion of intellectual property rights regime—or what is commonly referred to as an IP exhaustion regime.

An exhaustion regime determines the geographical scope of foreign territory in which an importer must seek the permission of the IP rights holders (e.g. a trademark, patent, design or copyright owner) to parallel import a good that is protected by their IP rights into the UK for resale.

Businesses have been waiting for clarity on what the UK's parallel importation laws will be for too long and are rightly seeking certainty on this matter. I am therefore pleased to announce to the House that the Government have taken a clear decision on this matter. Today, we will publish the Government's response to the 2021 consultation on the UK's future exhaustion regime. It confirms that the UK will be maintaining its bespoke exhaustion regime—which we have called the UK+ regime—and sets out the extensive analysis and stakeholder engagement that underpins our decision. This provides the clarity that stakeholders across the UK have been calling for, helping to provide confidence to businesses, investors and consumers that the UK will continue our balanced IP framework.

As part of the Government's response, we have set out how the UK+ regime reflects and supports the many different parts of our modern, IP-rich economy. This exhaustion regime ensures that our world-leading

inventors and creators can invest their time and energy in developing new products and technologies, knowing that our parallel importation laws will help to support them to make a living from their IP assets. In turn, it will support competition in the marketplace and fair access to IP-protected goods.

No legislative changes or adjustment to businesses' operations are required, as the UK will be maintaining its bespoke exhaustion regime.

If we are to unlock economic growth, we must incentivise innovation and creativity by providing long-term certainty and stability to all who interact with our world-leading IP framework. The UK+ regime achieves this goal by providing balanced, well-designed parallel importation laws.

A copy of the Government's response to the 2021 consultation on the UK's future exhaustion regime has been laid in both Houses.

[HCWS642]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit System: Fraud and Error

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The annual statistics for fraud and error in the benefit system for the financial year ending 2025, were published on Thursday 15 May 2024, at 9.30am.

Today's figures confirm the overall rate of overpayments is now 3.3% (£9.5 billion) for 2024-25, compared to 3.6% (£9.7 billion) in 2023-24. Overpayments due to fraud account for 2.2% compared to 2.7% last year while claimant error and official error are now at 0.7% and 0.4% respectively, compared to 0.6% and 0.3% last year.

This Government made a manifesto commitment that they will safeguard taxpayers' money and not tolerate fraud or waste anywhere in public services. With welfare benefits paid to around 24 million people, the welfare system is a deliberate target for both organised crime groups and opportunistic individuals and it is vital that the Government continue to robustly tackle

fraud to ensure support goes to those who need it most. We are taking further steps to minimise error, ensuring the right people are paid the right amount at the right time. The total rate of benefit expenditure underpaid in FYE 2025 was 0.4% (£1.2 billion), compared with 0.4% (£1.1 billion) in FYE 2024.

Through autumn Budget 2024 and spring statement 2025, the Department has committed to deliver £9.6 billion in scored savings out to 2029-30. This will be delivered through a suite of measures, including additional resourcing for the Verify Earnings and Pension Service which uses HMRC data to identify changes in claimants' earnings and private pensions that may impact entitlement to carer's allowance and pension credit, and new verification measures for capital and self-employed income and expenses across universal credit claims.

As part of this, the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery Bill), which moves to Second Reading in the House of Lords today, is estimated to deliver benefits of £1.5 billion over the next five years. It will safeguard public money by reducing public sector fraud and error and allowing the more effective recovery of moneys owed to the Government. The Bill will also help spot and stop errors earlier to avoid claimants' getting into debt. The latest fraud and error in the benefit system statistics show overpayments at a staggering £9.5 billion in the last year, with capital remaining one of the top reasons for overpayments in UC and PC. This demonstrates the continued importance of the eligibility verification measure, which is a core part of the Bill.

Today we have also published our unfulfilled eligibility statistics, following last year's reclassification from customer error underpayments. Unfulfilled eligibility measures how much a customer could have been eligible for had they told us their correct circumstances. The total unfulfilled eligibility rate in FYE 2025 was 1.3% (£3.7 billion) compared with 1.2% (£3.1 billion) in FYE 2024. The Department will report more on both overpayments and underpayments by way of its annual report and accounts, which are due to be published in July 2025.

[HCWS637]

Written Corrections

Thursday 15 May 2025

Ministerial Corrections

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

US Policy on Iran

The following extracts are from questions to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on 13 May 2025.

David Reed: Our United Kingdom and the United States are aligned in the view that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a serious threat to global stability. With nuclear negotiations currently under way between the US and Iran, can the Secretary of State inform the House what outcome his Department would consider to be a success from a British perspective? Crucially, does he have a contingency plan if those talks fail to produce an acceptable result?

Mr Lammy: Iran is now producing roughly one significant quantity of highly enriched uranium every six weeks. That is 40 times above the limit in the joint comprehensive plan of action—the deal that we struck with Iran, which I have in front of me.

[*Official Report*, 13 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 189.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy):

Mr Lammy: Iran is now producing roughly one significant quantity of highly enriched uranium every six weeks. **Iran's enriched uranium** is 40 times above the limit in the joint comprehensive plan of action—the deal that we struck with Iran, which I have in front of me.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The regime in Tehran is responsible for so much of the appalling bloodshed and conflict in the middle east. It poses a direct threat to Britain and on British soil, as we have seen from the recent arrests of Iranian nationals in counter-terrorism operations. Has the Foreign Secretary summoned the Iranian ambassador to express concerns and to explain what has been going on on British soil? What discussions have taken place with our allies in addition to the nuclear talks that he has just referred to? What is the position of our partners in the region on the very specific threats that Iran is posing and demonstrating with its dissidents on UK soil? When will the Government come forward with a comprehensive and clear strategy on dealing with Iran?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Lady is right. On 3 May, counter-terrorism police arrested eight individuals, including seven Iranian nationals, as part of two separate police investigations. Of course the Minister responsible for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has spoken to the Israeli ambassador.

[*Official Report*, 13 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 190.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy):

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Lady is right. On 3 May, counter-terrorism police arrested eight individuals, including seven Iranian nationals, as part of two separate police investigations. Of course the Minister responsible for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has spoken to the **Iranian** ambassador.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 15 May 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	467	TRANSPORT—continued	
Aviation Sector	473	Pavement Parking	477
Brighton Main Line: Capacity	473	Rail Access: Grimsby and Cleethorpes	480
Condition of Local Roads	479	Rail Sector: Skills	470
Driving Test Backlog	475	Rail Services: North Wales	472
Economic Growth	467	Topical Questions	481
Lower Thames Crossing	481	Vehicle Registration: Compliance	478
Maritime Sector	470		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 15 May 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	15WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—continued	
National Investigation Service: Transition of Services to the Insolvency Service	15WS	Local Government Pension Scheme: Member Benefits Reform	21WS
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	16WS	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..	24WS
Media Mergers Legislation	16WS	UK's Future Exhaustion of Intellectual Property Rights Regime Consultation: Government Response	24WS
Youth Funding: 2025-26	18WS	TREASURY	15WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	19WS	Private Intermittent Securities and Capital Exchange System	15WS
NHS Very Senior Managers Pay Framework	19WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	25WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	21WS	Benefit System: Fraud and Error	25WS
2025 UEFA Women's European Championship: Extending Licensing Hours	21WS		
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	21WS		
Electoral Integrity Programme: 2024 UK Parliamentary General Election Evaluation Report	23WS		

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Thursday 15 May 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS	7WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS—continued	
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	7WC	US Policy on Iran	7WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 22 May 2025**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 15 May 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 467] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Transport

Speaker's Statement: Ministerial Code [Col. 489]

Recalled Offenders: Sentencing Limits [Col. 491]
Answer to urgent question—(Sir Nicholas Dakin)

Royal Assent to Acts passed [Col. 499]

Business of the House [Col. 500]
Statement—(Lucy Powell)

Sanctions Implementation and Enforcement [Col. 524]
Statement—(Stephen Doughty)

Safeguarding Vulnerable Claimants [Col. 539]
Select Committee Statement—(Debbie Abrahams)

Backbench Business

Solar Farms [Col. 545]
Motion—(Dr Caroline Johnson)—agreed to

Youth Services [Col. 578]
Motion—(Natasha Irons)—agreed to

Coroner Services: West Midlands [Col. 605]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Accountability for Daesh Crimes [Col. 181WH]
Select Committee Statement
Gavi and the Global Fund [Col. 184WH]
World Asthma Day [Col. 208WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 15WS]

Written Corrections [Col. 7WC]
Ministerial corrections
