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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 5 March 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fuel Poverty

1. **Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero on tackling the health impacts of fuel poverty. [901795]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): The Government's 2021 fuel poverty strategy recognised that warm homes can help to reduce health inequalities and pressure on the NHS. That is a key reason why we are delivering a package of cost support worth £3,700 per household on average from 2022 to 2025 and investing heavily in fuel efficiency.

Dr Whitehead: The recent Institute of Health Equity Marmot report highlighted the negative effects of living in cold and uninsulated homes, including respiratory and circulatory diseases and hampered lung and brain development in children. Last year, the Energy Systems Catapult and a number of NHS providers ran a trial of warm homes prescriptions, with NHS practitioners identifying vulnerable patients and supporting them with their energy needs. I think that the Secretary of State has accepted the link between cold homes and health outcomes. If that is the case, are the Government considering expanding this approach, or looking for alternative ways in which the health system and fuel poverty prevention can go hand in hand?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that a number of local warm homes prescription schemes have offered additional support to help people with health vulnerabilities to stay warm and well. Such schemes are excellent examples of local collaboration between the NHS, local government and other partners—tailored, of course, to the local needs of their areas—and I would be interested to see whether other parts of the NHS choose to take up these sorts of ideas in the future.

Urgent and Emergency Care

2. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve urgent and emergency care. [901796]

9. **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve urgent and emergency care. [901803]

14. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve urgent and emergency care. [901809]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): A year ago we set out a plan to improve urgent and emergency care, and the plan is working. Performance this winter has been better, with ambulance waits down by nearly a third, and we are learning the lessons from this year to make further improvements in the year ahead.

Mary Robinson: It is welcome news that the brand-new £30 million A&E campus at Stepping Hill Hospital is nearing completion. However, other buildings on this ageing site are failing and urgently need replacing. Will my hon. Friend ensure that Stepping Hill remains at the heart of hospital facilities in Stockport with rebuilt units, and support new hospital investment and specialist diagnostic hubs across Stockport?

Helen Whately: I am delighted that Stepping Hill Hospital will soon have a new emergency care campus, with all the benefits that that will bring to my hon. Friend's constituents. I know that she is a great campaigner for her local NHS and has already met the Secretary of State about the concern she raises. As well as making her argument so clearly in Westminster, I would encourage her to continue discussions with her local NHS integrated care board, which is responsible for local decisions on capital investment.

Mrs Drummond: Up to £900 million for a brand-new acute hospital is coming to mid-Hampshire and health experts are making the case that it will make huge improvements in care, despite some politically inspired and misinformed opposition. Can my hon. Friend reassure my constituents that those running our local NHS should be listened to, and also that the doctor-led urgent treatment centre in Winchester will continue to provide for three quarters of urgent cases including X-rays, MRI scans and other tests after the new acute hospital is built, which we hope will be at junction 7?

Helen Whately: I commend my hon. Friend for her hard work on supporting the new hospital, for the leadership she is providing and for her work on encouraging residents to have their say in the consultation. I cannot prejudge the outcome of the consultation but I agree with her that the new hospital will be great for patients, with its modern facilities. She is right to say that an urgent treatment centre can provide excellent emergency care for the majority of people who attend A&E.

Andrew Lewer: Northampton has been the beneficiary of many welcome new or improved facilities in recent years, including a children's A&E, a main A&E and the announcement of a community diagnostic centre. However, the missing piece of the jigsaw is an urgent treatment centre, for which I have been campaigning for many years now. Will the Minister inform me on the progress on that centre?

Helen Whately: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his successful campaigning for healthcare in Northampton, which is, as he says, benefiting from upgrades to the children's A&E and the main emergency department and will soon have one of our 160 new clinical diagnostic centres. He will know that his local NHS integrated care

board will decide whether to fund a new urgent treatment centre, and I have every confidence in his ability to persuade it of doing so.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is one of the great successes of the past few years that we now save the lives of a lot more people with an acquired brain injury. Although we might save them in acute and emergency care, however, a national strategy for acquired brain injury is a really important part of ensuring that people have the proper care thereafter. The Government appointed me and the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, the right hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson)—he is just passing the hon. Lady a note to inspire her on the subject—to try to publish one. When does she hope that there will be money available to ensure that that strategy is one worth having?

Helen Whately: I know that the hon. Gentleman is a great campaigner on this issue; he has worked very hard on it with me in the past, and he now does so with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Health and Secondary Care. I assure him that we are in the process of revising the draft strategy, taking on board feedback from patients, their families, charities and the NHS, and we will publish the strategy in due course. I thank all stakeholders for their continued efforts.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): In January, the average category 2 response time for west midlands ambulance service was over 43 minutes. We know that the problems are worse in Shropshire, following stories such as that of a lady who waited 18 hours before seeing a doctor, having contracted an infection following radiation therapy for her cancer treatment. The situation in Shropshire does not seem to be improving as fast as we would like. What steps is the Minister taking to resolve the problem?

Helen Whately: Across the country, ambulance response times have come down by a third. We have worked very hard, particularly with areas that face greater challenges, including Shropshire. I have spoken to leaders in the local health system about the ongoing challenges. We are learning lessons about what has worked over the past year, and from where we have not made so much progress, to ensure that we do better in areas such as the hon. Lady's over the year ahead.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her positive answers; they are really appreciated. Bearing in mind the pressure that GPs are under, which is leading to more pressure on emergency provision, what steps are being taken to provide greater incentives for medical students to take on positions in GP surgeries? That would make a big difference.

Helen Whately: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about the whole health system. One thing we are doing as part of our work on urgent and emergency care is preventing people from being admitted to hospital unnecessarily, or from being brought to A&E in the first place. Primary care is part of that. In our investment in expanding medical school places, we are particularly encouraging medical schools, such as the new Kent and Canterbury Medical School near me, to train students to work more outside hospitals, including in primary care.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Despite watering down the targets for ambulance response times and the A&E four-hour wait, the Government still cannot meet them. We have heard from Members across the House this morning how patients are waiting longer. The new targets say that there will be further improvements in 2024-25, and the Minister has said that again this morning. Can she let us in on what exactly they will be?

Helen Whately: I am not going to pre-empt the publication of targets for the coming year, but, as I have said, we will continue to learn lessons from the progress that we have made this year, including on ambulance response times, which are down by over a third. Anyway, I will take no lessons from Labour, because we know the state of the NHS in Wales.

Social Care

3. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What progress her Department has made on reforming social care. [901797]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): We are making great progress on our 10-year vision for adult social care reform. We have introduced the first ever national career structure for care workers, and we have introduced new assessments by the Care Quality Commission, which will shine a light on how well councils are delivering their social care duties.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. In Suffolk, where the population is increasingly elderly, social care is under enormous pressure, and it is a significant challenge to recruit carers, pay them fairly and provide them with a proper career path. Therefore, I heard what my hon. Friend said, but will she consider commissioning a long-term workforce plan for adult social care equivalent to that for the NHS?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of the social care workforce: social care is its workforce. I can assure him that we already have a plan for the care workforce, set out in the "People at the Heart of Care" White Paper, and now we are putting it into practice. Our care workforce pathway is already being implemented, our new accredited qualification for care workers will be launched later this year, and we are backing social care with up to £8.6 billion in extra available funding.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I was concerned to hear that a constituent of mine was initially denied access to social care for his mother who suffers from Alzheimer's despite her inability to administer her own medication. Will the Government look to broadening the criteria of the Care Act 2014 to include those requiring support with administering medication?

Helen Whately: We very much want everybody who needs care to get it and everyone who is eligible for financial support should get it. That, of course, is assessed by local authorities. We are introducing Care Quality Commission assurance of social care commissioned by local authorities, to make sure people get the care they deserve and to shine a light on where local authorities are doing a really good job and where others could do better.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): The idea of a social care cost cap has dropped off the agenda slightly. I know it is incredibly expensive, but I continue to be contacted by constituents who face losing everything. When often their loved ones have dementia and it is already emotionally an incredibly traumatic time, they have the added anxiety of how they are going to pay for care. The only thing that should matter is what works and is best for their loved one, but there is a cloud of anxiety hanging over society, which we all worry about. Will the Minister confirm that this issue has not lost her attention and that we will continue to consider whether we can introduce a cap?

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for his important question on concerns about the cost of care and how much it costs some people. As he may know—I remind him—the charging reforms were delayed in 2022 by the Chancellor after we listened to local authorities.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): A fifth of the social care roles in Westmorland and Furness are currently vacant and unfilled. Coincidentally that is the same proportion of beds in Morecambe Bay that are occupied by patients who are unable to get a care package and therefore leave hospital. The reasons for this are blindingly obvious: the pay and career structures are derisory for hard-working wonderful people and there is a complete absence of genuinely affordable homes for people in those sorts of roles to enable them to live locally. Does the Minister agree that fixing that crisis in my community and others should be the priority for the Chancellor tomorrow, not silly electoral gimmicks?

Helen Whately: I recognise the challenges in the hon. Gentleman's area, although nationally vacancies in social care have fallen by over 20,000. We are reforming adult social care careers to make care a career for the UK workforce. We are putting extra funding into social care—up to £8.6 billion over two years—and introducing CQC assurance to make sure local authorities are doing their best on social care. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to talk to his local authority and make sure it is paying a fair rate for the care it commissions.

Adult Social Care Workforce

4. **Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** What steps she is taking to help increase recruitment and retention in the adult social care sector. [901798]

10. **Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help increase recruitment and retention in the adult social care sector. [901804]

19. **Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP):** What steps she is taking to help increase recruitment and retention in the adult social care sector. [901814]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): Care is a skilled profession and I want care workers to get the support and recognition they deserve. In January we took the next step in our ambitious care workforce reforms, launching the first ever national career structure for the care workforce alongside our new nationally recognised qualification.

Peter Grant: I know the Minister will want to join me in thanking every single person who dedicates themselves to working in the social care sector, including perhaps particularly those who have come to the UK from overseas to do so, but it is not sustainable to rely on incoming workers forever. The Migration Advisory Committee has found that Scotland is now less reliant on migrant workers in the social care sector than England, through the simple expedient of paying a decent wage. That might, by the way, also be a good way to stop doctors in England going on strike; the Minister might want to look at that. Has the Minister asked the Chancellor to provide funding in the Budget so that social care workers in England can enjoy the same pay and conditions as their colleagues in Scotland, and if not, why not?

Helen Whately: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we are grateful to all who work in social care, including those who have come here from other countries to care for our loved ones. We also agree that international migration is not a long-term answer to our care workforce needs. That is why we are reforming social care to work as a career, and we are backing that with extra funding—up to £8.6 billion extra for social care over two years.

Sarah Owen: I am afraid the Minister's warm words about the social care workforce do not meet the reality check for most people. The Government's own statistics show that there are at least 152,000 vacancies in social care in England alone, leaving my constituents waiting up to 10 weeks to be discharged from hospital. The Government have been using international recruitment to plug the gaps and as a result have filled over 11,000 vacancies in the past few years, so can the Minister confirm whether recruitment and retention in social care will be better or worse due to Government plans to prevent overseas social care workers bringing family members to the UK?

Helen Whately: As I said a moment ago, vacancies have fallen and the care workforce grew by more than 20,000 last year. We are seeing better retention of care workers as well, but we need to go further. That is why we are reforming social care careers, introducing the first ever national career structure for the care workforce and new qualifications and training.

Joanna Cherry: Edinburgh Trade Union Council recently described changes to the healthcare worker visa route as cruel and inhumane. Many of my constituents who have relatives in care share its concerns, as do I. We know the valuable contribution that foreign care workers make to the sector. Ideologically driven change to visas could further exacerbate the recruitment and retention crisis that other Members have so eloquently described. Given that the Government skipped consultation on these changes, will the Minister commit to meeting trade unions and social care leaders in Scotland to understand the impact of these harmful changes?

Helen Whately: I am grateful to international care workers who have come to the UK to look after loved ones. Their work has contributed to reducing vacancies and increasing the supply of social care, but we need to get the balance right between international recruitment and our homegrown workforce. We are carrying out

ambitious reforms of our adult social care workforce, and therefore it is right, alongside that, to ensure that we have the right numbers of people coming here from overseas for social care. That is why we have worked with the Home Office on changes to visas.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The managers of the wonderful care home I visited in Dunstable on Friday were annoyed by the number of job applicants for care places who were making the interview stage and then not arriving on the day. Can the Minister have a word with ministerial colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that job coaches are certain that jobseekers are not wasting the time of care homes? It is not fair, and those who work in care homes are busy people with a lot to do.

Helen Whately: I work closely with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions on the recruitment of people looking for jobs in social care, and I will raise that point with my colleague in the Department.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It was the Minister's party that promised to fix the crisis in social care "once and for all". With vacancy rates almost three times above the national average and turnover rates for new staff at more than 45%, it is clear that the Government failed. Labour's plan for a national care service with clear standards for providers and a new deal for staff will give social care the fundamental reset it needs. The Government have done it with our workforce plan, and they have half-heartedly tried it with dentistry. Does the Minister want to copy our homework once again?

Helen Whately: Let us be honest, Labour has no plan for social care. Whatever the shadow Minister says, it is unfunded. There is no funding committed to it and it is not meaningful. Those of us on the Conservative side of the House are reforming adult social care. We not only have a plan, but it is in progress.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I have asked the Secretary of State a number of times how she intends to recruit and retain social care staff, particularly with the visa changes coming into effect next Monday, stopping those from overseas coming to fill skills gaps from bringing their spouse or dependants with them. I ask again: how does the Secretary of State intend to improve the recruitment and retention of staff in the social care sector while her colleagues effectively work to undermine her?

Helen Whately: We are grateful to international workers coming to support us in social care and improving supply, but we have to get the balance right between international recruitment and our domestic workforce. In England, we are reforming social care careers to make social care work a career for our homegrown workforce, and I encourage her to make sure the SNP does the same in Scotland.

Maternity Services: North London

5. **Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the North Central London integrated care system on the potential closure of maternity services in north London. [901799]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Improving maternity care is a year 2 priority in our women's health strategy for this year. Any decisions around maternity services need to be focusing on improving outcomes for mums and babies. However, decisions on the local reconfiguration of services are made by local integrated care boards and local trusts.

Tulip Siddiq: The maternity unit at the Royal Free Hospital in my constituency is facing closure. Last week, I met with doctors from the unit who told me that the Royal Free is uniquely placed to help mothers with diabetes, pregnant women with HIV, and mothers who require interventional radiology. The Royal Free is the only local provider that offers this life-changing treatment 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Does the Minister agree that the Royal Free maternity unit has to stay open for the sake of those vulnerable groups of women?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Lady for raising her concerns, but as I said, this is a public consultation. It runs for 14 weeks and will close on 17 March. I urge her to raise her concerns as part of that consultation. It is absolutely crucial that we keep expertise in our maternity services, but I understand that the local proposals by the trust and the integrated care board outline plans for £40 million of significant additional investment into maternity services. Those decisions are for the local ICB and the local trust. The deadline is 17 March, and I urge the hon. Lady to ensure she takes part in that process.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Remaining in north London, can I bring to those on the Treasury Bench my concern over the quality of nursing care at Barnet Hospital? An elderly constituent of mine, who is in her 80s, was admitted there recently. She asked to use the lavatory but was told no one could take her, and was handed a nappy; she waited three hours until someone could actually take her to the loo. She is a coeliac, but was not offered any food for coeliacs during her 10-day stay because nobody had read her notes. She was also moved around her bed by her arms despite having a broken shoulder, which nobody knew as nobody had read her notes.

Maria Caulfield: I am very sorry to hear about the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent. That level of care is absolutely unacceptable. I know he has raised this particular issue with the Patient Safety Commissioner, Henrietta Hughes, but I am very happy to meet with my hon. Friend and his constituent to discuss those complaints, because that care is not acceptable.

Gynaecology Treatment

6. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps she is taking to reduce waiting times for gynaecology treatment. [901800]

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): At Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, the number of gynaecology patients waiting more than 52 weeks reduced by over 30% between August and December, but I sympathise with the many women who are still waiting too long. NHS England has been doing targeted work to help trusts with the most long waiters to support gynaecology patients in the community where appropriate, and to find specialist services that can treat them as quickly as possible.

Sarah Green: My local NHS trust recently stated that the average wait for a gynaecology appointment is 18 weeks, with patients starting treatment within 24 weeks, but that does not include those on cancer pathways. One of my constituents who had been identified as having abnormal cells in her cervix waited more than 60 weeks for a diagnostic assessment. She is one of many contacting me with tales of long delays for gynaecology appointments and paying to go private out of desperation. What steps is the Department taking to reduce waiting times for gynaecology assessments and treatment for those on cancer pathways?

Andrew Stephenson: Significant investment is going in to reduce both general wait times and cancer wait times. More patients on the cancer pathway have been seen than ever before; nearly 220,000 patients were seen last December following an urgent GP referral for suspected cancer, representing 117% of December 2019 levels. We continue to keep this under review and continue to strive to make the system go faster and reduce the elective backlog.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): NHS figures from December show that the number of women waiting for gynaecological treatment reached another record high of nearly 600,000. That number has tripled since 2012. A Labour Government will cut NHS waiting lists in England by funding 2 million more appointments a year. What can the Minister say to the women waiting urgently for treatment?

Andrew Stephenson: I would say that we are sticking to our plan to back the NHS to cut waiting lists and make our NHS fairer, simpler and faster. When there is no strike action, that plan is working. We already eliminated the longest waits, and, in November, we saw the biggest fall in waiting lists outside of the pandemic in more than a decade, alongside record investment in things like women's health hubs. We are prioritising women's health.

Primary Care

7. **Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to improve access to primary care. [901801]

8. **Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the adequacy of primary care provision in rural communities. [901802]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): We have met our manifesto commitment to deliver a record extra 50 million GP appointments annually. Our primary care recovery plan addresses

increased GP access and expands community pharmacy services nationwide with Pharmacy First. Our NHS dentist reform plan also allocates resources for 2.5 million appointments, targeting rural and coastal communities.

Julie Marson: I thank the Secretary of State for her response, and I thank the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), for visiting the community diagnostic centre and minor injuries unit at the Herts and Essex Hospital yesterday and all the fantastic staff there.

Frontier Estates committed to building a GP surgery as part of the wider Stortford Fields development. However, citing inflated build costs, it now questions the viability of the plans despite months of negotiations and efforts by the local NHS to find a solution. Will my right hon. Friend work with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, with whom I have already met on this issue, to ensure that Frontier really engages with the process and builds the surgery it promised my constituents?

Victoria Atkins: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the enormous amount of work she has done in her constituency to secure that community diagnostic centre. We have rolled out some 160 or so of those centres across England—we want to do more—and they are supplying some 6 million tests and scans for patients across England.

On the important issue that my hon. Friend raised, my officials and Levelling Up officials are already considering how primary care infrastructure can be better supported in the planning process to ease the pressure on primary care estates, particularly in areas of housing growth. I know that she will continue to be as conscientious in her campaigning on that as she is on other matters.

Greg Smith: Rural communities need local, easily accessible primary care. Since Long Crendon surgery closed during the pandemic, patients in that village and surrounding villages have been displaced, mainly to Brill and Thame, for GP appointments. For the vulnerable and those without private cars, the absence of regular bus services can mean an unaffordable £25 at least in taxis to see a GP. I have raised many times an innovative approach to building a new health centre in Long Crendon by the parish council, which has the land and the agreement by the ICB for the rent to put Unity Health in there—we just need the money to build it. Will my right hon. Friend break down every barrier to help us get that health centre built in Long Crendon?

Victoria Atkins: Again, I very much admire the effort and determination that my hon. Friend is showing to stand up for his constituents. He will know that sadly I am constrained from commenting on individual cases, but what I do know is that the innovation he is showing alongside his parish council—and, indeed, I would hope, his local integrated care board—is the approach we want to adopt across our rural and coastal communities to ensure that they, too, have the access to primary care that we all expect.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Equal access to primary care is so important, but the use of physician associates is downright dangerous. Does the Secretary

of State agree that patients have the right to see a qualified GP and not be fobbed off with a two-tier primary care system?

Victoria Atkins: I understand the concerns—we have seen them in the media—but, please, we in this House have a responsibility to our constituents and to professionals working in healthcare, including our clinicians and physician associates. In fact, physician associates have been working in the NHS for some two decades. They are there to work with doctors to assist them, freeing up doctors' time to focus on the tasks that only they are qualified to do. We have been very careful to listen to the concerns raised, which is why we recently announced intentions to regulate them. But, please, we must all take that responsibility for ensuring that we are not spreading concern. Actually, these roles can have a very positive effect on healthcare system.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): My constituents are fed up with battling to see a GP. I have been working hard across party lines with local councillors and the ICB, but I was surprised to hear from the Prime Minister in response to a question last week that only £2 million was allocated to my ICB for primary care, and that it should raid its hospital refurbishment budget instead. Could the Secretary of State advise me which part of the much needed hospital investment should be overlooked to compensate for the failure to invest in primary care locally?

Victoria Atkins: Again, it is for integrated care boards to assess the needs of their area. If there are concerns about access to primary care, we are keen to give them the autonomy to make decisions about how they spend their budget. We have set expectations of integrated care boards in a couple of respects—in particular, we expect them to use the money that we have provided for dental care and we have set clear expectations that integrated care boards will introduce at least one women's health hub in their area this year.

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

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): While we are talking about the recovery of primary care and the Secretary of State is at the Dispatch Box, the recovering access plan released last May talked about high-quality online consultation, text messaging services and online booking tools. They were due in July, but that became August and then December, and I understand that it has now been delayed indefinitely due to a claim made against NHS England in what is a £300 million project. That delay is hitting access to primary care. Will the Secretary of State update the House?

Victoria Atkins: We are determined to bring not just primary care but the whole NHS up to speed with technology. We are firm advocates of the idea that technology can help free clinicians' time and ensure that they are spending time looking at their patients rather than at computer screens. In primary care, we are working to ensure the digital telephony services that have played such a critical role in providing those 50 million additional appointments, as I described. I will take away my hon. Friend's points, and look into them carefully.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I have been corresponding with the Primary Care Minister, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), and her predecessors about urgently needing to protect general practice locations in city centres from outdated Treasury rules that potentially force them to move to ring-road locations. The Minister's latest reply suggested that the ICB could use capital funding to pay for new premises, but my ICB claims that that is against the rules. Would she and her officials please urgently meet me and my local ICB to bottom out what the rules are and urgently protect our city centre GP locations?

Victoria Atkins: I will ask the relevant Minister to write to the hon. Lady.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The simple fact is that the Conservatives have been in power for 14 years, and general practice has never been in a worse state. Despite slogging their guts out, GPs are struggling because this Government have cut 2,000 GPs since 2015, making it even harder for patients to get an appointment. Given that, why has the Government decided that the NHS needs what the Institute for Fiscal Studies has described as the biggest funding cut since the 1970s?

Victoria Atkins: It has been a very long time since Labour were in government, but even the hon. Gentleman knows that Ministers will never comment on fiscal events the day before they occur. Let me introduce some facts into his analysis. We have now delivered on our manifesto commitment for 50 million more general practice appointments per year, with 363.8 million booked in the last 12 months. That compares with 312 million delivered in the 12 months to December 2019. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman stopped shouting, perhaps he would be able to hear me. About 62,000 more appointments were delivered per working day last December, excluding covid vaccinations. We have our primary care recovery plan, and it is working. Of course there is more to do, but even the hon. Gentleman would not be so churlish as to deny those extra 50 million appointments.

Tobacco and Vaping: Legislation

11. **Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): When she plans to introduce a tobacco and vapes bill. [901805]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): The hon. Member will know that, shockingly, smoking kills 80,000 people across the UK every year, and costs society £17 billion in ill health and loss of productivity. The Government will introduce the tobacco and vapes Bill shortly. I am delighted to say that Northern Ireland Ministers announced just this morning that we will legislate for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Paul Girvan: I thank the Minister for that answer. I just want to say that the age-related Bill on the sale of tobacco products will create the first generation of smoke-free people in the United Kingdom. All politics is local, and it is vital that we have the same legislation in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, smoking contributes to at least 1,300 smoking-related cancers

per year. Some 13.9% of the people in my constituency continue to smoke, irrespective of the guidance given. I am glad to hear the Minister's assurance on the legislation, but will the Government engage with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure it is on their priority list?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State met the Northern Ireland Health Minister just yesterday. I absolutely assure him that all parts of the United Kingdom will be included in the once-in-a-generation public health intervention that will save millions of lives.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I urge my right hon. Friend to get on with introducing the Bill, because every single day we delay, more people die of cancer and other smoking-related diseases. Equally, in creating the first generation of people who will not be allowed to buy cigarettes or tobacco products—that is excellent—does she agree that one concern is that young people are now taking up vaping instead of smoking, and that vaping is clearly a path towards nicotine addiction?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Yes. My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. There is no doubt that tobacco and vaping companies are now trying to recruit children, putting vapes, including many illegal vapes, next to the sweet counter with extraordinary flavours such as bubble gum and berry blast, which are clearly not designed, as was originally proposed, for adult smokers to be able to quit smoking by moving to vaping. He is absolutely right and we will bring forward this once-in-a-generation legislation shortly.

Community and District Nurses

12. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What steps she plans to take to improve the recruitment and retention of community and district nurses. [901806]

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): We have delivered our manifesto commitment of 50,000 more nurses six months early. There are now almost 361,000 nurses working across the NHS. As part of that, community nursing has grown by over 9% since 2019.

Neale Hanvey: There has been a crisis brewing in community-facing nursing over the past decade, with the number of district nurses down by 40% and health visitor numbers in England and Wales falling by almost a third. What guarantees will the Minister provide that this vital workforce will be supported, when health budgets in all the nations of the UK are under increasing strain and NHS funding faces a £2 billion black hole, and cuts to spending in England have a consequential impact on budgets in Scotland?

Andrew Stephenson: Record funding is going into our NHS. In addition to the 9% increase in community nursing since 2019, we are investing over £2.4 billion in education and training through the NHS long term workforce plan, which commits to increasing training places for district nurses by 41% by the end of the decade. Since 2010, we have delivered over 63,300 more nurses and midwives into our NHS.

Draft Mental Health Bill

13. **Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): When she plans to respond to the Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill's report entitled "Draft Mental Health Bill 2022", published on 19 January 2023. [901807]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I put on record my thanks to the members of the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee, which scrutinised our draft Mental Health Bill. We are looking at the recommendations and will respond to the Committee's report shortly.

Olivia Blake: It is now over a year since the Joint Committee report on the draft Mental Health Bill was published. Despite repeated promises of reform, the Government have failed to act. More than 50,000 people are held under the Mental Health Act 1983. It is an outrage to them and to campaigners that reform has been de-prioritised. Will the Minister confirm when the Government plan to bring a formal Bill to Parliament and what conversations they have had with the Chancellor in the run-up to the Budget to ensure the reforms are properly resourced?

Maria Caulfield: As I have said, we have published our draft Bill, it has undergone pre-legislative scrutiny and I shall respond to the Committee's recommendations shortly, but this is not just about legislative reform. As a result of the £143 million that we have invested in crisis support, we have already seen less use of the Mental Health Act 1983 because people are being seen earlier: our crisis cafés and crisis telephone services, for example, have led to a 15% reduction in the use of the Act.

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a number of years since we promised to reform mental health legislation that reflects a time when people with severe mental ill health were viewed as problems to be managed rather than as individuals. I believe that we on these Benches, as Conservatives, should be doing everything we can to empower people and respect their liberties. It simply is not right that in the 21st century people's health conditions are being managed through the forced administration of drugs, which pays no respect to their liberties. May I reiterate the urgency with which measures should be introduced, particularly as people with lived experience have relived their trauma to provide the benefit of their experiences?

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely entirely agree. That is why the Government published the draft Bill in January last year, and why it underwent pre-legislative scrutiny. I gave evidence to the Committee, and we are working our way through its detailed recommendations and will publish our response shortly. However, that is in addition to our significant reform of mental health services, particularly earlier intervention and crisis cafés. We have seen the impact of that: 15% fewer detentions under the Mental Health Act, 8% fewer admissions to hospitals and 12% fewer admissions from our mental health crisis telephone centres, which are now available across England 24/7.

Healthcare for Women

15. **Ms Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve healthcare for women. [901810]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): Women's health is one of my top priorities. As we approach International Women's Day, we have already improved access to contraception and the treatment of urinary tract infections through Pharmacy First, announced £50 million of funding for research on maternity disparities and other health conditions affecting women, and set the expectation that each integrated care board area will have at least one women's health hub operating this year.

Ms Brown: For more than a decade I have been raising the appalling, often agonising treatment of many women who need hysteroscopies in the NHS. They are being left with unnecessary trauma and are reluctant to engage further with doctors, which is quite simply life-threatening. However, the medical establishment continues to resist change and the Government shirk their leadership role. Earlier this year the Secretary of State set out her priorities for the women's health strategy, and access to pain-free hysteroscopy was not included. Why?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her work in this regard, and I absolutely acknowledge the issues that women are experiencing with this highly invasive procedure at what is often an extremely distressing time in their lives. We are waiting for the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to update its guidelines on best practice in hysteroscopies. Following consultation last year that is under peer review, and is due to be published soon. However, as the hon. Lady knows, I am clear that it should not be the responsibility of women in those very distressing circumstances to ask for pain relief. Clinicians must assume that a woman wants it, and discuss that with her before the procedure.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the Government's recent refresh of the women's health strategy and the addition to it of birth trauma. However, I am currently chairing a national inquiry into birth trauma, and we are hearing from mothers throughout the United Kingdom about some of the severe mental health conditions that they are facing, including postpartum psychosis. I have been particularly concerned to hear about the risk of suicide among new mothers. What action are the Government taking to address this?

Victoria Atkins: Let me put on record my admiration for my hon. Friend's action in sharing her own experiences in order to improve healthcare for women across the country. She will know of yesterday's important announcement about suicide prevention, elements of which addressed exactly the concerns that she has rightly raised. Thanks to her hard work, we have also announced that within eight weeks or so of giving birth mums will be asked by GPs whether they are okay, and we hope very much that that will open up the conversation with women who may be struggling.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Amma Birth Companions has just been recognised in the 2024 GSK IMPACT awards. The charity is doing really important work to support vulnerable asylum seekers

and refugees who would otherwise face giving birth alone. Will the Secretary of State meet the charity to discuss its work and research, given the disparities that continue for this group of women?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady describes a very interesting piece of work. I will ask my ministerial colleague to meet the charity, as we want to support women. Indeed, part of our work across the women's health strategy is ensuring that maternity services are not just safe, but trusted by mums-to-be.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): With regard to healthcare for women, a gynaecologist who claimed that Hammersmith would be better if it were "Jew free" has been ruled as not racist, but merely "comfortable with using discriminatory language",

according to the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service. He was merely suspended for three months and is due to start seeing patients again in a few weeks. I am concerned that this doctor may be a danger to Jewish patients. I am also concerned that the tribunal is defective and its decision is grossly unreasonable. Will the Secretary of State instruct Government lawyers to begin judicial review proceedings against the tribunal?

Victoria Atkins: I sincerely thank my right hon. and learned Friend for raising this issue. As the Prime Minister set out on the steps of Downing Street last week, there are people whose ideology and dogma are in direct conflict with our country's shared values. Just as we will not stand for that across the country, nor will I stand for it in our NHS. I have already written to NHS England and regulators, setting out their responsibilities and our expectations of them, and I can assure my right hon. and learned Friend that I will be looking into this issue with great urgency and great care.

Topical Questions

T1. [901820] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): I am committed to making our NHS faster, simpler and fairer for all, including families, which is why the Government have recently introduced baby loss certificates. Nothing can diminish the pain of losing a baby, but we hope that this formal recognition of a life lost can help families to live alongside their grief. Indeed, since we announced the launch some two weeks ago, more than 37,000 certificates have been requested by parents.

That same commitment to families is why we are rolling out Martha's rule across England, giving patients and their families the automatic right to a rapid review of their case—24 hours a day, seven days a week. Families and carers know when something is not right or their loved one's condition is deteriorating. Martha's rule not only recognises this powerful instinct, but allows anyone concerned to act on it and to make sure that the NHS listens.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, for which I am very grateful, I would like to alert the House to a written ministerial statement and a detailed letter from

NHS England that has been laid this morning. It addresses a historical issue whereby women who received radiotherapy above the waist to treat Hodgkin lymphoma, and who were therefore at a higher risk of breast cancer, were not given annual checks. Yesterday, the NHS wrote to the 1,487 women affected in order to inform them. We expect all women to be offered a scan within the next three months, and NHS England has established a helpline and briefed GPs and relevant charities. The vast majority of this group of women will already have been receiving screening on a three-yearly basis, but NHS England wants to ensure that they receive annual tests, in line with the clinical guidance.

I wanted to alert hon. Members to that because, with the letters having been sent out yesterday, it is perfectly possible—indeed, probable—that they will start to receive queries from their constituents. I will of course keep the House updated. I emphasise, however, that what I have given is a summary, and I would encourage hon. Members to look at the very detailed letter from NHS England in order to reassure their constituents that we are scooping up everybody we can to look after them at this very troubling time.

John Penrose: Like many people here, I was delighted by last month's NHS dentistry recovery plan. How many new NHS dental appointments does the Secretary of State expect to be available in my constituency of Weston-super-Mare, and by when?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for supporting our dental recovery plan. Indeed, he is one of many colleagues who campaigned hard for it. I am pleased to inform him that dental activity, as measured by courses of treatment, has increased by 15% on the previous year in his local integrated care board area, and our plan will support further increases to dental access through some 2.5 million additional appointments across the country, including in his constituency. The first measure, namely new patient premiums, went live on Friday, and we hope to have the results very soon.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): With a general election in the air, I welcome what the Secretary of State has said about baby loss certificates and Martha's rule—there is genuine cross-party agreement on this. I also thank her for advance notice of today's important written ministerial statement.

However, with a general election in the air and given the Secretary of State's principled, vocal and consistent opposition to funding the NHS by abolishing the non-dom tax status, on a scale of one to 10—one being utterly shameless and 10 being highly embarrassed—how red-faced will she be when the Chancellor adopts Labour's policy tomorrow?

Victoria Atkins: One of the joys of being at the Government Dispatch Box is that not only do we have to deal with very serious matters, such as I have just set out, but we get to have a knockabout on the Labour party's electioneering. The hon. Gentleman will know the Conservatives' proud record on funding our NHS since 2010. I invite him to wait for tomorrow's Budget to see what more this Conservative Government are doing to support our constituents, and to help our economy grow for a bright future.

Wes Streeting: The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), has said that the policy will be

“as much use as an ashtray on a motorbike.”—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 710.]

As she speeds down the A23 back to Lewes, to defend her constituency against the Liberal Democrats, how on earth will she feel with all those embers of the Conservatives' 14-year record blowing in her face?

Is it not now clear that, with the Government having adopted Labour's workforce plan, Labour's dentistry recruitment plan and now Labour's NHS funding plan, when it comes to a record to be proud of, and when it comes to finding the answers, only Labour can deliver an NHS that is fit for the future?

Victoria Atkins: The Leader of the Opposition is a former barrister, and barristers like to rely on evidence, so let me give some evidence on what the Labour-run NHS in Wales looks like. People are almost twice as likely to be waiting for treatment under the Labour-run Welsh NHS—21.3% of people in Wales are waiting for hospital treatment after a consultant referral, compared with 12.8% in England. Patients in Labour-run Wales are, on average, waiting five weeks longer for NHS treatment than patients in England, and the number of patients in Wales who are escaping to seek treatment in England has increased by 40% in two years. But don't worry, folks, according to the Leader of the Opposition this is the blueprint—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind everyone that these are topical questions. It is about the many Members I need to get in, rather than the ping-pong over the Dispatch Box. Let us move on to Andrew Jones as a good example.

T2. [901822] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

I am talking to my local integrated care board about establishing the first centre of dental excellence in North Yorkshire, to be located in Harrogate, to build on the dental recovery plan. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that boosting capacity is critical to catching up from the pandemic, and that centres of dental excellence are a very good way to achieve it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we need more capacity in our dental workforce, and I know he will be a big advocate for his constituency. We set out in the first ever NHS long-term workforce plan that we will increase dentistry training places by 40% by 2031-32. Our dental recovery plan sets out many different measures to improve capacity.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Later this month I will be 10 years cancer free, having survived melanoma first as a teenager and again in my early 20s. Can the Secretary of State look me in the eye and guarantee that she is doing all she can to prevent others from getting the same diagnosis?

Victoria Atkins: Again, I thank the hon. Lady for sharing her experience, and of course we are doing all we can. I know that the SNP Scottish Government share our determination to ensure that cancer treatment continues to improve. England is diagnosing earlier and treating more. We have seen cancer survival rates improve by almost 10 percentage points since 2005, but we also know that four in 10 cancers could be prevented, which is exactly why we are bringing forward the smoke-free generation work. Of course, if the Scottish Government would like us to help with some of their waiting lists, we genuinely stand ready to do so.

T3. [901823] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The general practice estates and technology transformation fund supported projects in my constituency and was appreciated by my local integrated care board. What evaluation has been made of it, and will it be continued?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I have had a number of meetings with my hon. Friend and know that he is determined to resolve some of these long-standing issues in his constituency. I have assured him that ICBs have the freedom to increase capital for primary care in their region, so long as their plans remain within their overall capital allocation. I will certainly be happy to meet him again to talk about what more measures we can take to support his constituents.

T4. [901824] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I held my first dental summit since the publication of the Government's dental recovery plan, which I have to say was met with disappointment and frustration. The reason for that is that is not enough funding or flexibility, or the resolution to the contract. Will the Minister set out the timetable for when the dental contract will be resolved?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am very surprised and disappointed to hear the hon. Lady say that. We are delivering 2.5 million more appointments through the new patient premium, which started last Friday. We will have information within a month to see which dentists have taken up this generous new patient premium to ensure that many more people get access to dentistry. Not only that, but we have golden hellos to attract dentists to areas that are underserved, mobile dental vans and, importantly, a new focus on Smile4life. That is going to ensure that all babies and young children have that fabulous smile for life.

T5. [901825] **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): The Pharmacy First service has proved popular in Amber Valley, but some pharmacists report confusion because the ear infection service applies only to under 18s and patients are being referred to pharmacies when they should not be. Will the Minister either extend the service to over-18s or ensure that NHS communications are clear that this service is only for children?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He will be aware that a decision was taken that ear wax removal services are better done in the community and that ear syringing can cause problems.

That area is under review and I am happy to write to him to address the specific point he makes about over-18s and children.

T7. [901828] **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): I absolutely agree that we should redouble our efforts to recruit and retain more home-grown carers, as the Welsh Government are doing by paying them all at least the real living wage, but in the short term we have to rely on foreign workers. From her earlier answers, it appears that the Social Care Minister is happy to deprive them of the enjoyment of their own family life, while we expect them to give our relatives loving care. Will she think again and speak to Home Office colleagues about dropping this totally inhumane ban?

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): As the hon. Lady will have heard me say earlier, we are grateful to international care workers who come to care for our loved ones in this country. We need to get the balance right between international recruitment and our home-grown care workforce. On the question specifically on dependants, I say to her that every care worker who comes here to do work in the UK has a choice as to whether to come here or not.

T8. [901829] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Health and Secondary Care Minister for visiting the new medical school in Chelmsford yesterday. This is the first time that students have ever been able to train as doctors in Essex in its history, and the results are phenomenal. This is living proof of the Government's commitment to train the NHS staff of the future. What progress is he making to increase work placements for students so that we can train even more doctors, nurses and people for important roles such as physician associates?

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and her kind invite to visit her constituency. I pay tribute to all the work she has done to secure investment in Anglia Ruskin University. She is right to highlight the importance of delivering clinical placements as part of the long-term workforce plan. I assure her that we are working closely with NHS England and partners in health and education to ensure that happens.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Medicine shortages have doubled in the UK in the last two years. There might be some global pressures, but two issues have particularly affected the UK: first, the post-Brexit regulatory framework; and secondly, the fact that the pound has tanked, making it more expensive to buy medicines. What are the Government doing to undo that Brexit dividend?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman sounds like a broken record, as usual. The Department has no evidence to suggest that EU exit is leading to sustained medicine shortages. Shortages occur for a wide range of reasons and are affecting countries all over the world.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Rural Norfolk is experiencing a dental crisis and a generation of children are in danger of going without dental care. I welcome the dental recovery plan, but I notice that it will be four

or five years before we get more dentists. Last week, NHS Norfolk and Waveney integrated care board announced a £17 million underspend on dentistry. Will the Minister agree to meet with me and the ICB to work out how we get more money out now to help dentistry in Norfolk today?

Victoria Atkins: One of the many ways we have tackled access to dental care is to ensure that those dentists who have a contract to conduct NHS work are using them to the top of their licence. We are encouraging dentists to do that through the new patient premium and a higher rate paid for units of dental activity. There is so much more to the plan. Labour keeps trying to claim credit for our plan, but the truth is that our plan promises 2.5 million appointments while its plan promises a miserly 700,000.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is imperative that we tackle the scourge of mental ill health in children and young people. Labour will ensure access to mental health support in every school and establish an open-access mental health hub in every community, paid for by charging VAT on private school fees. Why will the Government not adopt that plan?

Maria Caulfield: I have a news flash for the hon. Lady: we are already doing all that work. Mental health support teams are being rolled out in schools—44% of pupils now have access to a mental health support team, rising to 50% shortly. Over 13,800 schools and colleges now have a trained senior mental health lead. Only last week we announced 24 early support hubs for 11 to 25-year-olds—they will not need a referral; they can drop in. There are 24/7 helplines available that can be accessed through 111. That is what we are doing.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Mid and South Essex integrated care board is seeking to remove vital community health services from St Peter's Hospital in Maldon. Will the Minister meet me and our right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) to discuss the proposals? They will affect both our constituencies and are causing a great deal of concern.

Helen Whately: I would be very happy to meet my right hon. Friends to discuss those concerns.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her offer to help cut waiting lists in Scotland. I listened to the frankly delusional statements from the SNP Benches about the state of the NHS in Scotland. We are in dire straits and suffer the same problems, particularly about GPs and appointments disappearing. When are we going to see an improvement in appointment availability?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will no doubt be extremely envious of the fact that in England there are 50 million more GP appointments now every year, which is a fantastic achievement by this Government. She will want to look at what is happening in Scotland, which has some of the worst health outcomes in western Europe, and challenge SNP Ministers over drug and alcohol death rates and falls in life expectancy.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend explain an anomaly in the “Agenda for Change” pay deal as it affects non-NHS providers? People working in the NHS for non-NHS providers may be eligible for extra money if the organisation they work for is in financial difficulties, but not if it is not. So badly run organisations are being rewarded and well-run organisations are being penalised, which seems to me to be perverse.

Andrew Stephenson: I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss the matter. We have reached pay settlements with the “Agenda for Change” unions, and we continue to reach pay deals with other unions. We are also supporting non-NHS providers whose contracts are dynamically aligned. It is a complex area, so I am more than happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss his concerns.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that NHS England is expected to announce the decision about the primary children's centre for cancer treatment in south London and south-east London. Evelina London Children's Hospital in my constituency is one of the only specialist centres in south London. Does she agree that the final decision should be made as soon as possible in order to benefit staff, patients and families? Will she join me in visiting Evelina London?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. In fairness, colleagues from across the House have been raising this issue with me because it affects a large population of London and the surrounding areas. I must leave it to NHS England to finish its consultation process, but I would be very happy to visit not just the Evelina but our other wonderful hospitals that look after children.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Given the expansion of health services through Pharmacy First, what action is my right hon. Friend the Minister taking to ensure that communities such as Sandiacre in my constituency, whose branch of Boots is due to close at the end of the month, are not left without access to such vital services?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to discuss that matter with my hon. Friend, who is a huge advocate for her constituency. It is always disappointing when a community pharmacy closes, but she will know that the launch of Pharmacy First on 31 January expanded the value and contribution of all our community pharmacies. It has been met with a £645 million investment over this year and next.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On access to primary care provision, will the Secretary of State assure the House that she will liaise with Health Ministers in the devolved Departments to ensure that rural communities do not lose out because of their isolated locations?

Victoria Atkins: I am very happy to give that assurance. I was delighted to meet Minister Swann yesterday to discuss his plans for Northern Ireland healthcare, including access to primary care.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I remind Members of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's international recognition procedure will ensure faster access to innovative treatments, but it will realise its full potential only if it is matched by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's evaluation process. What is my right hon. Friend the Minister doing to ensure that the two processes are aligned?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend will be aware that there have been delays with approvals by the MHRA and NICE. We are keen to ensure that those delays are reduced, and I am delighted to tell the House that significant progress has been made in both organisations. I am happy to work with my hon. Friend and both organisations to ensure that progress continues to be made.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Figures obtained by the British Dental Association project that £8 million of the NHS budget in Somerset is going unspent. Will the Minister explain to my constituent, who is suffering in dental agony, why that is happening?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I encourage the hon. Lady to hold her integrated care board to account. We invest more than £3 billion a year in dentistry, and our dental recovery plan means that significant money is available for NHS dentistry. It is for the integrated care board to commission those units of dental activity, which now offer more money—a minimum of £28 per UDA. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady if she finds she is not getting anywhere with her ICB.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I am currently working with a brilliant local pharmacist, Fizz, to open a new NHS dental practice in Belfairs in my constituency. Premises and dentists have been lined up, but we need the ICB to commission the service. Will the Minister meet me, my local ICB and Fizz to unlock that vital service as soon as possible?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to hear about that really good news for my hon. Friend's constituents—I know she works tirelessly for them. Of course, I will be very happy to meet her.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Wendy Hart had a high white blood cell count when she was discharged from the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital. Her husband, Terence, described a dreadful, pointless 60-mile round trip home and back to hospital before Wendy died of sepsis. Will the Minister consider distances between acute hospitals and rural communities when reviewing hospital discharge guidance?

Helen Whately: I am very sorry to hear about what happened to the hon. Gentleman's constituent. I send my condolences to her family and loved ones. Clearly, it is very important that discharge decisions are led by clinicians, who can make a clinical decision about whether somebody is medically ready to be discharged. I have no doubt that the family may well take up that decision with local NHS organisations.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): No doctor wants to be on strike, so I welcome the new deal with the consultant unions. It shows that by being reasonable, pragmatic and acting in good faith, unions can deliver for their members. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend knows only too well the importance of industrial action and the impact it can have on patients and on the NHS as a whole. I am pleased that the BMA has announced today, following the previous settlement that was narrowly rejected in its ballot, that it has been able to get back around the table with my officials and me. We have been able to find a fair and reasonable settlement that the BMA will advocate for and recommend to its members. We hope that that shows those who are choosing to strike that constructive negotiations, and trying to sort out some of the concerns that we know clinicians have, can be dealt with in a reasonable manner, which is of benefit not just to staff, but to patients.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): How many people were treated for acquired brain injury last year?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman has caught me off guard—I will write to him. I am keen to continue working with him on that issue. As he knows, we have already shared draft details of the acquired brain injury strategy with him and members of the all-party parliamentary group, and I am very keen to continue working collaboratively on that issue with him.

Point of Order

12.46 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have spoken before in the House about my constituent, retired school caretaker Gary Godwin, who is fighting for redress after losing £2,000 of his hard-earned savings to the now defunct funeral plan firm Safe Hands. Gary and 47,000 others look to have been let down by a failed regulatory regime overseen by the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority, for a grand total of £60 million between them. After raising the issue in questions to the Leader of the House last July and at Treasury questions last October, I finally managed, at the start of the year, after several attempts, to get a meeting with the Economic Secretary, who said he would raise it with the Chancellor. Having not had a reply for two months, I informed the Economic Secretary that I would raise a point of order today. Within an hour, I received a reply, but there was no mention of discussing the matter with the Chancellor, or of a review of the correspondence, as was originally promised. Will you tell me, Mr Speaker, what more I can do to ensure that Gary and his fellow victims do not have a lengthy wait for justice?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and for giving me notice of it. I understand that the Chancellor has replied to his letter in the last few minutes—is that correct? In any case, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what he has had to say. He still has time to table a question for the Chancellor at Treasury questions on 19 March to follow up on this important matter. I am sure that the Table Office will be able to advise him on how to else he might pursue it.

Senior Civil Service (Accountability and Appointment)

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

12.48 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the scrutiny and approval by Parliament of appointments to senior civil service roles; and for connected purposes.

In this nation, people rightly expect this elected and accountable Parliament to oversee an impartial civil service. The notion of distance and unaccountability has, however, grown among the populace like a spectre, caused by unnecessary tensions on both sides and casting aspersions on the majority. It is time something was done about it.

We need this reform because nothing is more fundamental to our democracy than the relationship between Parliament and the civil service. This is the mother of Parliaments, and our civil service is held to be the gold standard in the world of officialdom. When elected Members and the civil service row in the same direction, we can produce startling results, which have beaten fascists, built the NHS, and won the Olympic bid. When the conduct between us becomes strained, when confidence is undermined and when accountability, trust or respect are lacking, we get cast-iron assurances regarding matters such as weapons of mass destruction and sub-par personal protective equipment contracts. As a result, perfectly sound policies get stalled.

I am sure all colleagues will agree that our civil service is a great one, as is our Parliament—men and women dedicated to the public good—but has been plagued in recent years by increasing tensions that have a fundamental impact on the discharge of governance and policy. Let us consider the issues we have seen in recent years and how they tell of structural deficiencies, rather than being merely isolated accidents under a particular Administration.

The Sue Gray affair should alarm us all, whatever side of the House we sit on. To have a civil servant preside over an investigation into a Prime Minister, and then achieve escape velocity from the civil service to go and work immediately for the Opposition, has scarred the view of impartiality that the majority rightly accept and expect. The same could be said of the role of political appointees. In many ways, we can view certain Labour and Conservative spin doctors as essentially the same entity: unaccountable to the public, but very much imposed on the public, beyond the advisory role for which they were initially intended.

Both those issues could be addressed through updates to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, which sought to better control apparatus such as special advisers, but if we wish to fix an issue, we need to amend the culture that goes with it. To do that, we need to start at the top. We need a culture that the majority of the service still respects.

Let us define that top and the route to it. The great mandarins who hold vast power are often faceless. That cannot be right in a democracy: if a person wants power, they must be subjected to the sunlight of this place. Permanent secretaries are appointed under a

[Giles Watling]

scheme in which the Prime Minister has the final say in the recruitment process—the Prime Minister alone chooses directly from a list created by the civil service commissioners. If any Member present can, without the aid of Google, name the commissioners who appoint people to hold power over their constituents' lives, I would be amazed.

It is not just the permanent secretaries we must consider. The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trades Union Administration Act 2014 explains that a permanent secretary is a person serving in a range of government posts. That definition needs massively expanding to ensure that it encompasses top officials within state entities such as the NHS—for instance, the CEO of the NHS is often seen as a godlike distant figure and not suitably accountable to this place. Let us be in no doubt: horrific things happen if a culture is enabled where officials feel they are above policy instructions from the elected. At the current time, advancement in the civil service comes from appeasing the established networks, such as the commission, and the Minister for the civil service. These people serve the nation, so their fortunes should lie with this institution, not an elite few within it.

I do not propose that we fix all the issues at once, nor do I propose a baby-out-with-the-bathwater approach, but a modest solution that resets the relationship to a more traditional and, may I say, British footing. By that, I mean a process that is less invested in smoke-filled rooms with those from the Executive, one that empowers this place. I propose that a cross-party Committee of both Houses be formed to fold those appointments into understood due process. Appointments would be fixed-term and renewable by this place, which will end at a stroke

the concept of a job for life. This is hardly revolution: it is a mix of established democratic processes in Parliament and professional standards that industry outside this place would recognise. It would only impact a few dozen people at the top; it is hardly onerous. I imagine that 99.9% of the civil service would not be impacted, but the change to the culture at the top would cascade down. If the upper echelons knew they were better overseen by this place—this cross-party institution—they would ensure that those they manage are correctly supported, mentored and held to account.

Some siren voices claim that this work could be discharged by Select Committees holding more hearings, or that better training of Ministers could fix all the issues, but the bottom line is that if a person has vast power over the machinery of government but does not feel a sense of fealty to Parliament, such ideas are mere tinkering. What I have proposed can be done now, in a modest manner, to gently course-correct a few errors and modernise and empower this institution. If we do not do so, eventually we could well need more radical reform. The relief valve is simple and established: professional industry processes via this accountable House. Let us act now, because if a trend of unaccountability continues to make people question who is really running Britain, the gold standard I mentioned will soon be seen as fool's gold.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Giles Watling, Michael Fabricant, Andrew Rosindell and Mr Mark Francois present the Bill.

Giles Watling accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 May, and to be printed (Bill 171).

Automated Vehicles Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: *Seventh Report of the Transport Committee of Session 2022-23, Self-driving vehicles, HC 519, and the Government response, Session 2023-24, HC 264.*]

12.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As hon. Members know, most journeys take place on our roads. About 86% are made by cars, taxis and vans, but in the over 100 years since the invention of the car, despite our vehicles becoming better, safer and now cleaner, one aspect of driving has remained constant: the driver has always controlled the vehicle. In future, things may be different. For all or part of a driver's journey, self-driving vehicles will free them from that responsibility, improving the lives of the millions of people who are unable to drive; boosting connectivity for rural communities across the country; transforming freight, be it long haul or last mile; and above all, making our roads safer.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): As the Secretary of State knows, insurance premiums have been going through the roof recently—the costs are astronomical. What impact does he expect automated vehicles to have on insurance premiums?

Mr Harper: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to make a little progress, I will speak about how one centrepiece of the Bill and of our approach is the safety not just of the automated vehicle and its occupants but of other road users, particularly vulnerable road users. I will come on to that point; if the hon. Gentleman does not feel that I have covered it, he should feel free to intervene again.

We are on the cusp of a transport revolution, and Britain is very much at the wheel of that decision. British companies are developing the self-driving technology; British lawyers are developing the robust new legal frameworks that are being used; and British parliamentarians in this House and the other place can now agree regulation widely seen as among the most comprehensive in the world. The goal is clear: we want to make this country the natural home for the self-driving vehicle industry, and this Bill is the next stop on that journey.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It will not surprise my right hon. Friend that I am speaking up for Milton Keynes on this subject. This is a huge global opportunity for Britain, worth £350 billion, and Milton Keynes is often the testbed of this technology. It is a beautiful, vibrant city that is going places—except perhaps in the eyes of the producers of last night's "EastEnders"—so does he agree that when we get this technology, we will be able to roll it out because we have tested it in places such as Milton Keynes?

Mr Harper: I thank my hon. Friend for speaking powerfully for his constituency. He is right: those developing this technology will want to roll it out carefully and thoughtfully, and they will want to do that in specific places in the United Kingdom. He has just made a powerful bid for Milton Keynes to be at the centre of that.

Gearing Britain up for a self-driving future has been the work of years. In 2015, our world-leading code of practice enabled self-driving vehicle trials in the UK. We passed the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018, which codified insurance in this area for the first time and recognised the importance of that, as the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) said earlier. In that same year, we kicked off a Law Commissions review on a legal and safety framework for self-driving vehicles—

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Harper: Let me just set out what that review did, then I will take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman, who is an esteemed member of the Select Committee. It convened legal minds from across the country, launched three rounds of public consultation, sifted through hundreds of written responses and produced more than 70 recommendations, which now underpin this legislation.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. These are really important points, as is the clarification sought by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr on insurance liability. Can I ask the Secretary of State about the arrangements for the compensation of victims of any collisions that are caused by uninsured automated vehicles? He mentioned the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018, but that legislation does not mention this point. This Bill represents an opportunity to address that. Will the Secretary of State set out how we are going to do that, or are we missing an opportunity?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that point. We have arrangements in place for vehicles with human drivers who are uninsured, and we are working with the Motor Insurers' Bureau on the arrangements that will be in place. I would envisage analogous arrangements for self-driving vehicles that are uninsured, to make sure that if they are involved in accidents, any victims of those accidents are able to receive reimbursement in the same way as happens now for the victim of an uninsured driver. We already have arrangements, and I would envisage analogous arrangements. We are already having those conversations, but if the hon. Gentleman has more to say on that, either today or in Committee, I will be delighted to hear from him—

Grahame Morris *rose*—

Mr Harper: I am happy to hear from him again now.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that clarification, but this is a whole new world where we will be relying on AI, software and so on. How would an insurer prove that a vehicle was being driven autonomously rather than by a driver? Under the provisions of the Bill, would the insurer have access to the data so that they could analyse it and see whether an individual was in charge of a vehicle or whether it was being driven autonomously?

Mr Harper: I will come on to that in my speech, but I will answer the hon. Gentleman's specific questions. From the point of view of any person needing to make a claim, the insurer will be liable whether the vehicle is in self-driving mode or the user is in charge. What happens subsequently, regarding whether the manufacturer,

[Mr Harper]

the software provider or whoever has to pony up the money, is a matter for the insurer to argue about with them. That will not impact the victim, who will be paid by the insurer.

On the hon. Gentleman's important point about data, we discussed this last week when I met a roundtable of those involved in the industry, including road safety campaigners and those in the insurance industry. The Bill will ensure that the data can be shared, and the insurance industry is keen for that to happen so that it can properly price the risk. I will say more about this when I talk about the safety framework, but there is a real opportunity here because most road traffic collisions are caused at least in part by human error. The track record of self-driving vehicles shows that this is an opportunity to improve road safety, which is important not just for those who use vehicles but for other road users. There is a balance to strike here. We need to capture that benefit but also ensure that we do not leave anyone exposed without protection, as the hon. Gentleman rightly set out.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): On the point the Secretary of State has just been discussing, presumably the details of all journeys undertaken by automated vehicles will be recorded. Where will that data be stored, and who will have access to it? Could someone access that information for non-driving reasons—for example, someone involved in divorce proceedings or an employer in an employment tribunal?

Mr Harper: My right hon. Friend should note that data for these purposes will be protected in the usual way. Data has to be used for the purposes for which it was gathered. There are legal processes for who has access to it, as well as those we will set out specifically for driving purposes. The other things he mentioned will be governed by the usual laws that govern the use of data. I do not want to dwell on those specifics, but they are already covered by existing data protection legislation for the devices that people have in vehicles to monitor their progress or for mobile phones.

I would like to start with safety. Anyone stepping into a self-driving vehicle will reasonably ask: "Can this car consistently drive safely? Will the law protect me if there is an accident? Is the manufacturer regulated and can they be held to account?" Under this legislation, the answer to each of those questions will be yes. The Bill has been built on a bedrock of safety, protecting not just the driver inside the car but road users outside the vehicle.

As I mentioned in answer to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), I chaired a roundtable with road safety groups last week and explained how we are holding self-driving vehicles to a higher safety standard than the average human driver, guided by principles we will soon consult on; how these vehicles must meet rigorous technical requirements before rolling off production lines and being authorised for our roads; and how we will tackle misleading marketing, with new offences for companies that seek to blur the line between true self-driving and driver assistance.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): That gets to the nub of the point. Because these vehicles are going to be automated, they will be governed by an algorithm written by a human

being somewhere remote from where an accident might occur. How do we determine whether the primary purpose of that algorithm is to protect the person in the car or someone outside the car, such as a pedestrian or a child crossing the road? How does the algorithm make a choice in those circumstances?

Mr Harper: We will consult on the statement of safety principles, which will set out the governing principles of the legislation. On the specifics, this will be about making sure that the manufacturers—those who create the software and those who put the cars together—have rigorous processes for testing and decision-making. Those systems will have to be authorised to be used in our cars, and it will be important to look at their data and their track records. As I say, in real-world situations where these vehicles are being used—for example, in California—the evidence suggests that they have a very good safety record that is much better than that of human drivers. There is a big opportunity here to have a safer road environment, not just for the users of the vehicles but for other road users.

I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has had the opportunity to ride in a self-driving vehicle, but the data they collect of their surroundings is interesting. My personal observation is that the space they give when passing a cyclist, for example, is a lot more generous than that I have seen many human drivers give. Of course, those parameters are going to be set and regulated, and people will have to be assured that the vehicles are safe before they are on the road. Ultimately, the manufacturer will be legally responsible if they turn out not to be.

Clive Efford: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way a second time. I agree entirely that, overall, roads will be safer with automated vehicles, but there will still be accidents. My question was specifically about where there is an accident and there is a choice to be made about protecting the person inside the car and injuring someone outside the car. How do we determine what takes priority in those circumstances?

Mr Harper: We will consult on the safety principles, but with some of this stuff we have to look at the way the vehicles make decisions. We cannot possibly legislate for every single set of circumstances. In the same way, when there is a collision involving a vehicle with a human driver, the driver will make the best decision they can in the specific circumstances. Sometimes those situations lead to legal conflict and then people have to make a judgment. We cannot legislate for every single one of those circumstances in advance. What we can do is make sure there are robust systems that make good decisions based on the best data, and then look at the track record. We will also set up a regulatory system whereby any accident involving an automated vehicle will be properly investigated.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. It is essential with this legislation that we earn the public's trust and win their confidence. That is one of the reasons why we have been so clear, and why we accepted the amendments in the other place, about putting safety at the forefront of the Bill. If people are not persuaded of that, this technology will not make much progress.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Harper: I will take an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) and then make some progress before continuing to take interventions.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is taking a safety-first approach to this legislation, and that seems to be the will of the House. I have used a driverless vehicle operated by Waymo, a driverless Uber-style service in the United States. He will know that those vehicles have more cameras—more eyes—looking in more directions more of the time than it would be possible to achieve even with 100 drivers sitting in a single vehicle. My concern is whether, in his effort to put safety first, he is compromising the potential for economic growth. In America, most of the force for change with automated vehicles is being driven by the leading global technology companies. What discussions has he had with those companies in preparation for the Bill? How comfortable are they with the Government's approach?

Mr Harper: I have discussed the legislation with a number of those companies—both UK companies and those in the US—and I am pleased to assure my hon. Friend and the House that they too recognise that safety is incredibly important. They all understand that they have to be able to operate within a legal framework set by legislators who are ultimately accountable to the public, and that they have to take the public with them. As ever with these things, whatever the track record of existing vehicles and drivers, because this is new technology, people will be sceptical about it, and anything that goes wrong will have a brighter light shone on it. The industry is very aware of that and, I think, very happy to work with us on those issues.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Harper: I will take one more intervention and then I will make some progress.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will be honest, Mr Deputy Speaker: I am not very technically minded. I like the idea of a manual car with five or six gears and reverse. In the rural community that I live in, I am very happy with that. I have a bit of hesitation about automated vehicles. Thinking about young drivers—this is really important, because the Secretary of State mentioned blurred lines—we have to make sure that everyone who learns to drive has full capacity to drive any vehicle, and does not think they can get into an automated vehicle and just sit there and do nothing. It is really important that everyone is subject to the same rules. Can he confirm for anyone who thinks that in future they will be able just to sit in the back of the car that that is not the case, and that they will have to learn to drive in the way that we all have over the years?

Mr Harper: I will come to that in a second—it will become clear in the next section of my speech—but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Bill is about giving people choices. If people want, as many will, to carry on driving their existing vehicles in the traditional way, that is absolutely fine and no one is going to try to stop them. To be very clear, the hon. Gentleman can carry on driving for as long as he wants to and is safe to, and no one is going to try to stop him. Certainly, I am not going to try—I wouldn't dare.

On the legal concerns—this will address the point about the driving test, too—the Bill redefines our legal relationship with road transport. As soon as someone turns on a self-driving feature, legal responsibility for how the car drives will transfer to an authorised self-driving entity, or ASDE—not a very catchy acronym, admittedly, but that is what they are called. That could be a manufacturer or a software developer but, crucially, it will not be the human driver, who will assume a new status. As a user in charge, they will still need to ensure that the car is roadworthy, and they will need to reassume control if necessary. That answers the hon. Gentleman's question: someone will still need to be in possession of a full driving licence and able to reassume control of the vehicle if required, but they will be protected by law from any offences while the car is driving itself.

Some journeys, either in private cars or on self-driving transport, will be fully automated, and a human will never need to take control; they will be, in essence, a passenger. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) mentioned the example of Waymo cars in the US. Those are operated as taxis, with no driver present, and the human is never expected to take control; it is classed as a “no user in charge” journey. In those circumstances, someone would not need a driving licence, because they would never be expected to drive the car, in the same way we are not expected to drive a taxi or private hire vehicle. Those legal concepts will have a seismic impact.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): This is the future, and it is both quite exciting and quite scary. We have to get our heads around it and make sure that we get this right. On what the Secretary of State has just been describing, is it basically the difference between someone taking a taxi and driving their own car? If there is an accident in a taxi, the taxi company is responsible, not the passenger.

Mr Harper: If someone is using a vehicle for a “no user in charge” journey for which they are, in effect, the passenger and there is an accident, it will be totally the responsibility, in all circumstances, of the person operating the vehicle. Where someone who is driving the car for part of the time switches on the self-driving features and something happens while those features are activated, that will be not their responsibility but that of the manufacturer or the software developer. If someone is in control of the vehicle and the self-driving features are not activated, they retain responsibility.

One of the things that we will have to do is educate people about the difference, and we are being clear to manufacturers that there is a big difference between a self-driving feature and driver assistance. Under driver assistance, the driver is still fully legally responsible for the vehicle, but with some technological help; when the self-driving features are activated, they no longer have legal responsibility.

Wera Hobhouse: Is there not potential for a legal conflict between a driver who says, “I was in self-driving mode,” and a company that says, “No, it was switched off”? Does the Secretary of State see that it might be very difficult to establish what happened in such circumstances?

Mr Harper: Potentially, but that is exactly why the earlier question about data is very important. These vehicles generate a huge amount of data and one part

[Mr Harper]

of the authorisation process will be making sure that that data is properly managed and there is proper access to it by the investigators of any potential accident and the insurance industry to establish exactly what has happened in such circumstances.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Harper: I give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Transport.

Iain Stewart: I want to build on the question from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the situation where a driver is in control of the car at some point and at other points the car is autonomous. That will presumably result in drivers becoming less experienced, as they will not accumulate as much knowledge and experience of driving. When the automated features switch off and the driver needs to take control, those will be potentially immediate and challenging circumstances. Is my right hon. Friend assured that the driving test and refresher courses will give drivers sufficient capacity to take over in those circumstances?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend raises a good point. I am very comfortable with the driving test; it continues to be updated to make sure drivers are familiar with features such as satnavs, and the new technology will be added. The wider question about how often drivers drive and how experienced they are of course arises now. Someone can take a driving test and not drive very much but occasionally hire a vehicle, and we hold them to the same standard as those who drive day in and day out; they are still responsible. There might in these circumstances be a question about whether it would be sensible for people to take refresher courses and do further training, and we will want to monitor that and determine whether we should legislate for it or issue guidance. It is an interesting point for us to keep an eye on.

As well as the legal issues, making driving more convenient in this way also makes it potentially much more accessible, by for example giving those who cannot drive at the moment, such as the 340,000 people registered blind or partially sighted, new options to travel independently, opening doors to economic and social opportunities that have thus far remained closed. Interestingly, in the United States, where this technology has been rolled out earliest, it is those groups who have been most vocal in arguing for the technology, because it changes their lives for the better and opens up their opportunities.

The third area is learning and enforcement. This technology will get stronger, smarter and safer over time. The safety data will be collected by the vehicle, monitored by its operator and scrutinised by a Government regulator, which means we can take enforcement action when things go wrong or through sanctions and suspensions if a company withholds data. The Bill also includes measures to investigate incidents independently and ensure that lessons are learned. I have spoken about the context behind the Bill and addressed some of the key components and will turn now to some of the benefits self-driving vehicles will bring.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): This is an exciting Bill about an exciting future. I have listened carefully to what my right hon. Friend has said about

who will ultimately be responsible if there is an accident. My understanding is it will always be the manufacturer and will never be the person who owns the car. In my constituency, as in many others, large numbers of people like modifying their cars and I am sure when autonomous vehicles are introduced people will want to modify those as well. They might change them in ways that ultimately slightly limit or diminish some of the safety features put in when the car was built, so who will be ultimately responsible in such circumstances? People may make modifications without knowing the implications, potentially, for diminishing the safety of the car. Will the manufacturer still be responsible when the car is modified, or will it be the owner?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend raises a very important point that we must make sure is covered. Clearly, if people make modifications that alter the functioning of the self-driving features of the vehicle, we would either have to say that that was not acceptable or they would have to accept that the vehicle was no longer self-driving. There would need to be rules. The vehicle will go through an authorisation process to go on the road, and there will be things that people will be allowed to change and things that they will not. I suspect that manufacturers will be very clear that they will no longer be responsible for a self-driving vehicle if someone has modified it. As long as that is clear, that is fine, but people will have to accept that, as cars become more technological with more technology built into them, the days of being able to tinker around with them under the bonnet and alter things will be long past if we want that technological stuff to kick in.

Alexander Stafford: My question was not just about modification that may change the safety of the car but about any modification. If someone who owns an iPhone changes the screen, it is no longer under manufacturer warranty even though that does not affect how it works. If someone has modified their car and it does not affect a safety feature but there is then an accident, will the manufacturer be able to say that the car has been modified and that, even though the safety features are unchanged, it is therefore no longer its responsibility? Will the liability pass to the owner if the manufacturer decides it has nothing to do with it?

Mr Harper: These cars will have to be authorised by the regulator to go on the road, but my hon. Friend makes the good point that, as part of that process, what the user of the vehicle can and cannot do needs to be clear. I suspect there will be very limited things that they could do without affecting the operation of the vehicle, but it is good to put on the record that in the information provided by both the manufacturer and the regulator we must be clear about what the user of the vehicle can and cannot do to ensure it can be driven safely.

Despite Britain having some of the safest roads in the world, the levels of serious injury and road deaths remain too high. That could soon change. If we can eliminate driver error, which is involved in 88% of road collisions, we could get to the point where self-driving vehicles are a game changer for road safety: they do not drink and drive, they do not get stressed or distracted, they do not speed, get tired, bend the rules of the road or push their luck.

Self-driving vehicles will save lives and we cannot ignore the economic impact either. According to industry estimates, 40% of new cars will by 2035 have some self-driving capability. This is a growing global market, Britain's share of which could be worth £42 billion and generate 38,000 skilled jobs in areas ranging from cyber-security to AI, and thanks to Government support, our self-driving vehicle industry is not only thriving but recognised the world over.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Secretary of State for his reassurances about safety. I do not think it is all one-sided, because another aspect of safety is cyber-safety, which we do not need to worry about with a traditional car. Automated vehicles are extremely vulnerable to cyber-attacks from hackers and potentially from terrorists, especially as the software and technology age. What are the Government going to do? Are they going to commit to establishing the necessary regulations to ensure cyber-security for automated vehicles is robust and that protections continue over the lifetime of the vehicle?

Mr Harper: The simple answer is, yes, we are going to do that. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise cyber-security as an issue, and it is of course an issue today, because many cars today have electronic features from keyless entry to navigation systems. Existing cars are vulnerable to being hacked. Cyber-security is important and we and the industry are working with the National Cyber Security Centre. I agree that cyber-security will be very important, but it already is important.

Clive Efford: I agree with what the Secretary of State said about tinkering and that nullifying any insurance, but we have also just experienced the Horizon scandal, where the manufacturers themselves had access to the technology. What security do drivers have from the designers of the software governing these cars covering their own backs?

Mr Harper: One of the things we will have in place is a duty of candour. We will also set up a regulatory process with investigations of every self-driving vehicle involved in an incident. Importantly, manufacturers will be legally obliged to have that duty of candour to disclose the information, so that these issues can be got to the bottom of. The hon. Member raises a specific case that I will not comment on, and there will no doubt be learnings from that case, but the regulatory approach we are setting up will deal with the issue he just raised.

Sir Greg Knight: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Harper: Let me make a bit of progress; I want to try to get to a conclusion, because others wish to speak, but I will try to get back to my right hon. Friend in a sec.

In 2019, Google's Waymo made the UK its first European engineering hub for self-driving technologies. Bosch and ZF, among others, are investing in the UK, drawn by our highly skilled workforce. CAM Testbed UK, a unique cluster of five facilities between London and the west midlands, has received £200 million of Government and industry funding, and we have put £66 million into scaling up self-driving mobility ideas, from buses in Scotland to HGVs in Sunderland, with a further £150 million announced as part of our advanced manufacturing plan. We do not want to lose momentum,

and we want to make sure that we push the industry to realise the full benefits of this technology. I hope that the Bill brings certainty to investors, clarity to manufacturers, confidence to the public and demonstrates Britain's strongest commitment yet to a self-driving future. Before I conclude, I will take an intervention from my right hon. Friend.

Sir Greg Knight: The Secretary of State has been generous in giving way. Just to clarify the point, there could be circumstances where a vehicle is in fully auto mode, but the owner bears some responsibility. For example, if an automated vehicle is on full auto and is involved in an accident, but it is then discovered that all the tyres are without tread, surely in those circumstances the owner would bear some blame.

Mr Harper: I set out at the beginning that in circumstances where a user is in charge—where they are not purely a passenger with a company providing a taxi or private hire service—and the vehicle is in self-driving mode, the manufacturer or software provider is responsible for the conduct of the vehicle, but the user in charge is responsible for such things as the physical condition of the vehicle and the tyres, and they retain that responsibility. The balance of which of those things caused the accident will be determined in exactly the same way as currently.

In conclusion, as I think the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) set out, self-driving vehicles will provoke excitement from some and nerves from others, but for most of us, it is a combination of the two. Clearly it is an opportunity, but there are some risks. I know that first-hand, not only having visited California-based Waymo and ridden in one of its self-driving vehicles, but having done a journey from my departmental office to this House in a self-driving vehicle designed by the British company Wayve. It was interesting, as it went expertly through busy streets and responded quickly to things. It was a rainy day and a lot of people were darting in and out of the traffic—probably not sensibly—but the car responded safely. I realised the enormous potential of this technology, not just as a growing economic sector, but for a future where transport is safer, more convenient and more accessible. This Bill is a crucial step towards that future, and I take great pleasure in commending it to the House.

1.33 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Let me start by confirming Labour's support for the legislation and the principle behind it. Automated vehicle technology, once the preserve of science fiction, is advancing at pace. Fully autonomous vehicles are already being tested on our roads by world-leading UK companies. The progress they have made is truly something to behold. Continuing that progress and getting this technology and the safety standards around it right are so important. It has huge implications for road safety, vehicle accessibility and our economy, so Labour agrees that it is vital we have a proper regulatory framework in place to ensure these technologies are introduced in a safe and accessible way that contributes positively to our economy.

On that basis, we welcome the Bill and its efforts to set safety principles for these vehicles and clear rules around marketing to stop consumers being misled about the autonomous capability of the vehicles being sold to

[*Louise Haigh*]

them. However, there is still room to go further and to ensure that these vehicles' introduction is a public good and not in any way a destructive force. A few months ago, I also visited Wayve in King's Cross, a UK company doing pioneering work to develop autonomous technology for vehicles, which it is already testing on our roads. It is an experience, sitting in a vehicle with no driver, no controls and no clue which direction it will go in next, and I admit that I wondered, as I was being whisked about central London in all sorts of directions without any input or control from me, if that was not how the Secretary of State felt sitting around the Cabinet table most weeks.

Turning to the safety benefits of autonomous vehicles, it has been estimated that road collisions cost our economy as much as £43.2 billion in 2022 and that 85% of road crashes involve an element of human error. Automated vehicles can play a huge role in reducing human error, avoiding tragic accidents and helping to reduce the burden on the state in the process. The need to do more to tackle these deaths and injuries on our roads cannot be overstated. The last Labour Government cut road fatalities by almost 50% while in office, but there has been only an 8% reduction since 2010.

The Bill comes to us in a vastly improved state from the other place, thanks to pressure from my Labour colleagues there. As a result of their efforts, the Bill explicitly targets a safety standard for autonomous vehicles equivalent to or higher than a careful and competent human driver, as it rightly should. The statement of safety principles that the Secretary of State must make following the passage of the Bill will now also be subject to proper parliamentary scrutiny. That is important progress, and we are grateful for the Government accepting those important amendments.

Grahame Morris: We are addressing important safety and regulation issues, but does my hon. Friend share my concerns about potential job losses? Almost a million people are employed in the logistics sector, including drivers, delivery drivers and so on. I know the Bill is not concerned with alternative employment, but I see the effects of deindustrialisation in my area. Does she share my concerns about the potential job losses if this legislation is not done in a sensible way?

Louise Haigh: It is typical of my hon. Friend to raise such an important and pertinent point. I will come to it shortly in my speech.

It is a shame that much of the important work still to do on this safety regime will be set out further down the line, rather than being debated today in the Chamber. We will look closely at the detail when it comes to see how the standard is defined in practice, and I welcome any insight from the Government today to reassure colleagues on that. For instance, what level of fault will be allowed for an autonomous vehicle compared with a standard practical driving test, if any at all?

This technology does not just offer potential road safety benefits. It is estimated that disabled people in the UK take around 38% fewer trips than non-disabled people. Automated vehicles could help address that gap by unlocking a world of opportunity for those who

cannot or struggle to drive and for those held back from that opportunity by the inaccessibility of too much of our public transport network. Securing those benefits will mean ensuring that access to these vehicles is not limited just to the extremely wealthy, and that the interests of disabled people, who are currently five times more likely to be injured by a vehicle than non-disabled pedestrians, are at the heart of the development of these technologies from the very start. I would welcome the Secretary of State setting out how he will ensure that disabled people and disability-led groups will be properly consulted as these vehicles are introduced to our roads.

Jim Shannon: I suppose, if I am being honest, that I am a bit of a sceptic in this matter. I am not a petrolhead, by the way, but many of my constituents love their cars, love their vehicles, and love the opportunity to work under the bonnet. I am always conscious that we may see a move towards automated vehicles all across the country, irrespective of what people think. Is it the shadow Minister's intention to ensure that people will always have choice? If she does, that is the right way.

Louise Haigh: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and remain impressed that he has something to say on this issue, as on so many others. It will of course remain the case that should people wish to drive their cars, they will be free and able to do so. I think it will be a long time—indeed, the industry has predicted it will be several decades—before the number of automated vehicles outstrips the number of vehicles with drivers on our roads.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) mentioned, there is one major area that the Bill does not address, and which we have not considered in any meaningful capacity, which is the potential impact on jobs from automated vehicles. As a South Yorkshire MP, I am all too familiar with the economic impacts of deindustrialisation. Far too many towns and cities across the north have already suffered enough from lost livelihoods, with the social fabric of their communities ripped apart as a new economic model left them behind. We simply cannot afford to make those same mistakes again.

That is why Labour has been clear that artificial intelligence and automation must be harnessed as a public good—one that delivers social benefits, grows the economy and supports jobs rather than destroying them. That is why, during its passage through the other place, my Labour colleagues attempted to amend the Bill to establish an advisory council that would ensure the Government consult on the introduction of these vehicles with not only industry representatives and road safety experts, but trade unions. The Government opposed that amendment. From the way this Government have politicised the ongoing industrial dispute on our railways and Ministers' failure to even sit down with union representatives, we have already seen just how important it is to have proper engagement with workforce representatives, as well as just how far this Government will go to avoid doing it.

I would welcome an explanation from the Secretary of State as to why he is so opposed to the idea of speaking to experts and trade union representatives about the introduction of such sensitive and consequential technology. Will he also say what steps he will take to

ensure this technology creates jobs, rather than destroying them, especially in the areas of the country where low-paid work dominates? It is in exactly those areas, which still feel the ravages of deindustrialisation, that jobs in driving, warehousing and logistics dominate—all jobs that face the highest risks from automation. Unless the Government are prepared to play an active role in how we transition our economy, it is exactly those areas, like my constituency in South Yorkshire, that will be hit all over again.

I have talked a lot about what the Bill is, Mr Deputy Speaker, but allow me a minute to talk about what it is not. As the Secretary of State well knows, his Government have promised us all sorts of transport legislation over the years that they have failed to make parliamentary time for. This Bill is not his long-promised rail reform. It is not legislation to properly regulate e-scooters, e-bikes or drones, to set minimum standards for taxis, to extend franchising for buses, or to strengthen the powers of the Civil Aviation Authority—legislation that has been promised time and again by this Government, without any intention of actually delivering it.

I will close by pointing out the irony that the one major piece of transport legislation in this parliamentary Session is a Bill on driverless cars brought forward by a driverless Government who are running out of road.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chairman of the Transport Committee.

1.43 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be able to contribute to this debate. I should flag that the Transport Committee conducted an extensive inquiry on self-driving vehicles and published our report on the subject last year. Our principal recommendation was to bring forward legislation to give the industry and investors the certainty to continue their work. We are very pleased indeed that the Government have taken on board our central recommendation and brought forward this Bill. We commend the Law Commission for the background work it did to provide the legal underpinning.

Hopefully there will be sufficient time for the Bill to reach the statute book before we get to the general election. Had it not been brought forward, there was a real danger of a missed opportunity. The UK has been a leading player in the development of this global technology, but there is no certainty that that would continue. One message we heard loud and clear from the sector was that it needs the regulatory framework and that certainty to allow further investment to take place, so we are, as I say, very pleased that that is happening. To give some idea of the scale, figures from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders estimate that by 2040, the annual economic impact to the country will be £66 billion. My fellow Select Committee member, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), raised legitimate concerns about the risk to jobs from this new technology, but there is an upside: 12,000 new direct jobs in automotive manufacturing, and more than 300,000 additional jobs in the wider economy, again using SMMT figures. There are economic opportunities—job opportunities—provided by this new technology.

It is always difficult to adjust to change in the economy. I often use the analogy that a few decades ago, lots of people were employed in manufacturing typewriters; now there is hardly anyone in that industry, but other job opportunities arose. That will also be the case in this sector. He is not in his place now, but I echo the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) that the city of Milton Keynes has been at the forefront of the research and development and the testing of this technology in the UK, and long may that continue.

As other speakers have said, the advantages are not just economic; this technology also widens the accessibility of transport for many people who are, for various reasons, inhibited at the moment. That wider social value may be more difficult to quantify in monetary terms, but will be increasingly valuable. More generally, this technology will widen the transport choices available. Self-driving vehicles will replace some journeys made purely by car, but will also be part of an integral transport system where a self-driving vehicle may pick up people from a railway station, bus station or airport to complete their journeys. There are many, many upsides to this legislation.

I want to highlight a few other concerns we had during our inquiry, some of which the Government have already addressed. The first is on safety. We very much welcome the amendments put forward by the Government in the other place to introduce a more certain and wider definition of safety; we set out concerns in our report that the broad definition of a self-driving vehicle as being as safe as a

“competent and careful human driver”

was just a bit too vague and weak. The amendments that have been brought forward in the Lords to ensure proper consultation not just with the industry, but more widely with road safety stakeholders, are very welcome, while the change in the parliamentary procedure from a negative to an affirmative resolution will give it greater clarity. We very much welcome that.

I will raise two particular safety issues. One, which I mentioned in my intervention on the Secretary of State, is the need to ensure that drivers have the relevant level of skill and experience to intervene when the technology requires them to do so. As I said, those instances will obviously be immediate and often in challenging conditions, and will require skills over and above the general driving competencies and knowledge as to what a driver ought to do in those circumstances. I do not think it is necessarily something to include in the Bill, but, as the Government look at the consultation on safety, I strongly urge them to look at what changes to the driving test may be appropriate, and even at wider encouragement for everyone to have refresher courses. I think most drivers—me included—would be terrified at the prospect of resitting our driving test, as we have probably built up many bad habits over the years. There is, perhaps, a wider point about ensuring that drivers remain competent, but this new technology does introduce specific new circumstances that need to be considered.

The second safety-related issue is about ensuring that MOT tests are up to date so that they properly capture all safety-critical technology. In the future, cameras, sensors, software and other technology will be as safety-critical as tyres, brakes and other mechanical parts that

[Iain Stewart]

are currently assessed. Again, I urge the Government to look ahead and perhaps redefine what is encapsulated by the MOT.

Related to that is a concern raised with me by smaller garages about ensuring that they still have a fair chance of carrying out MOTs. As the technology becomes ever more sophisticated, there is a risk that the original equipment manufacturers will have a monopoly on maintaining software and related equipment and that only their garages will be able to carry out such work. There a wider point—this is not just about self-driving vehicles—about ensuring that the full spectrum of operators in the car repair and maintenance sector has fair access to doing that work.

I will also raise two points related to insurance. My friend and colleague from the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Easington—he is no longer in his place—mentioned data sharing. I welcome the fact that data sharing is referenced in the Bill and that its scope will be set out in secondary legislation. It is important for the insurance industry to be able to capture the full picture of driver behaviour and the behaviour of vehicles in this new world. That will not be limited to collisions, where the insurers will need to know what happened; there will be other injuries for which data must be available—say, a self-driving vehicle may brake suddenly, which results in a whiplash injury or related concerns. As a probing suggestion, is there a case for putting in the Bill a requirement for consultation with the insurance industry on the concept of data sharing, similar to the one that Government have set out for the setting of safety parameters? I will leave that with my hon. Friends on the Front Bench to consider.

The second insurance concern was raised by the Motor Insurers' Bureau about where we have what might be called a "black swan" event, with a significant co-ordinated cyber-attack that instructs many vehicles simultaneously to behave in a way that could cause mass public injury. The instruction might be to drive at high speed and turn sharp right into a crowded pedestrian area. The concern is that, as things stand, the absence of a mutualisation of risk could lead to such a level of claims that it would bankrupt the car insurance sector.

In property, there is an equivalent backstop to cover the event of such terrorist activity. Some thought needs to be given to that. Again, it probably goes wider than purely self-driving vehicles, because, as the Secretary of State mentioned, the technology is often already embedded in cars and could be hacked by a malevolent actor. The insurance industry is concerned about that, and I urge the Government to consider that perhaps not necessarily in the Bill but as part of wider reform.

Notwithstanding those concerns and questions, this is a welcome Bill with huge upsides economically and socially. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) put it succinctly, it is an exciting new world, but for many people it is a scary new world, and we have a duty to bring the public with us.

There are many areas where transport is already automated and people accept it and are quite relaxed about it. They will get on a get on a docklands light railway train, which is automated, and aircraft flights are now 95% automated. In Milton Keynes, we have delivery robots going along the pavement and no one

bats an eyelid about them. But as we see with smart motorways, if the public are not convinced about the safety of new technology, they will not accept it.

We all have a duty to make sure that the regulations ensure the safety of the drivers and the passengers as well as the wider roads-using and pavement-using public. The upsides are enormous, but we must bring people with us. I commend the Government for bringing forward the Bill, which is incredibly important, and I look forward to seeing it on the statute book.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesman.

1.55 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), the Chair of the Transport Committee, on which I serve alongside him. He made many good points and I agree with much of what he said. We still have good questions about the Bill on technical details and insurance among other things, which we will undoubtedly cover in great detail in Committee. His final point about bringing the public with us is key. During the Select Committee's inquiry, which was referenced by the Chair, I brought that up several times with the witnesses. As the Chair said, we accept things like the DLR, but that is fixed transport; this is very different. Obviously, as we have seen with smart motorways, the public may not buy it unless we and the industry are robust in what we are selling them.

Before I start, I must be honest about my own thoughts and preconceptions about autonomous or automated vehicles, as we are calling them in the Bill. The kid and science fiction fan inside me looks forward to the transport of tomorrow, with futuristic cars like those in films such as "I, Robot", "Minority Report" and "Blade Runner"—although it must be said that with their current policies the Government are doing their level best to deliver the bleak and dystopian future from "Blade Runner". "Back to the Future" told us that that we would have flying cars by 2015, but perhaps "The Jetsons" was more accurate with its version of 2062.

Growing up, my favourite had to be "Knight Rider", where David Hasselhoff played—[*Interruption.*] Yes, I am showing my age. Well, "The Jetsons" is from 1962, so hopefully that was on repeat when I was watching it. In "Knight Rider", Michael Knight very much played second fiddle to KITT the car.

In truth, I am not the best passenger in a car. I prefer being in control, no matter how suboptimal that might be for my passengers. I also like driving. As a family, we have been driving electric for three years to reduce our carbon footprint. I also use public transport and active travel a lot more than I used to, but I enjoy driving and would not want my car to drive itself, although I do enjoy the driver aids seen in most modern cars. I hope we never quite get to the point where automation becomes compulsory, but I suspect that will be a debate for MPs a couple of generations and more from now.

This issue and the Bill sound exciting, but the truth is that the Bill is technical and dry—it is less Michael Knight, more Michael Howard. Its Committee may not be a barn burner, but none the less it will be important. That is because the Bill is absolutely necessary—indeed, we could say it is long overdue—and will put in place

much-needed regulation to focus and develop this technology and ultimately enable its full commercialisation and public roll-out.

As you might hear me saying from time to time, Mr Deputy Speaker, Scotland has been taking the lead on autonomous vehicles for some time now. The Forth bridge has been home to one of the main pilots of autonomous vehicles for passenger services, with the CAVForth project operating since last summer. Buses built just up the road by Alexander Dennis in Camelon are taking thousands of passengers a week over the bridge and into Edinburgh. It is a groundbreaking and world-leading trial, which could help revolutionise public transport in the long term. I cannot resist saying that it would not have been possible had the Scottish Government listened to the naysayers just over a decade ago and dropped construction of the Queensferry crossing. We now have the Forth bridge operational for public transport, with private vehicles transferred to the new crossing. Those trials can happen in the best possible environment, with the result that thousands of passengers are crossing the Forth every week on an autonomous bus.

Like Labour's shadow Minister, I welcome the Bill, although with some reservations. Ultimately, it represents a chance to be ahead of the curve and get the appropriate legislative framework in place before problems arise. It allows that framework to change things when the future does not deliver what it is supposed to. Motoring is a highly regulated area of life, and rightly so, given that we are dealing with machines capable of wiping out multiple lives with barely a scratch on them.

It was mentioned earlier in the debate, although perhaps from a different viewpoint, that we have seen in the US that problems arise when there is a lack of regulation and proper legislative oversight of the industry. Since there is virtually no national oversight, those issues and the regulatory frameworks have been dealt with at state level. We saw the dangers of such lax regulation with the suspension and collapse of Cruise in four different states. Just weeks after getting approval for full operation of its autonomous taxi service in San Francisco, a slew of incidents and accidents led it to withdraw all its vehicles from service.

The day after the Transport Committee was treated to a trip around London in autonomous vehicles, with drivers in the driver's seat ready to take over, a friend of mine posted clips of his journey in a Cruise taxi in San Francisco. I am not sure I would have been as willing at that point to do the same without a driver ready to take over, because later investigations showed that the cars had difficulty identifying children as pedestrians and risked hitting them. In a statement to The Intercept website, it said:

"its vehicles sometimes temporarily lost track of children on the side of the road."

That is exactly the type of thing we need to stop here before it happens. We support the approach of legislating before those vehicles are on the road. We do not want to follow the United States into a wild west of autonomy, where it takes multiple incidents or corporate whistleblowers to ensure intervention from the state. That intervention must be built into the entire regulatory process from beginning to end.

I also want corporate responsibility to be built into the regulatory framework. As we have seen with the law on corporate manslaughter, although the legislation

may talk a good game, the reality is that prosecutions are few and far between, and those who should be held accountable for actions carried out under their watch are instead allowed to walk away. I do not want that to happen to the operators of autonomous vehicles that are proven to be at fault, particularly in incidents where people are harmed or even killed. I would welcome some reassurance from the Minister that where negligence or fault is established, those ultimately responsible are held to account through the criminal law.

Like Labour's shadow Minister, we welcome the changes made in the Lords to guarantee that autonomous vehicles achieve equivalent or higher safety standards than human drivers. That only seems right, and it would be a retrograde step if this much-vaunted technology delivered worse results and worse safety than we have now. I ought to be clear that, despite my personal misgivings, I have every confidence that, in the end, automated vehicles will prove to be safer.

This area crosses legal jurisdictions. As the Minister mentioned, much of the Bill results from joint working between the Law Commissions of England and Wales and of Scotland, which may at times have been a tricky needle to thread. Throughout, the Scottish Government have been keen to work alongside the UK Government to ensure that the Bill is fit for purpose not just for today's environment, but to anticipate future developments.

I am happy that, for the most part—highly unusually, it has to be said—there has been constructive working and pragmatic engagement. I say "for the most part" because, unfortunately, the Scottish Government's representations on clause 50 have so far been ignored. Clause 50 is hugely problematic because it gives the UK Government the power to amend Acts of the Scottish Parliament in areas that are fully devolved, with no recourse to this place or to Holyrood. As it stands, there will be nothing to stop the Secretary of State laying a statutory instrument containing regulations that are counter to Acts passed at Holyrood, where the UK Government regulations would override the Scottish Parliament's Act.

That is simple disrespect for devolution and for the devolved institutions, and it has happened despite the Scottish Government engaging with the UK Government to find a way forward on clause 50 that respects Scotland's Parliament as well as this place. There is no objection to having in place a provision to allow existing legislation to be updated to account for autonomous vehicles and the implications on traffic laws and the highway code, but it is simply not on for the Secretary of State to grab that power from the existing devolved powers that rest with Holyrood, rather than accept that Scotland has a different legal framework and work within that reality.

Like so many folk across Scotland, I am sick and tired of the arrogance of this Government when it comes to devolution. There is still time for the Secretary of State and his officials to sit down with their counterparts in Edinburgh and iron out a solution, particularly given the good working relationship on much of the Bill. I urge him to make that happen, and not have the UK turn this Bill into another constitutional punchbag.

We would also like a clear strategy from the Government on the societal and economic consequences of a move towards automation in the transport sector. As the Chair of Select Committee, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), said, these new technologies

[Gavin Newlands]

will create new and novel jobs, but there are 2.7 million jobs in the logistics sector in the UK, and not one of those positions will be unaffected; they will be either lost or changed as a result of this new technology. There are around 400,000 taxi and private hire drivers in the UK. If we end up with autonomous taxis, how many of those drivers will remain in jobs 50 years from now? What will their jobs be in 50 years' time?

The UK has an unfortunate track record of managing technological change and its impact on the employment market. As the Labour shadow Minister said, deindustrialisation destroyed countless communities across these isles, particularly in Scotland and in swathes of the north of England, in part because there was no plan and no thought put into how to deal with and support that transition. The Tories caused untold long-term damage by essentially abandoning sectors such as manufacturing altogether, in favour of putting all the UK's eggs in the services basket. We are seeing the same thing happen now with the move to green technology, although thankfully in Scotland we have a Government committed to a fair transition.

Automation is a much bigger issue than the matters we are talking about today. In many ways, it is time to have a public conversation about what this means for society as a whole. Change always comes with positives and trade-offs. An assumption that the public will simply consent and welcome automation without that conversation is potentially gravely misplaced. The Government must acknowledge those issues and be prepared to support sectors and communities if the changes that the Bill envisages come to pass.

It has taken longer than anticipated by many for automated vehicles to get to this point, but we cannot assume that the advances in technology will continue at the current pace. The pace may increase quickly, and the implications will be with us before we know it. Those implications of automation for our society more generally are serious and deep rooted, and they need a serious response.

We broadly welcome the Bill, but it is incumbent upon the Secretary of State and his Government to fix clause 50 and engage in real dialogue with the Scottish Government in order to help both parties. It is incumbent upon Ministers to explain their approach to the wider societal and economic implications of these measures. I look forward to positive responses on those issues as the Bill moves through its stages.

2.7 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. One of the first things I did when I arrived in this place was to sit on the Bill Committee on the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018. Here we are, all these years on, and the technology is making significant improvements. I would like to outline what I see as the important benefits of this legislation, and some of the safety and security issues. I will make the case for why these technologies should be developed further. But an advisory council is paramount, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) mentioned, because a wide range of voices must be heard before this legislation is implemented.

The automotive sector is the jewel in the UK's manufacturing crown. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders estimates that its total turnover in the UK economy is £78 billion, with £16 billion of added value. The industry's transition and development are all about the automated connected electric and shared vehicles—the ACES vehicles—which are the future. As has been said, what they bring is very exciting, but there are also concerns. They are a rapidly developing technology. We must ensure that the UK automotive industry has a prime role in its development. According to the SMMT, it is estimated that autonomous vehicles could create a market worth £42 billion by 2035 and potentially provide 38,000 new jobs.

Importantly, autonomous vehicles make roads safer—I believe that and I think most in the industry would say it; and we heard it, too, from the Secretary of State in his opening remarks—not just for occupants but for pedestrians and cyclists, provided the right sort of technologies are deployed. I have personally seen that they remove the opportunity for human error, which causes 88% of road traffic accidents. Indeed, research from the SMMT states that if automated vehicles were deployed in substantial numbers, some 4,000 lives could be saved and 60,000 serious accidents prevented between now and 2040. I will come to the benefits of that not just in terms of lives, but what that means for the economy.

Autonomous vehicles can improve connectivity in areas where our public transport is failing passengers. With the depopulation of rural areas, we can see how challenging that issue can be, including for older people and disabled people more generally. Other countries, including states in the EU, and most states in the United States, are all moving forward with their own autonomous vehicle frameworks, so the United Kingdom cannot afford to fall behind in an industry that could be worth £750 billion globally by 2035. That is why the legislation is so important. The UK automotive industry needs to be at the forefront of this rapidly developing technology and we need the legislation to provide the framework to support it.

Like the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, I have experienced driverless vehicles. I was fortunate enough to try it in the Jaguar I-Pace and the technology is incredibly impressive. Although we had a driver at the wheel for safety and security, just seeing the screens and all the information feeds determining the passage, speed and direction of the vehicle was extraordinary. This work is not just being done in silicon valley, but around the world by great organisations. I am particularly proud to have as a neighbour WMG, University of Warwick—the Warwick Manufacturing Group—developing these technologies, but we also have companies such as Oxa at the forefront of developing this work.

I said I wanted to talk about safety. As I articulated with the numbers I mentioned earlier, we will see a significant reduction in the number of accidents, and in the number of those killed and seriously injured. In 2018-19 I tried to introduce legislation called Rowan's law. If you will forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will remind the House that seven-year-old Rowan Fitzgerald was killed on a bus in Coventry because the driver fell asleep at the wheel. He had been driving more than

70 hours a week for three weeks. Rowan and another passenger were killed in the incident. It is my belief that, with certain assistive technologies we are discussing, that would not have happened.

While the technology is being developed and rolled out, we must ensure that public safety is at the forefront of the Bill. The insurance giant Axa, based on 2022 data, calculated that accidents in the UK cost the UK economy £42 billion in lost productivity and wider loss. There was also a cost to the NHS of £2.4 billion. That is why I commend the work by my Labour colleagues in the other place in pushing the Government to concede on two key safety points. I welcome the Government's concession to put the highest standard of safety on the face of the Bill.

To introduce automated vehicles successfully and safely in the UK, we need to bring all the public with us on the journey. Whether as drivers or as those sharing the roads with AVs, the public need accurate knowledge of any new transport technology so that they know how to engage with it safely. It cannot be acceptable for manufacturers to mislead or over-promise. Equally, manufacturers will benefit from being held to a fair standard. We therefore need strong, fair and enforceable standards. Improving and strengthening safety communication and messages on AVs should be the top priority before we fully deploy AVs on the roads. Communication and messages about AV safety must be written and delivered in a clear and accessible manner. Technical knowledge must be translated into language that everyone in society can understand. False and misleading AV advertising should be regulated to avoid miscommunication. For example, driver-assistance systems should not claim to be self-driving systems. We need an objective national safety threshold definition for the safe deployment of AVs. There is evidently still work to be done on the implementation of the legislation to ensure that safety remains at the forefront of the Bill.

The implementation of the Bill should be supported by an advisory council, which would advise on its implementation and on the roll-out of self-driving vehicles. It would include trade union representation, emergency vehicles, disabled groups, manufacturers, highway authorities and other road users, such as pedestrians and cyclists. It is a shame that the amendment that would establish such a group was voted down. I am pleased that we passed amendment 5, which would ensure representatives of road user groups are consulted when preparing the statement of safety principles. I would like that expanded to include the membership of the advisory group, and to put that on the face of the Bill.

On security, I have concerns, particularly on insurance, that have been aired across the House. Having listened to manufacturers in recent weeks about security challenges and the amount of vehicle theft across the country, I am satisfied they are doing their utmost to provide vehicle security. There are, however, many out there who are seeking to steal vehicles for export. The simple truth is that whatever technologies manufacturers come up with, they be overridden, especially by organised crime. That must be a real fear for the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) mentioned the unfolding Horizon scandal, the role of the tech company and the cover-up it was alleged to have been involved in. What does that mean for the development of vehicle technology? More generally, we have seen the challenges that authorities

face when trying to impose regulation on tech companies. Just this morning we read about Apple facing a fine from the EU of, I think, €1.6 billion. A central concern must be the extent of the control given to big tech, and the transparency that policymakers such as Governments, as well as other authorities, will be able to demand of it.

When the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) mentioned MOTs, I was thinking precisely the same as him. At present many elements are not covered by MOTs, and I wonder how it can be ensured that a vehicle is valid, legitimate and roadworthy when so much of the brain power of that vehicle is driven by new technologies. All MOT centres will have to be geared to keep up with technological development to ensure that these vehicles are roadworthy and have fully up-to-date software.

As I said earlier, these developments will have a huge impact on the economy and jobs. Other Members have asked what they will mean for operators in the logistics sector and, for instance, taxi drivers. I urge the Government to adopt our proposal for the establishment of an advisory council to hear from trade union representatives and take on board their thoughts, and, indeed, I suggest that a requirement for trade union representation should be included in the Bill. Other Members have also mentioned the concerns raised by industry, such as who will be responsible for software updates. How will a victim of a crash involving an automated vehicle be able to prove whether the vehicle was driving autonomously? Perhaps the Minister could clarify those points, and confirm that insurers will have appropriate access to data to deal with claims of this kind.

Without doubt, the future lies in automated, connected, electric and shared vehicles, and it is important that the UK has the necessary legislative framework not only for manufacturers but for the development of these technologies. The automotive industry contributes an estimated £3 billion to UK research and development and is one of our greatest strengths, so we must ensure that we have the legislation to provide for that. In the short term, the benefits of the Bill will be largely in assistive technology—data and mapping technologies, for instance—to make vehicles much safer for their occupants and for others. I welcome those safety benefits and the potential opportunities for the UK automotive industry, but, as I have said, there are real concerns about future security.

2.23 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the Bill because it takes the first step towards the creation of a framework within which automated vehicles can operate safely. The future of sustainable travel lies in such vehicles, and the UK now has a good opportunity to join the growing number of countries that are embracing this new technology. The tech sector in the UK is particularly strong, and the Bill should give confidence to investors if we are to develop a self-driving vehicle industry and take full advantage of its potential. A large part of that potential relates to road safety: there are still too many road accident victims, and I believe that automated vehicles can contribute significantly to reducing that number if we get this right. The Bill also has the potential to help us reach net zero. We may need to question, and reduce, individual car ownership in future if we want to hit our net zero targets, and automated vehicles may help us to do that.

[Wera Hobhouse]

However, the potential of this industry will only be realised if there is a high level of public confidence in the protections that the Bill gives to public safety—particularly the safety of other road users such as cyclists and pedestrians, who are more at risk than motorists. There is clearly scope for improving the safety of our roads, given that nearly 90% of traffic accidents are caused by human error. Many of the accidents that involve more vulnerable road users, such as cyclists, result from driver impairment or from drivers' disobeying traffic laws.

Evidence emerging from trials of AVs in San Francisco relating to overall safety improvements is encouraging, but a report of just one thing going wrong will set back efforts to secure public confidence in the safety of these vehicles. It will be important to set out very clearly the scope of any trials in the UK. We may receive reassurances from the industry that the technology is being improved continuously, but we must set out our expectations of what the trials can and cannot achieve. No technology will ever be 100% safe. If there is an interaction between technology and the human being sitting in the car, there is the potential to override the system. The nature of that interaction is almost a philosophical question, which has not been entirely resolved today, but the Minister has been generous in allowing us to raise our concerns.

During the San Francisco trials, issues arose relating to AVs' hindering emergency vehicles and stopping in cycle lanes, and those need to be addressed. Of course some issues are to be expected in trials, but a repetition of those incidents will damage public trust. People must be confident they will not be repeated on UK streets, and that will require a robust legal and safety framework which will also cover our trials.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's concession in changing the standard of safety for AV drivers so that they will have to meet or exceed the level of safety of careful and competent human drivers. The implications of that for driving tests have already been mentioned, and it is important for that discussion to continue. The Bill gives us a chance to improve the safety of our road networks for the long term, and we should see this as an opportunity to improve accessibility and safety for the public rather than just maintaining current standards.

Automated vehicles also require adequate infrastructure to support them. The poor state of UK roads has led to the highest number of pothole-related call-outs for the RAC in the last five years. Assurances must be given that improvements in road surfaces will be made before the roll-out of AVs. Will minimum standards for road quality be set for their use, and will local authorities be given the additional resources they will require in order to meet them?

Older and more vulnerable people are more reliant on taxis and private hire cars, a great benefit of which is a driver who can help them with access. The benefits of increased affordability that AVs may bring must not come at the cost of reduced access for disabled and vulnerable users, who will also require assurances about access on automated public transport if it is to be completely unstaffed. We have not talked enough about the human input into this brave new world of automated

vehicles and about whether, for instance, someone will be available to assist a disabled person using such a vehicle.

Another area of concern, which has also been mentioned today, is the attention given to data protection in the Bill. It is of course essential that AVs can take in data for machine learning algorithms, which enable them to improve the way in which they navigate. However, a large number of parties will inevitably have access to the data. It will include personal information, including people's faces. The overlap between commercial and personal data creates issues with access and storage. When data is shared between parties, including private companies, can we be sure that people's personal data is not being monetised for commercial gain? The Government have not yet given adequate assurances that personal information will be protected.

What about insurance? Insurers have said that the data from AVs must be readily available to establish liability, but drivers must feel confident about how their data is managed. How the data is stored must be open and transparent, and it must be held independently. Establishing a clear path of accountability is essential for public confidence. Cyclists and pedestrians who do not hold personal insurance should receive fair and swift compensation when they are victims of an accident. Further assurance is needed that insurance companies will receive adequate guidance for such claims.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Bill, but I urge Ministers to carefully review how it will impact on access for disabled and vulnerable transport users. I also encourage the Government to look further at data protection regulation. We must see this Bill as the beginning of a framework, not the end.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member is giving a list of things that are absent from the Bill. In my constituency we have autonomous delivery robots, which are currently on pilot; they are not regulated at all in the UK. Is this not another area that the Bill should regulate, in addition to the issues she has raised?

Wera Hobhouse: We always try to solve other problems with Bills in front of us, so we have to be a bit careful not to hang something on this Bill that actually goes into other areas, but new technologies create new challenges for all of us. For example, there are safety issues with such deliveries, but that probably requires a separate Bill. However, it is important that the Government make sure that we have adequate regulation of new technologies.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, there are many exciting opportunities for technological change, and we must embrace them. If we do not, other countries will go ahead, and then we will have them anyway. We must take the public with us, understand the risks and make sure that the huge potential of AVs is seen for what it is, but we must avoid unintended consequences that will lead to the public not coming with us, so let us get this right. It is a great opportunity, and let us make sure that we minimise the risks.

2.32 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I did not intend to give a speech in this debate—I just wanted to intervene—but as there were so few of us contributing, I thought

I would make a short contribution at the end. I am grateful to you for allowing me to do so, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I accept that the time has come for this technology. As somebody who worked in the transport industry for many years prior to becoming a Member of Parliament, I accept that we cannot stand in the way of this technology and that, overall, our road network will be safer with the advance of autonomous vehicles. None the less, there will be occasions when accidents occur, and we have to accept that we will be legislating for how vehicles respond in those circumstances. At the moment, if an accident happens, it happens in real time and people behind the wheels of the vehicles make real-time decisions to try to minimise the impact. However, automated vehicles will have to be programmed in advance to respond in a particular way in certain circumstances—we cannot get away from that. The fact is that the people designing the algorithms will be doing so remotely and well in advance of any accident happening.

Who is the primary person to consider when an accident takes place? Is it the person or persons in the vehicle, or is it the pedestrian? Is it a child, if someone is identified as being a child? Is it people standing at a bus stop on the side of the road? I will come to that soon when I share the concerns of one of my constituents who came to see me not about autonomous vehicles, but about an accident at a bus stop. These things have to be considered and accounted for when drawing up the algorithms that control automated cars—we cannot get away from that. Who will the algorithm protect in such circumstances? That is one of the challenges that came up when autonomous vehicles were being tested in Greenwich. When someone moved a chair and put it in front of the vehicle, the vehicle did not identify it. If it had been a child, the vehicle would have run them over.

We have to accept that we are going into no man's land by advancing with this technology. We will need to scrutinise its use, which is why it is right that we are looking to set up a panel that will have oversight of this area and advise the Secretary of State. I accept what the Secretary of State has said: if somebody tinkers with the software, clearly they put themselves outside of their insurance policy and will be liable for any accident that occurs as a consequence. However, both I and my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) have mentioned the Horizon scandal. At the heart of that scandal was Fujitsu, which tried to hide the glitches in its software. We cannot run away from the fact that there is a distinct possibility that something like that could happen when we have automated vehicles that are controlled by software. We must have the ability to scrutinise that and to ensure that people can have confidence in what companies say about the software they develop for automated vehicles.

We are told that we will have these vehicles for 20 to 30 years in co-existence with driven vehicles. What is going to happen when accidents occur? I am sure we will be told, as we were told in 2018 with the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act, that insurance companies will pay up, that these matters will be sorted out later and that they have anticipated every circumstance. We hear that time and again with legislation, but its practical application is where we really find out what is going on. When a driven vehicle has a collision with an autonomous vehicle, will the assumption be that the autonomous

vehicle is always right, that the driven vehicle must be wrong and that the accident must be due to human error? I am sure I will be told that we have allowed for that in the legislation, but I am also sure that once it is applied on the roads, this will become a big area of contention.

Wera Hobhouse: I am listening very carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and I am thinking about the aviation industry. Aeroplanes are very complicated technologies, yet aviation is one of the safest forms of travel, because each accident is investigated carefully to avoid a similar catastrophe. Does he think that similar structures for investigating accidents should be put in place as a safety mechanism?

Clive Efford: Scrutiny of accidents is going to be important, because we will learn a lot. We can improve safety with this technology—there is no question about that. The question is about the moral argument when accidents do happen and how we choose how vehicles should behave in those circumstances.

A constituent has come to me about a tragic case of a child being killed at a bus stop. A lorry lost control and swerved into the bus stop, and the child could not escape the vehicle and was crushed. It is an absolutely tragic story. My constituent came to see me about designing bus stops to make them safer for people standing at the roadside. Having lost her child in such tragic circumstances, I commend her for her consideration in wanting to improve the situation for others. As it is rolled out, this technology could prevent vehicles from colliding with roadside structures such as bus stops, so I accept that it can improve safety. This is an example of where we might be able to meet my constituent's desire to improve safety in such circumstances.

This technology will need a great deal of scrutiny. We will learn a lot from the application of this legislation as more and more automated vehicles enter our road network, and an advisory council to consider all aspects of the technology is absolutely necessary.

Clause 2 says that the Secretary of State must consult, but the list is very limited and puts businesses, including those that design the vehicles and draw up the algorithms, in prime position above road user representatives and other concerned individuals. The list needs to be much wider, and there needs to be a statutory body to provide oversight. We are on a steep learning curve and we will learn as we go. I accept that we cannot stand in the way of progress, but we must accept that there are serious safety questions that require answers. An advisory council of the kind that has been recommended is absolutely necessary.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

2.41 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I thank all Members who have taken part in this debate.

Self-driving vehicles offer an enormous opportunity to this country, with the potential to create a market worth £42 billion by 2035, to create 38,000 new jobs and to improve road safety and connectivity in the long term for all road users. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said, Labour welcomes and supports the broad principles of the Bill. I pay

[Bill Esterson]

tribute to the detailed work carried out over four years by the Law Commission to give us confidence about the framework before us.

The UK was leading the charge on self-driving technology in 2018, but since then, China, the US, France and Germany have overtaken us. The Opposition want to encourage innovation in this sector to bring economic and job opportunities to the UK, and to return the UK to its leading role in the development of this technology. Labour's industrial strategy will do that, as part of our approach to improving the UK's prospects.

Automated vehicles could remove transport-related obstacles for those living in remote rural communities, those living with a disability and older people by reaching those who are denied access to public transport.

Crucially, automated vehicles have the potential to improve road safety for all. Eighty-eight per cent of road collisions are a result of human error. Research by Axa suggests that 3,900 deaths and 60,000 serious road traffic collisions could be prevented between last year, when it carried out the research, and 2040 through the deployment of automated vehicles. It forecast an 85% reduction in road incidents through the introduction of AV technology, which would in turn benefit the NHS to the tune of £2.3 billion a year in reduced medical and ambulance costs. However, this all requires a proper transition and roll-out from the Government.

I mentioned the importance of safety improvements, and I am pleased that the Government have accepted the need for higher standards in the Bill. My Labour colleagues Lord Tunnicliffe and Lord Liddle deserve particular credit for their work in this crucial area. The Government amendment that referred to "careful and competent" drivers sends a very clear indication to industry, and it rightly puts the highest standard of safety in the Bill. I am also glad that the Government agree that secondary legislation should be considered under the affirmative procedure. The regulations that follow from the Bill should be subject to proper scrutiny over the years as the technology is developed.

A number of concerns that were raised in the Lords remain to be addressed in Committee. The impact on the transport workforce will be crucial in any transition to automation, which is why trade unions have a key part to play. Working with industry and the unions is a key part of a successful industrial strategy, and the unions have much to offer in advising on how to find alternative employment for their members and in ensuring that the economic benefits of new technologies are available to workers, as well as to investors and consumers.

As the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, said, we have already seen what happens when this Government do not engage with union representatives. We must learn the lessons from deindustrialisation to avoid repeating its mistakes, which have contributed to growing inequality across our country.

We also want to see people with disabilities, pedestrians, cyclists, businesses, emergency services and highway authorities included in the development of this technology. My hon. Friends the Members for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and for Eltham (Clive Efford) both highlighted the importance of setting up an advisory

committee, and I hope they will join me in Committee to revisit this important aspect that should be added to what has already been amended in the Lords.

This brings me to accessibility. This Bill's framework provides a unique opportunity to support people with disabilities from the outset by, for example, including consultation with disabled road users on the statement of safety principles. In 2019, the Government published their "Future of mobility: urban strategy" which highlighted that one of the potential benefits of supporting self-driving vehicles is making travel more accessible to disabled and older people. The Government know that the Bill should specifically include people with disabilities and older people. It was therefore disappointing that they did not accept Labour's amendments in the Lords.

I said earlier that the introduction of automated vehicles brings an opportunity to improve safety for all road users, not least pedestrians and cyclists. The Transport Committee's September 2023 report on self-driving vehicles argues that the introduction of self-driving vehicles

"should not impose new responsibilities on other road users and pedestrians".

Will the Minister confirm whether he accepts that principle?

Speaking of areas of uncertainty in the Bill, there are other examples of a lack of clarity, which is something that the insurance industry will require. I know that much of this will be addressed in secondary legislation. Access to data is essential to ensuring that the insurance model does not break down on issues such as responsibility for software updates, on liability during transition from automated to "user in charge" and on the Motor Insurers Bureau dealing with cases of uninsured vehicles. Additionally, clarity is required for those injured by an automated vehicle, as they currently have to prove that automated features were engaged in order to claim compensation. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham made a reasonable point about who will be responsible in the event of an incident and how this can be covered in legislation.

The Transport Committee highlighted the insurance industry's concerns in its recent report on self-driving vehicles. Uncertainty, and the possibility of endless legal disputes if access to data is not available, risks increasing insurance costs for consumers and deterring growth in the market for automated vehicles, so I look forward to delving further into these questions with the Minister in Committee.

The Bill rightly addresses concerns about false marketing of automated vehicles that have not been authorised. The Government must work with industry to ensure there is a clear communication strategy during the transition to automated vehicles. We have seen what happens when communication is negative, through the approach in the media to the transition to electric vehicles. Whether deliberate or otherwise, the messaging from some, not just in the media, but in government, including the Prime Minister, has delayed the time at which many people will benefit from cheaper private cars, at a cost of £13 billion to drivers. I hope that Ministers will not repeat the same damaging approach in their messaging on the switch to automated vehicles.

Labour welcomes this Bill as it moves through the House. The benefits of automated vehicles are there for all to see, for our economy, through the creation of new jobs and, crucially, through improved road safety

and connectivity. There is a good degree of consensus on the implementation of the legislation. If Labour is given the opportunity to serve after the election, with us in the driving seat, we will power ahead and ensure that Britain really can lead on this exciting new technology.

2.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): I thank everyone who has contributed to this incredibly enjoyable debate. It is always enjoyable when there is a remarkable degree of consensus across the House. I note that Labour, the Scottish National party and the Liberal Democrats all support this legislation. There was a large degree of consensus on the various issues, with almost everyone who spoke agreeing that this legislation could and should lead to safer roads. We all want to reduce the number of accidents, injuries and deaths on the road.

Various Members from different parts of the country talked about the autonomous vehicle work going on in their constituencies: the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) talked about CAVForth in Scotland; the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), talked about the work in Milton Keynes; and the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) talked about the benefits in Warwick. Various Members also mentioned Wayve in north London, and I know that companies in my constituency are working on this. Getting this industry right really is an example of levelling up. There was also a large degree of consensus that we need to make sure that this technology works for the benefit of vulnerable users. One of the major reasons for it is that it offers huge opportunities for people who are blind, frail and so on and cannot drive.

Lots of useful questions and points were raised. I spent a huge amount of time nodding in violent agreement with what Members from the various Opposition parties were saying, such was the consensus. Many of the points have been covered in the Bill, which I will go through in detail. Various Members mentioned the need for proper accident investigation. We completely agree on that, because it is vital that whenever a self-driving vehicle is involved in an accident, we need to know why the accident happened and whether, for example, it was a result of the software or the algorithm going wrong. We need to learn from any accidents. This is an evolution; we are not going to get the perfect result and this is going to evolve over the coming years and decades. The importance of accident investigation is why we provide in the Bill for an incident investigation function similar to those in other sectors, such as aviation, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). The Secretary of State will have the power to appoint independent accident investigators, who will find out the root cause and make sure that we all learn the lessons.

Matt Western: I just want to understand this better, because I might have missed something. Is that technology, in essence, like a black box that would be fitted within a vehicle, which those investigators could then access?

Anthony Browne: Absolutely, the accident investigators will have the power to get access to the software and technology so that we understand what went wrong. That is a crucial part of this; we need to understand

technically what the cause of any accident is. That is very different from a police investigation into an accident, where they are trying to attribute blame to X, Y or Z but do not need to understand the root cause.

Let me turn to some of the most detailed comments. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), said that the Opposition support this legislation. She talked about the importance of jobs and getting that aspect right. Most speakers talked about the benefits for jobs, with the self-driving sector creating as many as 38,000 new jobs by 2035. A range of new jobs will arise out of this, not just in the companies making self-driving technology, but with conductors on automated services, for example. She worried about the job losses that were coming, as did various other Opposition Members, but they are getting ahead of themselves; those sort of impacts will be a very long way down the line and this is an evolution in the coming years and decades. It is definitely worth thinking about the issue. The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, asked what will happen to jobs in 50 years' time, but it is not the purpose of this Bill to deal with the situation in 50 years' time.

Accessibility is clearly a major issue and we completely agree on it. The Government want to ensure that all parts of society, including people with disabilities, can reap the benefits of self-driving technology. That is why we have anchored our approach in the recommendations put forward by the Law Commissions in their inquiry. Their central conclusion was that our focus should be on gathering evidence and gaining experience, and making sure that this works for disabled people and vulnerable users. The Bill requires that the authority granting a passenger permit must consider how the service will lead to improvement in understanding accessibility. Service providers will then be required to publish regular reports on how they are meeting the needs of disabled and vulnerable users. We are also following the Law Commissions' recommendation in establishing an accessibility advisory panel to inform the development of national accessibility standards. The Department for Transport already has a statutory disabled users advisory panel.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South, the Chair of the Select Committee, raised a large number of points. He made comments about "careful and competent driver" being too weak as a definition. It is an ambition rather than a detail, and that takes us to the whole point about the statement of safety principles. The ambition of making sure that a driver is safe, careful and competent is in the Bill, but the detail of exactly what that means will come through in the statement of safety principles, on which we will consult widely.

The Secretary of State and I had a meeting with a wide range of user groups last week—road user groups, road safety groups and people from the Royal National Institute of Blind People were at the roundtable. We committed to working with them as we go forward on putting together that statement of safety principles. We have also committed in the Bill to consulting a range of different groups, including road user groups, and that could include trade unions. We would very much like to hear from them if they have contributions to make on the different aspects of safety that we will be sorting out. As this is an evolving technology, a lot of what is in

[Anthony Browne]

the Bill is high level and quite a lot of statutory instruments will fall from it; it is necessary to be flexible. Consulting on developing those SIs will take until 2026, so there is a long time to get a lot of the details right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South also said that he wanted to make sure that drivers have the right level of skills and do not forget how to drive. People being deskilled is a long way off, but he asks the right question and the Government will keep under review whether we need to do anything on that. He also made the point about making sure that MOT tests are kept up to date. We have consulted on the future of those tests, and we will be monitoring that and making sure that they are kept up to date. Most Members, including my hon. Friend, raised the valid point about data and the insurance industry. Thatcham Research, which does the driving safety work for the insurance industry, was at the roundtable that we had last week, and we committed to working with them in the future. They need to know exactly what data they can get access to at the time of an accident. The powers for that are in the Bill. It will be critical to understand whether the vehicle was in self-driving mode at the time—the “no user in charge” mode—or whether a human was driving, as well as the cause of the accident. That point has been well made, but those issues are already addressed in the Bill.

Various hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South, talked about the need to take the public with us; I agree. It is good to debate the subject here and good that there is a political consensus. We will be doing lots of consultation on the subject going forward and will invite everyone’s input. The Government recently launched PAVE, Partners for Automated Vehicle Education. I launched the initiative at the RAC Club a couple of weeks ago and it is supported by the Government. It aims to educate the public about self-driving cars and promote debate about that transport revolution.

The spokesperson for the SNP, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, made many very good points. I am not usually in such agreement with the SNP on Government policy. We absolutely need to take the public with us. He asked whether it would be compulsory to have an autonomous vehicle, as he wants to carry on driving. I can confirm to the House that the Government have no plans to ban driving—not now, not ever. He will be entitled to carry on driving if he wishes. Self-driving cars are entirely voluntary.

The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members raised points about international incidents, including problems with state-level rules in the US and problems that Cruise had in San Francisco. I agree that we need to learn lessons from all the international incidents and that we need strong, clear rules. The whole point of the legislation is to clearly define the legal and regulatory structure, so that we avoid the bad stuff and so that we can learn, improve the system and bring in changes as we need them.

Gavin Newlands: As I alluded to, the Scottish Government have been more than willing to work with the UK Government on the Bill. In fact, they are in complete agreement on many aspects of the Bill, but

does the Minister accept that clause 50 is an overstep by the Government yet again? They are overruling legislation defined in the Scottish Parliament, given that Scotland has a separate legal framework.

Anthony Browne: I reassure the hon. Member that we have been in contact with Scottish Government officials about the Bill over many months, including on this issue, and there has been an exchange of letters. The power in clause 50 is limited to making regulations changing or clarifying whether, how or in what circumstances a relevant enactment applies to the user in charge of a vehicle, a concept that the UK Government consider to be reserved. The power can amend devolved enactments only to this limited extent. It cannot be used to amend enactments more broadly or for any other purpose. I am happy to meet the hon. Member if he wants to discuss that further.

On international rules, many hon. Members mentioned the Horizon scandal and whether big tech companies can be trusted. They mentioned the fine Apple has just received from the EU. Those are valid concerns. It is imperative that we go on the journey of developing the technology together, so that there is trust between the Government, the regulators, the public and the companies themselves. That is why we have introduced a duty of candour, legally requiring senior management of the companies to be up front with the Government about any technical problems or changes that could impact safety. We take this so seriously that it is subject to criminal sanctions, including prison sentences of up to 14 years if senior management are completely deceptive about what is happening. The work has to be carried out on the basis of openness. This is not a new idea—we have the same legislation in other industries, such as the pharmaceutical industry, where we need a similar duty of candour about the safety of drugs. We take the issue very seriously.

The Opposition spokesperson and the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington talked about the need for an advisory council. We have committed to consulting on the statement of safety principles, and most of the issues we have discussed are included in that statement. The legislation also includes a duty of monitoring. The Secretary of State will have a legal duty to monitor the development of self-driving autonomous vehicles, including safety issues, and to write a report that every year.

Most of the other issues have been covered already. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Hon. Members are very keen to conclude the debate. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who is no longer in his place, said that the legislation should cover delivery robots. I agree with the hon. Member for Bath that this legislation does not provide the time or the place for that. There are many different issues concerning delivery robots that do not fit within the scope of this Bill.

Finally, the hon. Member for Eltham, who was not originally going to speak but decided to give a speech, said we should ensure that all road users benefit from the legislation. There is no algorithm that decides to run over cyclists or children. The whole point of these vehicles is to make roads safer. That will come out through the consultation on the statement of safety principles, but we are already committed to fairness between all road users being at the centre of those principles. Safety has to be for all road users, not just the people within the vehicle.

The debate has been positive and constructive, with a lot of well made points. I look forward to going through the Bill in Committee where we can discuss issues in more detail. With that, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

AUTOMATED VEHICLES BILL [LORDS]: PROGRAMME

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Automated Vehicles Bill [Lords]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 18 April 2024.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Anthony Browne.*)

Question agreed to.

AUTOMATED VEHICLES BILL [LORDS]: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Automated Vehicles Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State.—(*Anthony Browne.*)

Question agreed to.

AUTOMATED VEHICLES BILL [LORDS]: WAYS AND MEANS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Automated Vehicles Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:

- (1) the charging of fees under the Act; and
(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—
(*Anthony Browne.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on

(1) the Motion in the name of Secretary Kemi Badenoch relating to the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill: Instruction not later than 45 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order, and

(2) the Motion in the name of Secretary James Cleverly relating to British Citizenship (Northern Ireland) Bill: Instruction not later than 45 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion;

such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to those motions or to the motion in the name of Nigel Huddleston relating to High Streets (Designation, Review and Improvement Plan) Bill: Money.—
(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill: Instruction

3.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I beg to move,

That it be an instruction to the Committee on the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill that the Committee have leave to make provision about paternity leave in cases involving the death of—

(a) the mother of a child,

(b) a person with whom a child is, or is expected to be, placed for adoption, or

(c) an applicant or intended applicant for a parental order under section 54 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008.

The Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore), was supported by the Government on Second Reading and enjoyed cross-party support from the House. I congratulate the hon. Member for bringing forward this very important Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) has also campaigned on the issue.

As it stands, the Bill would require regulations to be made that remove the continuity of service requirement for bereaved partners so that they are eligible for shared parental leave and pay. The Bill aims to provide a parental leave entitlement for bereaved fathers by providing a shared parental leave entitlement, but that is not the only or necessarily the best mechanism available. It is also possible to use parental leave to achieve the Bill's objective.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There is nobody in the House who does not welcome the legislation and the thought behind bringing it forward. I understand—perhaps the Minister can confirm this—that the Bill will not be law in Northern Ireland, and that it will take a process to make that happen. Will he outline the process that will ensure that those in Northern Ireland have the same opportunities as those the Bill?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very happy to work with the hon. Gentleman to ensure that is the case. We will do everything possible to support those efforts in Northern Ireland.

My officials are working to complete a comparative analysis of shared parental leave and paternity leave entitlements to establish which mechanism is best to achieve the Bill's intent. To ensure we use the best available mechanism to deliver this entitlement, we are seeking to broaden the scope of the Bill to include paternity leave. In that way, both shared parental leave and paternity leave can be considered in Committee. We are of course working closely with the hon. Member for Ogmores on that.

What is more, the instruction would enable a Committee to consider amendments that would extend the measures to new parents who have their children through other routes, such as adoption or surrogacy arrangements. Where possible and appropriate, the Government aim to afford adoptive and surrogate parents similar employment rights to those we give to birth parents. Employed parents who have their child through adoption or surrogacy arrangements may be entitled to adoption leave and

pay, or paternity leave and pay. Extending the provision in the Bill to new parents who have their children through those other routes is consistent with the Government's stance on this issue. I have discussed this motion with the hon. Member for Ogmores, and I appreciate his support. I commend the motion to the House.

3.11 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I will just say a few words about the motion; I am sure the Minister would be disappointed if I did not.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore) for his work on this issue. I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) here too, because they have both been working on this issue with the Minister, and it is very pleasing that we have got to this stage. I commend my hon. Friend on his success in achieving Government support. This important Bill will help those in the awful and unimaginable situation of losing a partner when a child is expected. The Minister is right to try to equalise the provisions across all circumstances. We look forward to the Bill hopefully being amended in Committee to take on board the intentions set out today. We welcome the motion, and we wish it all the best.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): When Aaron came to my constituency surgery with his three-week-old son, Tim, in his arms—his wife sadly died in childbirth—he had been working for a company for less than six months so he was not entitled to shared parental leave. Does the shadow Minister agree that this will affect the very small number of people a year in that situation? It will not be a significant burden on businesses and the Government, but for the people it affects it will be hugely impactful.

Justin Madders: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have discussed that with the Minister in other debates. The Bill will thankfully affect a very small number of people, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that for them it will be an incredibly important advance. On that note, I wish the Bill the best of success in its passage through Parliament.

3.13 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmores) (Lab): I rise in support of the Minister's motion. I thank him for the constructive way in which he, his officials and—dare I say it?—the Government Whips Office have engaged with me during the passage of this Bill. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for his and his team's support.

As the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) said, this Bill will not impact many people. No one in this House wants it to impact many people, because nobody should face what some of our constituents have in recent years and long before. Becoming a parent should be a moment of joy, not a moment of grief and sorrow. I welcome the Minister's intervention to broaden the scope of the Bill. It is hugely important to a small number of people, and I look forward to dealing with the number of amendments that will come forward when the Bill is in Committee at the end of the month.

Question put and agreed to.

British Citizenship (Northern Ireland) Bill: Instruction

3.14 pm

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): I beg to move,

That it be an instruction to the Committee on the British Citizenship (Northern Ireland) Bill that the Committee have leave to make provision for the acquisition of British citizenship by Irish citizens, whether born before or after 31 December 1948, who are resident in the United Kingdom.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for selecting this motion. The reason for tabling it is that the Bill, as currently drafted, allows only people born in Ireland after 31 December 1948 who have been resident in Northern Ireland for five years to register as British citizens. The instruction will allow the Bill Committee to consider amendments that would apply the provisions to all eligible Irish nationals of all ages who live anywhere in the United Kingdom for five years.

The provisions to amend the Bill will do that in several ways. First, they will make the route available to Irish nationals regardless of how they became Irish, and not just those born in Ireland. Those covered by the original Bill will still be included, but the measure will be more generous and fairer, in that it will give all eligible Irish nationals a more straightforward pathway to becoming a British citizen.

Secondly, there will not be a requirement for an Irish national to have been born after a certain date. The instruction will make it so that people born on or before 31 December 1948 have the same opportunity to make use of the Bill as those born after that date.

Thirdly, qualifying residents can be from any part of the United Kingdom, not just Northern Ireland. That will mean that all eligible Irish nationals resident anywhere in the United Kingdom will be able to make use of this important piece of legislation.

I again ask Members to consider the unique position that Irish nationals hold with regard to the United Kingdom. The Bill will help to reaffirm and reflect that, and will make a real difference to those Irish nationals who also wish to be British citizens. We are confident that the amended route will not undermine the integrity of the system. It is about introducing a more appropriate route for people who could otherwise seek to naturalise.

Amending the Bill will help us to be more inclusive to all eligible Irish nationals currently resident in the United Kingdom. The Government are clear in our support for the underlying principle of the Bill, and it will have our full support if these suggested amendments are made. I thank the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for bringing the issue to our attention, and indeed for his constructive engagement with me and my officials. I look forward to working closely with him to help his Bill safely travel through the House.

3.16 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): His Majesty's official Opposition support the changes to the Bill. We outlined our reasons for supporting the Bill on Second Reading, and I have nothing further to add.

3.17 pm

Gavin Robinson: I thank the shadow Minister for her renewed endorsement, and I thank the Minister, in particular, not only for the way he introduced this motion, but for the courteous way in which he and his colleagues have engaged with me. The officials in his Department have been uniquely pleased to receive my telephone calls, text messages, emails, Teams calls and everything else—they have been very helpful—and the Minister, with his joyous bonhomie, has come back to me on a number of occasions about the Bill. I appreciate all that support.

I think that there is a procedural requirement that I indicate my assent to the motion. Anybody who was present for Second Reading will understand entirely not only the nature of what the Minister has outlined, but the reasons for the instruction—it all follows from narrow drafting. We are more than content with what has been outlined.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It would be remiss of me not to put on the record my thanks to my hon. Friend for his insight. The formation of Northern Ireland left behind many who considered themselves to be British in Ireland. This Bill will right the wrong that was done to those who had a right to that identity but were held back by the ties to their homes and their local communities. Does he agree that the message sent today to those who consider themselves British in Ireland is clear: “There is a place for you, and a passport to go along with it”?

Gavin Robinson: My hon. Friend is quite right. In relation to the entitlement of those born in the Irish Free State to obtain British citizenship, the reason a date was introduced to the Bill in the initial stages was the creation of the Republic of Ireland in 1948. That is the reason for it, but there is absolutely no requirement for it to be there, and I agree with the Government that it is unnecessary.

It is encouraging for me as a Unionist to have an even better Unionist argument put forward by the Conservative and Unionist party to say that this should not be restricted solely to those in Northern Ireland, but should apply to anywhere in the United Kingdom. How could I oppose that proposition?

Given that my colleague and hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) was not here for Second Reading, it is important that I place on the record, in his presence, my appreciation for the path that he laid before me. In the 23 years that he has sat in this House representing the people of Northern Ireland, he has championed the content of the Bill and the requirement for such legislation. We are all greatly appreciative of the Government's support, and hopefully we will be able to progress this positively and conclusively within this parliamentary term—an outcome that we relish.

I think you are coiled, Mr Deputy Speaker—poised and ready to go. I am very concerned for those people in our society who tune into the BBC Parliament channel at teatime. I am concerned that if I do not exhaust the next 45 minutes, there will be nothing for them to watch when they get home from their hard day's toil and check in to see how we are representing them. But since you seem so keen to restore yourself to your feet, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall conclude.

Question put and agreed to.

High Streets (Designation, Review and Improvement Plan) Bill: Money

King's recommendation signified.

3.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the High Streets (Designation, Review and Improvement Plan) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.

The Government fully support the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) to improve our nation's high streets.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The question is as on the Order Paper—

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I beg your pardon. I call Jack Brereton.

3.22 pm

Jack Brereton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—I will not detain the House long. I just wanted to put on the record my huge thanks and appreciation to my hon. Friend the Minister, his officials and the Whips Office for all the support that they have given me and my Bill—it is an important Bill. Members across this House care deeply about high streets, and I am grateful for the support that I have received from them. I hope that the Bill will continue to move forward with success—we have Committee stage soon—on its way towards Royal Assent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do apologise to the hon. Gentleman. He did indicate to me that he wished to speak, but the business was moving so fast that I overlooked him.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO INDUSTRY)

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Nusrat Ghani relating to Financial Assistance to Industry shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RATING AND VALUATION

That the draft Non-Domestic Rating (Rates Retention: Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 20 February, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

DATA PROTECTION

That the draft Data Protection Act 2018 (Amendment of Schedule 2 Exemptions) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

HOUSING

That the draft Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 (Consequential and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 18 January, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Waste Enforcement (Fixed Penalty Receipts) (Amendment) (England and Wales) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 10 January, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Packaging Waste (Data Reporting) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Groceries Code Adjudicator

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

3.23 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Having seen the House run through business at such a blistering pace, we can now all settle back and enjoy the next four hours and six minutes as we consider the matter of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. I assure the House that it is some years since I made my living by speaking for six-minute units in the legal profession, so we may manage to knock off the odd six minutes here or there. I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Yesterday we were here in rather greater numbers for a wider debate on agriculture. I spoke then about the importance of food manufacture and processing to the local economy in the northern isles. Today we paint on a somewhat broader canvas with issues of wider concern, but what is important for the agricultural industries throughout the United Kingdom will always be important for us in the northern isles.

In recent years, farmers in my constituency and elsewhere have found themselves caught in a pincer. They have seen their input costs—particularly the costs of fuel and fertiliser—rise sharply, while the price that they are able to get for their produce at the farm gate has continued to be depressed by the operation of the market in which they are often required to operate. Farmers have, to put it bluntly, found themselves squeezed in the middle.

I think it worth reminding ourselves of how we came to this point. The genesis of the Groceries Code Adjudicator was an inquiry by what was then the Competition Commission—now, I guess, the Competition and Markets Authority. That inquiry took many years of pressure to be held, and its report led to the creation of the groceries supply code of practice, which was, in turn, followed by the Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013. It was a long, slow and painful process to get even to that stage. I remember the conversations that I had with colleagues in 2013, as a Minister in the coalition Government, about how the adjudicator would operate and whether it would be sufficient. I think we all knew that, at some point or other, we would need to revisit the matter, but we were certainly pragmatic about it, and took the view that what we were getting in 2013 was better than nothing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate on a massive issue that affects us all. Hailing as I do from a farming constituency, I have a deep and intricate interest in the defence of farmers' prices and income. My real fear is that the harder farmers struggle to eke out their pay, the less likely future generations will be to pursue farming, being isolated and working night and day for less than minimum wage. Does he agree that we need to defend the pay scales, through an enhanced adjudicator power, to secure the viability of the job as an occupation for the future?

Mr Carmichael: I do. I felt that a debate focused on the Groceries Code Adjudicator was timely and essential because the relationship between the producer and the

retailer is critical. Unless we get that relationship right, there will be no future; many generations, one after the other, have made the decision to go into agriculture, but it will simply not be worth it. As many of our environmental objectives rely on agriculture, the reduction of agriculture and the change we are seeing in the countryside will ultimately be counterproductive to achieving those environmental gains.

I understand Governments' reluctance and caution about interfering in the operation of a market—we all know that the law of unintended consequences is never far away—but 10 years since the adjudicator's creation, it is surely obvious that the way in which it is working, measured by its outputs, is simply not good enough, and that reform is required. On the basis of the debate we had in the Chamber yesterday, the good news for the Government is that there is already a fairly broad consensus in the House, both from people representing rural seats and those representing urban seats, about what that reform should achieve.

The Competition Commission's report identified what was essentially a dysfunctional market. On the one hand, we have a handful of behemoth purchasers: 95% of the food consumed in this country comes from 12 retail companies. On the other hand, we have thousands of small businesses—farmers, processors and others. We have all heard the stories over the years about the influence of the supermarkets. Of course, big food manufacturers such as Kraft Heinz can compete—they can engage with supermarkets on something like an equal footing—but for the farmers and processors in my constituency and those of other Members, it is a very different story.

The hard commercial fact is that farmers require access to supermarkets to grow their business, but once they have access to those supermarkets, the risk is that they become dependent on it. At that point, it is the supermarkets that can dictate the terms and conditions on which trade is done. Of course, that is a matter of contract, but as any lawyer could tell us, when it comes to taking action to enforce or arbitrate on the basis of a contract, that contract is only as good as the resources behind it. It seems that even 10 years after the creation of the adjudicator, it is still necessary for farmers and processors to say that supermarkets should be required to buy what they say they are going to buy, pay the price that they say they are going to pay, and pay it on time. The fact that we still hear that message is the simplest basis on which I can illustrate the need for reform.

At the moment, our farmers find themselves in a perfect storm. Leaving the European Union brought with it the repatriation of agricultural policy, as well as a number of trade deals with other countries in other parts of the world. The changes to agricultural support risk reducing the amount of food produced on the land; at the same time, we see land given over to other, non-food-producing purposes, such as the creation of renewable energy resources or the process of growing trees—rewilding. Those trade agreements open up our markets to imported food. If that food is not produced according to the same welfare and environmental standards that we expect our farmers to meet, it will inevitably lead to an imbalance in price, which makes it more difficult for our farmers to compete on price. At a time when we see huge pressure on family budgets as a consequence of a massive spike in the cost of living, consumers will increasingly buy on the basis of price. It

[Mr Carmichael]

seems to me that we are putting ourselves in a place where our own farmers are least able to compete on the basis that consumers are most likely to buy on.

If the Government are sincere in wanting to keep productive farming and a proper, functioning market, the relationship between the farmer and the retailer is absolutely critical—it is more important than ever. I was struck when listening to the debate yesterday how many of the participants spoke about subsidies for farmers. The hard truth of the matter is that these subsidies have never properly been subsidies for farmers; they have been subsidies for consumers, because they have allowed farmers to sell their produce at a price that simply would not be economic in any free market. The people who have benefited from these farm subsidies have ultimately been the consumers and the large corporates—the supermarkets—that have been supplying them.

The world is very different today from the one in which the adjudicator was created 10 years ago. There are changes that I would like to see, around which consensus was apparent yesterday. The first difficulty in the way in which the adjudicator's functions and office were created is that the remit given to them misses out on the early parts of the supply chain. It does not cover producers who supply processors, or smaller retailers. As with the Groceries Code Adjudicator, the code of practice surely requires to be extended to include processors, hospitality and manufacturers.

As well as the remit given to the adjudicator, the resourcing of that office also requires to improve. It is difficult to see how we can possibly hope for an adjudicator to exercise meaningful control over the big supermarkets—who, incidentally, fund its operation through a levy—if the cost of a single investigation is greater than its annual budget. Remember also that when it comes to the dialogue between the regulator and the supermarkets, the supermarkets will not be under-resourced and they have every interest and every means to ensure that they put forward the most favourable case they can possibly create. Just as there is an inequality of arms between supermarkets and farmers, so there is an inequality of arms between the supermarkets and the regulator.

Also, the code applies only to direct suppliers, which are now the 14 largest retailers. There is no protection, as things are currently structured, for those who would be indirect suppliers, so any supermarkets or other large retailer that wishes to avoid enforcement or coming under the attention of the Groceries Code Adjudicator can do that quite simply by purchasing the goods through intermediaries.

The Agriculture Act 2020 allowed the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to create statutory codes of conduct. I am aware that a consultation being carried out by the Government on contractual relationships in the fresh produce industry finished on 22 February. I expect that that is still being considered by Ministers, but I hope it will be possible to hear some indication from the Minister today of when we might see the outcome of that consultation. As we consider the reform of the adjudicator's office, we must ask one simple question: is there an overall strategy at play? It seems to me that different avenues of influence are possible and that, as part of the review, the compatibility of the codes of conduct under the 2020 Act and the office of the adjudicator requires to be examined.

Bluntly, I do not care how we tackle this. The vehicle for change is irrelevant, as far as I am concerned. It is the outcome, the change that we are able to achieve, that matters to me. The concern that is most frequently expressed to me is a pretty fundamental one—namely, that the code does not cover pricing. Few things illustrate that better than the way in which the dairy industry has been affected by supermarket activities in recent years, but when we speak to producers in just about every sector, we get the same story every time.

The strands of Government policy that we have at the moment—the removal of support for production through the new agricultural policy for England, which, as I said yesterday, has a knock-on effect for agriculture in other parts of the United Kingdom, and the improvement of food security—will only both be achieved if British farmers receive a fair price for the food that they produce. If we do not achieve that, then removing the direct support for food production from our subsidy system will leave us with no option but to import ever more of our food. The carbon consequences of the production of that food—reference was made yesterday to its being produced in Central and South America in ground that would previously have been rainforest or whatever else—and its transportation would run counterproductive to other stated Government policies.

It is in the round that we see the importance of regulating properly this relationship, and it is now a matter of urgency. Recent research demonstrated that 49% of farmers in the United Kingdom fear they could be out of business next year, 61% identify supply chain unfairness as something that has an adverse effect on their mental health, and 23% of dairy farmers doubt that they will continue into 2025. Action needs to be taken. There is a willingness in this House to take meaningful action to deal properly with this relationship, which in itself will have a significant effect on the future economic and social viability of our rural communities producing good-quality food for people in all our communities to consume. Who would not want that?

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. This debate is very important to me personally. My father was a hill farmer, and I represent a rural constituency with many farmers who are experiencing many of the pressures that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) referred to; indeed, he described them as a perfect storm. I congratulate him on securing the debate and on all the work he does in this area, of which I am only too aware. He mentioned the pressures that farmers and those in the farming community face making a living, and the competition for land from different land uses, with which we should be careful in ensuring that we have food security as well as energy security and the other things that we need to retain in this country.

The right hon. Gentleman is of course familiar with the Groceries Code Adjudicator, but it might be worthwhile setting out exactly what it is there to do, how it can help get a fair deal for farmers, and what else we are doing to ensure that that is the case. The role of the GCA is to enforce the groceries supply code of practice. It does so by providing advice and guidance to both suppliers and large retailers on matters relating to the code, arbitrating

in disputes between large retailers and their direct suppliers, investigating issues to ascertain whether there has been non-compliance with the code, and imposing sanctions and other remedies for breaches of the code.

The code applies to the 14 largest grocery retailers in the UK, which have an annual turnover in groceries of £1 billion or more. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, the code was put in place following a detailed market investigation by the Competition Commission between 2006 and 2008, which found that direct suppliers of groceries to large supermarkets faced unfair risks that adversely affected competition and, ultimately, consumers. The code regulates designated retailers' interaction with their direct suppliers, including some but not the majority of farmers.

While the code prevents the unilateral variation of supply agreements, such as on wastage and forecasting errors, and requires retailers to pay invoices on time, it does not cover prices agreed between a retailer and a supplier, which, as the right hon. Gentleman says, are a matter of commercial negotiation. However, the code does help ensure that negotiations are conducted fairly and transparently, and the GCA has an interest in ensuring that negotiations on cost price pressures do not lead to non-compliance with the code.

Of particular note are the GCA's seven golden rules, which all the regulated retailers have signed up to and which safeguard the requirements of the code in discussions about price and cost pressures. There is strong evidence to show that the GCA has been highly effective since it was established in ensuring compliance with the code and changing the behaviour of retailers to ensure fairness for suppliers.

Stakeholders have expressed a positive view of the GCA and their input has helped inform the statutory review of the performance of the GCA that the Government conduct every three years. Indeed, I met many of those suppliers and they spoke very clearly about the benefits of the GCA that they see. Those suppliers represent many of the primary producers referred to by the right hon. Gentleman.

The third such review concluded in July 2023 and I hope the right hon. Gentleman's constituents felt able to submit their views. The review considered publicly available evidence and the responses submitted by 71 stakeholders, including from 27 individual suppliers and their representative bodies, and 30 other trade associations, organisations and individuals. Most of the suppliers who responded to the review said they believed the impact of the GCA on the groceries market had been positive as retailer behaviour had improved. They also said the adjudicator had addressed the previous imbalance of power and made the grocery market fairer to operate in. For instance, in 2014, just after the GCA was set up, four out of five direct suppliers responding to the GCA's first annual survey said they had experienced an issue with the code. That is now down to one in three, and the issues that concern suppliers are down in practically all cases. Suppliers, including small and medium-sized enterprises, feel better protected against any poor behaviours from retailers following the best practice put in place by the GCA. In 2022, more than two thirds of direct suppliers felt that retailers covered by the code conducted relationships fairly.

Overall, there is a consistently high level of awareness among suppliers of the GCA and the code. I have met the current adjudicator, Mark White, several times and

have been extremely impressed by his pragmatic approach to ensuring the compliance of the designated supermarkets, which has helped to stop problems escalating and reduced the need for time-consuming and expensive formal dispute resolution.

I am aware that some Members have asked whether the GCA has the necessary powers and resources. I know that Mark White believes his current powers provide the necessary tools to enforce the code and change retailer behaviour. He is also responsible for determining the level of resources that he needs and setting the levy of regulated retailers to fund his work. While Ministers are responsible for approving the proposed levy, the Government have always accepted the adjudicator's levy business case and will of course give careful consideration to future requests.

Mr Carmichael: I am pondering the words the Minister has used. I think he is right that the adjudicator does have the powers to investigate and enforce the code of practice, but there are still big areas that are not covered, and that comes to the concern that farmers, producers and processors have.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am not ignoring the right hon. Gentleman's concerns at all. I recognise them and, as I said earlier in my speech, the vast majority of the market in terms of primary producers is not covered by the code. I will come on to that shortly. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that there would be challenges in the GCA being the custodian or overseer of thousands upon thousands of business contracts, with the complexity and bureaucracy that would flow from that, which neither of us would wish to see. That would, of course, result in an impact on prices as well. I will address that later.

We recognise that, despite the GCA's effectiveness and successful interventionist approach, we have not yet stamped out all unfair practices. The impact of the recent cost price pressures in the food sector has demonstrated how external factors can affect relationships and behaviours. As such, we recognise the continued need for the GCA's role in ensuring fair treatment of suppliers to supermarkets through enforcement of the code. We are aware that some poor practices are affecting producers across several agricultural sectors not covered by the code and that primary producers, such as farmers, have felt unfairly treated. The Government also want farmers to get a fair price for their products—that was the opening and closing argument of the right hon. Gentleman—and we are committed to tackling contractual unfairness that can exist in the agrifood supply chain.

Powers in the Agriculture Act 2020 enable the introduction of statutory codes and contractual practice to protect farmers. Those codes would apply to any businesses purchasing agricultural products directly from farmers, including processors, consolidators and other intermediaries, providing greater certainty for farmers by ensuring that clear terms and conditions are set out in contracts. That will seek to improve the negotiating position of farmers to achieve fairer prices and greater transparency and accountability in supply chains. Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are exercising the powers under the 2020 Act in a sector-specific approach, acknowledging that the problems experienced by each sector differ widely and avoiding broad regulation that places burdens on sectors that may not require intervention.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

The first sector-specific regulations for the dairy sector were laid in draft in February 2024 and regulations for the pig sector are expected to be introduced later this year. Work is also progressing on regulations for the egg sector, and DEFRA carried out a fresh produce review, which the right hon. Gentleman referred to, in December 2023, and the response to that will be published shortly. I cannot give a more definitive timescale than that, I regret—if it was all in my gift, perhaps I could, but it is not. He is probably pretty familiar with the term “shortly”. Crucially, the recruitment is under way for an agricultural supply chain adjudicator, who will be responsible for enforcing the new regulations.

As I touched on earlier, it may be that the GCA’s effectiveness is the reason why some think we should extend its role to ensure the better protection of primary producers in the grocery supply chain, such as farmers.

Requiring the GCA to regulate the many thousands of transactions throughout diverse supply chains would risk diluting the adjudicator’s tight focus on the 14 largest supermarkets and could undermine its record as a highly effective regulator. In terms of what it does, if something is not broken, don’t try and fix it. However, we do understand that parts of the system are broken, and that is why we are bringing in the sector-specific supply chain remedies.

It is important to safeguard the GCA’s ability to remain vigilant on the compliance of the 14 designated retailers. The Government therefore have no plans to extend the adjudicator’s remit, but instead seek to learn from and emulate the GCA’s approach and effectiveness, so that it can be replicated for the sector-specific codes.

Question put and agreed to.

3.53 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 5 March 2024

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

Educational Attainment of Boys

9.30 am

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the educational attainment of boys.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the Backbench Business Committee, which agreed to this debate.

The Government have been improving the overall standards of education in this country, which we can see in the fact that 80% of our schools are good or outstanding. We have been rising up the international rankings on maths, reading and science, and yet today boys are still not doing as well at school as they should be. They are underperforming and that cannot go on any longer.

In addition to that, boys are behind girls at every single stage of education. The gender attainment gap is an expression of their underperformance because there is no biological or other intrinsic reason why boys should be behind girls, as they have been for the past 30 years. It is not a competition or a battle of the sexes, of course—we all want our girls to learn, to do well, to reach for the stars. But as a Parliament and as a society, we must want our boys to do the same. The figures are stark, as is the lack of interest or action, which I will come to later.

Let me run through a few facts. At 11, in reading, writing and maths, 56% of boys meet the expected standard, compared with 63% of girls. At 16, 43% of boys and 47.2% of girls received a grade 5 or above in GCSE English and maths. At 18, 34,000 fewer British boys every year go to university than girls of the same age. Boys are also behind girls in terms of exam performance in A-levels, T-levels and vocational education. At 16 to 24, more than 400,000 young men are NEETs—not in education, employment or training—and fewer young men go into the majority of our professions than young women.

We should also mention exclusions: another sign of boys not doing so well. The latest figures that I have show that 4,677 boys were excluded from school in one year. Those figures are hidden in plain sight. The Government, education research bodies, think-tanks, trade unions and social mobility organisations all know them, and yet there is silence—a silence of inaction, a silence of acknowledgment, a silence of care.

Research papers from academic research bodies and think-tanks continually highlight the facts, but say precious little on what should be done. One published only this year focused on how girls were outperforming boys, yet the main recommendation was to ask why so few girls study science, technology, engineering and maths—unbelievable! The plight of the boys was made invisible. Similar recent research reports give a scant nod to the gender attainment gap, but do not seek to explain it, let

alone put forward ideas on what to do. Boys' educational underperformance is a truth and no one dares speak its name: silence across the educational establishment.

Some have spoken, though. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), the Chair of the Select Committee on Education, cannot be in Westminster Hall this morning because he is chairing the Committee at this precise time. He reminded me recently, however, that the Committee has made a number of recommendations about the need to support boys in school. He believes it is a matter of concern that boys are disproportionately represented among many groups. He wants schools to be inclusive and to unleash the potential in every pupil and thinks that understanding the best ways for them to support boys and drive forward their academic attainment is so important. I know that he welcomes this timely debate.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys. Our fourth policy report in this Parliament focused on boys' educational underperformance. As in all our reports, we asked experts in the UK and across the world to speak to us. Crucially, they included six brilliant headteachers from across the UK—from Dorset, London, Cheltenham, Birmingham, Sussex and Rochdale—who have closed the gender attainment gap in a way that has also supported their female students.

We also heard from a national network of educators led by Dr Alex Blower, the access and participation development manager at Arts University Bournemouth. They are implementing an educational framework based on the “taking boys seriously” principles developed at Ulster University. I highly recommend that as a starting point, alongside how the six headteachers are succeeding at a practical level.

From what the successful school leaders told us, four main pillars need to be adopted. First, schools and trusts need to recognise the gap, collect data, then commit themselves to addressing it continuously throughout the school. From the board down to teaching assistants, it is a whole-school cultural approach. There has to be institutional will from the top to the bottom. The schools found that the problem is not with the boys, but with the way the adults treat them. They found, for instance, that some teachers were sanctioning boys more harshly than girls for the same offence and that they had lower expectations of boys and were inadvertently rewarding them for lower effort. Once the teachers recognised that, the improvements were immediate. They found that many of the disengaged teenage students were those who had arrived at secondary school aged 11 with low literacy skills. The successful schools put in place careful monitoring and interventions to ensure that language and reading skills enable the student to understand the lesson. It is basic stuff, not rocket science. We cannot expect the pupils to learn if they cannot access the curriculum because they do not have the basics. I will happily send the Minister a summary of what the successful schools have done.

Secondly, the schools create a boy-positive environment that is inclusive, fair—including with discipline—relational and aspirational. It is important that the boys and their parents recognise that they are included and that parents are supported if needed. The boys are not seen as a problem; they just need encouragement, understanding, to be believed in and given self-esteem. They need pushing.

[*Nick Fletcher*]

They need high expectations, their success to be celebrated and to understand the point of what they are being taught.

Thirdly, there need to be tactical interventions, especially on literacy, oracy and study skills, plus role models and mentors. The successful schools did not see role models and mentors as necessarily being outside school or in the media. They simply made sure that older boys were visible in succeeding in all subjects—not just traditional subjects such as football and physics, but drama, music and history. Not all boys need that but some do, especially boys with no father or positive male role model at home or in their community.

More male teachers are needed to show boys that learning is for them, too. It is telling that 80% of teachers told me that not having enough male teachers in school is a problem, especially given that 30% of primary schools have no male teachers at all. Yet the Department for Education and teaching and training institutions fail to promote teaching specifically as a career for young men. We have asked, but we have been ignored.

Lastly, as a society we simply need to take better care of our boys and support them when they need it. The attitude identified as harming boys' progress is not limited to the school environment. We have all as a society inadvertently developed a culture that boys experience as hostile to them. We have developed the belief that boys' underachievement is somehow natural and normal, because "boys will be boys".

The negative narrative and indifference that boys face, especially those with problems, have to change. Some 41% of sixth form boys and girls have been told in school lessons that boys are a problem. Two in five boys have been told by schools, or outside organisations invited into schools, that they are a problem. Let that sink in. Two in five is a shameful statistic, and those schools need to take responsibility. What will the impact be? It's hardly going to be positive, is it? Too many boys feel ignored, marginalised and unsupported.

We also need to deal with other problems caused by the adult world: family dysfunction; a lack of community aspiration and opportunity; gangs; criminal pathways; and social media's so-called influencers. What to do? As well as making my earlier points, which are aimed at all involved in education, the APPG asked the Government to do a number of things and I will mention a few. We need to provide political leadership and a narrative that publicly acknowledges that the gender attainment gap exists and that boys' relative underperformance is a problem that the whole educational community has to solve.

We need to launch or fund a sector-wide task and finish group, and a summit of headteachers to find and promote solutions, inviting successful heads to guide the taskforce and the Government's thinking. We need a ring-fenced research programme on understanding and addressing the gender attainment gap, and to launch a "This boy can" campaign, similar to the "STEM is for girls" campaign and other initiatives. We should specifically promote careers in teaching and other professions, including health and social care, which would then put pressure on careers services.

We need to tell Ofsted to include the gender attainment gap in its assessment of schools and to give a positive assessment to schools that have policies and initiatives in place to address it. There should be more encouragement of mentoring schemes for boys, whether from current or former pupils, or community leaders. On behalf of boys without fathers or positive male role models at home, I urge the Government and the wider educational community to take action.

As a society, Government and Parliament that believe in inclusion and equality, we cannot let this situation continue. We must not and cannot tolerate our boys not doing as well at school as they should. The time to stop the inaction and stop ignoring the issue has come. We have to come together and tackle the underachievement of boys in our schools. We can and must do that together.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you for bobbing, colleagues. I call Jim Shannon.

9.44 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for bringing forward this debate. He has spoken on this issue many times in Westminster Hall and the Chamber, with a real passion for the subject, encapsulating his concerns for his constituents and for our young boys. I will do likewise for my constituency, because this issue has been on my radar throughout my time as an elected representative, from when I was a councillor, starting in 1985, through my time as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, and now as an MP.

The hon. Gentleman clearly laid out the problem and I join him in speaking out for those young boys who seem to fall through the cracks. It is a long time ago, of course, but I can well remember that as a boy my attention was hard won by the teachers at school. Sometimes my mind tended to wander, and for that reason many a duster sailed past my head and many a cane came down upon my hand—all justified and well deserved. I do not think that it did me any harm; it may have motivated and challenged me to focus a wee bit more in the class and to do the right things.

The issue I am trying to get at is that times were much different. I can remember teachers encouraging me—I also have to say, Mr Paisley, that you and I both will have been encouraged by our parents, both mum and dad. They are the motivation for us in many cases; they are the encouragers who make us try to achieve higher goals and higher things, and we are thankful for them. They ensured we went through the exams and went straight out to work, though I certainly know how easy it would have been to slip through the cracks, like those young people the hon. Member for Don Valley referred to.

Every time A-level or GCSE results come out, I like to remind those who feel disappointed—I say this very humbly—that I did not excel at exams in the way that I should have. That was probably a case of not focusing and not putting in the hard swotting that was necessary. However—again, I say this very gently and humbly—

I started work, progressed through that to my own business and ultimately became an elected representative. There are things that can be done and just because exams do not work out when someone is 16, 17 or 18, that does not mean that life is over and it cannot get better.

The issue of educational attainment for boys is one that my colleagues in Strangford, the former Education Ministers Michelle McIlveen and Baron Weir of Ballyholme, worked on very closely. Now, a good friend of ours, Mr Paisley, Paul Givan, is in the post and he really focuses on those issues back home. It is an accepted fact in Northern Ireland that Protestant males from working-class backgrounds are the lowest achievers, with some all-boys schools only having around 30% of pupils attaining A to C grades in five GCSEs, so there are a lot of things to do back home—that is not this Minister's responsibility, of course, but I mention them because they relate to the story and the debate before us today.

The topic has been the subject of numerous reports and actions taken to improve the outcomes that some have labelled a generational educational problem. Indeed, the underachievement of young Protestant males in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), such as at Dundonald High School, is similar to that in mine.

One of my constituents works in a school. He has only five boys in his class and he caters to them day and daily on an individual basis because that is his focus and his responsibility. Some of the boys are incredibly bright but also incredibly troubled, with backgrounds that make their outlook on life understandable. Other boys struggle with the basics and use anger in an attempt to distract from what they believe is their failure—but in my opinion, the failure is not theirs. It is ours. The society we live in and the education system in place have allowed a situation where those who do not thrive academically feel like failures.

We have to make sure they do not feel like failures—we have to lift them above that. We need surgeons, but we also need the people who make the scalpels and the surgeons' tools. Those who manufacture the knives are as necessary as those who wield the knife, something that seems to be lost in some approaches to learning. It is important that teaching captures our young people's attention and takes them forward.

Having said that, I am aware of programmes in Northern Ireland, such as the Usel programme, which takes the children referred by social workers and who have slipped through the gaps and provides them with learning and employment and, more importantly, helps them to find their place in a fulfilling way. I have sat on the board of governors for Glastry College since 1987, approximately 37 or 38 years, and my boys grew up with young boys from Greyabbey.

Some of those boys were never going to achieve educational standards—it was never going to happen. They knew what they were going to do: they were going to work on the farms or building sites, because that was where their vocation was. Opportunities do not always come through education, but the opportunities to have education must be there. That is what we are really asking for. I am asking to make sure that those young boys have that opportunity and can do those things.

Those programmes are vital. I recently spoke to a lady involved in running one of them in a café, who told me that the overwhelming majority of children in the programme were young boys who simply did not feel worth anything or that they could achieve anything. In some cases, their dads were in prison, and some did not even know who their dad was. That is a fact of society; it is a fact of life. That is not a judgment, by the way—I am making an observational point because we have got to reach out, try to do things better and bring people forward.

Those cases are heartbreaking. The need for programmes and small classes is clear, but so is the need to change the structure so that those who excel in the practical know that they are valued and vital. That takes changes from the root, but all that takes money. There is no better person than this Minister to be asked this question, or to encapsulate our thoughts, put them together and tell us how the education system here on the mainland will work. It takes money and determination to help to make a change, and that is the message we need to send from this House today.

Grades are important and educational standards are vital—but, with respect, they do not always equate to success. I say that gently but honestly. Success is finding happiness, fulfilment and joy in life, and people need to know their worth in order to achieve that. Today must be the first step.

9.51 am

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I begin by wishing everyone a very happy St Piran's Day. St Piran is the patron saint of tin miners and we have adopted him as our national saint in Cornwall, hence my attire.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing this debate on a very important issue—one that he feels passionately about, as do I. He opened the debate by laying out the case very clearly. Although this debate is about academic attainment, and that is clearly important, it should not just be about that. I stand before Members as someone who left school at 16—as I often say, most of my teachers thought I left long before that—and could not wait to get out of education, although I did quite well in my O-levels. I am a great believer that, although academic attainment is important, it is by no means the only important thing in life. The most important lessons I learned in life, I did not learn in the classroom.

We need to keep things in perspective. As a country and as a Government, we sometimes put so much emphasis on academic attainment that that becomes counterproductive for those, particularly boys, who do not achieve it and then feel that they have not quite come up to the mark and may become demotivated as a result. The debate needs to be about more than just academic attainment.

Having said that, I think we have a real challenge in this country when it comes to how we educate, support, equip and enable boys to fulfil their potential in life. Some recent figures showed that there are now 83,000 more boys not in education, employment or training than girls. That should raise a number of questions. Why is there such a big disparity between the number of boys who drop out of education or training and are not in jobs and the number of girls who do the same?

[*Steve Double*]

We need only look at the suicide rate among men, particularly young men, to wonder what is going on in our country and our society today. Three quarters of all suicides involve men. Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50 in this country, and that should really concern us. What is going on with the way we support, help and treat men that means so many of them decide to take their own lives?

I think there are a number of factors. I speak as a father to two boys, who are now grown men in their own right, and as a granddad to three, two of them boys—for the avoidance of doubt, the other one is a girl. I am so grateful, actually, that I am not a young man today because we seem to bombard our young men with so many negative messages about being a man.

The whole thing about toxic masculinity pushes negative messages all the time to young men, who then wonder what they are meant to be, who they are meant to be and how they are meant to behave. We need to take a long look at ourselves. I absolutely understand and agree that we have needed to address the inequality that many women have experienced in our society for a long time, and we have made huge progress on that, but we should not be putting men down as a result. I feel sometimes that that is what we have done, and we need to think carefully about it.

I am also concerned that we seem to put so much expectation on teachers. I am a great believer in the family and that having a stable, loving and positive family environment is the single thing that determines the outcome for boys and girls—for all children. Teachers clearly have an important role in providing education, but so often we expect our teachers to do far more than educate; we expect them to be social workers and mental health professionals and all sorts of other things. The state cannot do everything. I worry sometimes that we are always looking for the state to provide the answers to these challenges, whether in education, through schools and teachers, or other parts of the public sector, when I believe that most of the answers actually lie within the family. The Government have made some positive steps to support families and parents. That is hugely welcome, but we could do more to help parents to fulfil their role, rather than expecting teachers and other parts of the state to do it for them.

One thing I have noticed—the Minister is aware of this, and I am grateful for our meeting to discuss it—is that Cornwall, like other parts of the country, is seeing a huge rise in schoolchildren suffering with mental health conditions or who have neurodiverse conditions, and the education system is struggling to support them properly. Many parents are taking their children out and off-rolling them as a result. My observation is that disproportionately more boys are affected than girls. We need to look at what more we can do to support children struggling with these challenges and their parents.

As the Minister knows, I think fining the parents is not the answer. I have to put on record that I was disappointed that the Government are going to increase unauthorised absence fines for parents; that is not something I agree with at all. I think it is definitely the wrong thing to do. We need to provide help to ensure that children

struggling with these conditions get the support they need, rather than threatening their parents with fines for the children not being able to attend school.

Finally, on the point about the underachievement of boys, a report into race and ethnic disparity in this country was commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) when she was Prime Minister. It found that one of the most disadvantaged groups in our country was white working class boys in coastal towns. I would ask the Minister: what have we done with that information? In Cornwall, where we clearly have many coastal towns and villages, it is young people, and particularly boys, growing up in those communities who consistently underachieve.

My Cornish colleagues and I worked hard to get Cornish included as a recognised national identity in the recent census. That has been really helpful, because we now have real data on how Cornish people are faring. The census found that only 14% of 18 to 24-year-olds who identified as Cornish went on to further or higher education, whereas nationally it was 34%. The Cornish are 20% behind the national average. Again, I would say to the Minister: what are the Government doing about that?

We are very much aware of the underfunding of schools in rural areas, which the Government have begun to address, but there is still a long way to go. We need to look at the funding of schools and other services in coastal areas. Many young people growing up in our coastal towns and villages find themselves disadvantaged because of the very nature of the challenges that coastal towns face. That is feeding through into the underachievement of those young people, particularly young boys.

I ask the Minister: what more can the Government do to support coastal communities and to ensure that schools in coastal communities get the resources that they need to close that gap or disparity, so that young people growing up in our coastal towns and villages do not suffer the disadvantage that they have done for far too long? I believe that this really should exercise the Government, particularly Ministers in the Department for Education, to look at what is going on and provide the support that we really need in Cornwall and other coastal parts of the country.

10.2 am

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Paisley. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing this incredibly important debate on the educational attainment of boys, and I also congratulate him on his excellent and constructive speech, which I am sure gave the Minister and his team a lot of food for thought.

Like my hon. Friend, I have raised this matter in debate and discussion on numerous occasions and not enough has been done to date by our Government to address these issues, despite the fact that our Government have been very successful in all that they have done in the past decade to improve our education system and to make it positive and successful. I pay tribute to the tireless work on men and boys' issues by my friend and campaigner, Mark Brooks OBE, who has done so much to raise this issue outside this Chamber by campaigning across the country.

Overall, we know that there is an attainment gap between boys and girls. That is not a recent phenomenon—it has been the case for many years. The trend continues, and at all stages of education, boys lag behind girls. I am a great believer in social mobility, and education is an important path to achieve that. Opportunity through education and offering good education is what we all want. As a former teacher and lecturer, I have been disappointed to see how the issue of educational attainment for boys has not progressed in the way that I would have liked seen—I know that the Minister will agree with that too. Girls outperformed boys at the expected standard for all subjects in 2023, except for maths, where they were neck and neck or maybe the boys were slightly better. In reading, 76% of girls met the expected standard, which was down from 80% in 2022, while 70% of boys met the expected standard, which was unchanged from 2022. That is a huge gap in educational achievement between boys and girls.

I follow my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) in highlighting the underachievement of white working class boys, which has made the headlines quite a number of times in the past decade. There is obviously no quick fix to this long-standing and growing problem, which has developed into something of a taboo subject. Both the previous speakers have highlighted the fact that we have concentrated on women's issues, which are very important, but we have somewhat neglected some of the issues facing men—which my colleagues have already raised, and I will not repeat.

White working-class boys from disadvantaged backgrounds underperform against boys of all other races and ethnicities in our country. The question is why. That demographic is falling further and further behind and shows no signs of catching up, which is a huge worry. White schoolboys eligible for free school meals have lower higher-education participation rates than any other group when analysed by the sex and ethnicity of those receiving free school meals.

Even for those not eligible for free school meals, white boys still trail. They have a higher-education participation rate of 36.4%, compared with Chinese boys, who have the highest participation rate. Why have Governments of different political persuasions not attacked that problem and come forward with solutions? What should be done? What can be done? We have heard some examples and I will not go down repeat them. We need to look seriously at tackling this problem, but to do so it must be accepted that a lot of working class white boys have disadvantaged backgrounds, which we have to help them to overcome.

We understand the reasons, but what action should we be taking? Schools need to adapt more and the curriculum needs to be adapted too. Academic excellence is not the only thing that matters, and there are a lot more jobs and opportunities out there that are not based on academic achievement. Good role models are also absolutely vital. The family is the primary educator, and one hopes that parents, as well as teachers, will have a huge input, but there are many other candidates for role models, including local sportsmen and women, businesses and former students, particularly those who are really successful.

In schools in my constituency of Bexleyheath and Crayford we quite often get those people to come in to enthuse the young boys and make them realise that, yes,

they have got to have a basic education, but beyond that there are huge opportunities in sport, business, retail, music and entertainment—there is a great wide world out there that is not based on academia. There are many careers and jobs about which, unfortunately, teachers are not knowledgeable. It is absolutely true that teachers do a fantastic job; they are dedicated and hard-working, but former students, or successful footballers or whatever, who can come in and talk to boys about their lives and careers are great motivators.

When we look at today's society in our country there is such huge opportunity. We want these underprivileged lads to have that opportunity to advance themselves, but they need to understand what is there. It is not just the academic curriculum that matters—teachers and parents need to be informed of what is available and of the routes through which people found successful career opportunities.

Great teachers can give inspiration for life—we all remember inspiring and motivational teachers. I had one when I was in sixth form many years ago called Peter Sillis. He was my history teacher. He was a great motivator, telling people that they did not just have to do jobs based on academic achievement. He always told me that I had the wrong political views, but it was the 1960s and I am afraid that all the teachers were left-wing. That did not stop us sitting in the front desks opposite him in his lessons arguing back whenever possible. He was a great Harold Wilson supporter—I will not go any further with that one.

There are many dedicated and outstanding teachers for whom we are grateful. We praise teachers because it is a difficult job in today's society. It is more difficult than when I was a teacher and when I was at school, because society and, I am afraid, behaviour has changed. However inspirational and good teachers are, they cannot do the work alone. They require the backing of the education establishment, the Government, academics, businesses, industry and the general population, believing in the teachers and in the boys. We need to motivate them. Of course, parents are the primary educators, and we need to help and enthuse them and get them to be positive and look at what can be done. Academies are a great triumph of our Conservative Government because they have opened up a different world, and they run differently from when I was teaching and when I was at school. That has been a positive achievement. Quite often, academies and secondary schools have people in to offer advice and to discuss matters.

We have heard that there is a shortage of male teachers. That is a regret because a lot of our primary schools have few, if any, male teachers. That may be difficult for families if at home the mother is bringing up the children without a male role model. We must never forget that boys from the most economically deprived areas of our country are just as clever, talented and able as anybody in the best areas. What they lack are the opportunities and the chance for support, encouragement and confidence. Being confident that they can and will do things is key in today's society. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley mentioned reaching for the stars, and that is a good matter to highlight. Boys can succeed if they get the opportunity to do so.

We need more publicity from the Government, academies and businesses and more investment in boys at an earlier age, particularly white working-class lads.

[*Sir David Evennett*]

In particular, we must not at any time let boys decry education, become disillusioned and opt out, so we end up with an underclass who are not educated and have not had the opportunity to make something of themselves. Yes, we need qualifications, but it is the basics that they all need—the ability to read and write and to be confident with maths. They will hopefully see what the opportunities are if we bring people into schools who are not educationalists. I know we as politicians go into schools and talk about life at Westminster, but we need more people to go into schools and talk about their careers. If we do not, not just individuals but society will be disadvantaged because there is huge talent out there among young males, including young white males, which needs to be grasped so they can all have a positive future. This debate is important, and I know the Minister is listening with great concentration, but he needs to take back to the Department the fact that this is an issue. The Government have done good things in many other areas, but this one is still in his in-tray.

10.13 am

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett), and I agree with him that no one forgets a good teacher. Indeed, my own socialist English teacher remains in regular contact with me, continuing to lobby and raise issues with me on almost a weekly basis. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing the debate and on the report from his all-party parliamentary group on this important issue.

Education is everything. It is the route to opportunity and the way to ensure that everyone is best equipped to fulfil their ambitions and dreams—it is, indeed, a silver bullet. Research shows that boys perform worse than girls on most major educational indicators through their school years, and some figures in particular should cause us concern. Boys are far more likely to be suspended and twice as likely to face permanent exclusion, and less than 60% of boys meet the expected standard in English, reading, writing and maths.

Specific groups of boys are particularly impacted by low attainment. Of those eligible for free school meals, only 34% of white British boys, 35% of mixed white and black Caribbean boys and 36% of Caribbean boys attained grade 4 in both English and maths GCSEs in 2023. Most noticeably, boys from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller backgrounds have especially low pass rates. I mention the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community in particular as Darlington has a high proportion of that population. I want to mention St Teresa's Primary School, which is led by the excellent head Paula Strachan, who has done so much work focusing on the GRT community.

We must take these figures seriously. The Government have taken, and is taking, steps to close the gap, having driven up standards over the past decade. In Darlington, 80% of schools are now rated as good or outstanding, in comparison to 2010, when only 65% of our schools met those standards.

However, we must not forget the young working-class boys from the groups I mentioned—the kids who often miss out on so much. In Darlington I have seen at first hand that many working-class kids miss out on the aspiration and inspiration to succeed in education. Many of those boys come from families where they may not have a male role model; if they do, that male role model might not be in employment. Being encouraged to succeed is much more the norm in middle-class households, as well as in some ethnic minority communities. That is something that we can and must change. It is down to us as politicians, as well as our schools, community groups and Government—with parents, perhaps most importantly of all, taking the lead—to inspire kids to take education seriously, and schools need to have the resources to facilitate that.

In my role as the MP for Darlington, I have ensured that I have spent time at every one of the 36 schools in Darlington, hosting assemblies, answering questions and talking about my career in business and politics. That might only be a small thing, but it might be the one thing that inspires one person. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley, who is leading this debate, has organised an amazing programme of role model lectures in his local schools, and his work in that respect is an example to us all. I am interested in hearing from the Minister what plans there are for more innovative ways to inspire and teach the boys who are falling behind where we want them to be.

Reading is a good place to start. The library at Skerne Park Primary School was opened last year by children's author Cressida Cowell as part of her Life-changing Libraries scheme, in partnership with BookTrust. The project gave the school a dedicated library space and new books, and it has inspired teachers to put reading at the forefront of the curriculum. On my visits to Skerne Park, I have been delighted to see the enthusiasm with which pupils talk about what they are reading, and how much the variety of books engages children's creativity and imaginations. Many of those inspired kids may previously have missed out on more conventional forms of education.

I was also delighted when the historic Darlington Library on Crown Street reopened its doors last year, having been saved by community campaigners after the Labour council sought to close it down. It is a vibrant place with a huge variety of books, where children, parents and carers can further indulge in reading in. It is beautifully decorated with murals depicting scenes from Charlie Mackesy's wonderful "The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse". It is a vital hub for our community, with a focus on being welcoming to children and therefore encouraging them to read. It also helps to inspire parents to encourage and embrace their children in learning. Facilities such as that can really inspire a love of reading and open doors to other worlds for our children.

In addition to that, we must not ignore the need for further focus on children with special educational needs and disabilities. As of January last year, 22% of boys were identified as having special educational needs. That is a further sign that we must look at innovative ways to make sure these children are educated in the way that best fits them. More than 300 children in Darlington are still waiting up to three years for a child

and adolescent mental health services assessment, so much more still needs to be done to ensure that more boys do not miss out.

Before I conclude, I must put on record my concerns about Labour's plans to tax private education. When I recently visited Dame Allan's School in Newcastle, I was blown away by number of places it gives to local disadvantaged communities—funded entirely by itself. That could all be thrown away if VAT is added to school fees, which risks robbing that community of that opportunity.

We cannot uneducate a person who has learned to read. If we arm them with the basics, we lay the ground for them to succeed. Education is a silver bullet in terms of achievement, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister what more the Government are doing in this area.

10.20 am

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. It is great to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), who made some incredibly interesting and pertinent points. I agree with him particularly about putting VAT on private schools. Abbeywood School, a private special school in Hellaby in my constituency, deals with people with severe SEN, and I worry that it will close if VAT is applied. That would have a detrimental effect on Rother Valley and on our children with special needs.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for the work, time and effort he has put into championing and supporting men and boys in this place through the APPG and for consistently raising this issue in debates and questions. I know that he feels strongly about it, and he is making a real difference in raising its profile. Prior to his election, these issues were not raised nearly as much as they are now. He really is giving a voice to men and boys and their place in this world, so I thank him for that.

It is an undeniably shocking statistic that more than three times as many men as women take their own lives every year. In fact, suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50, with one suicide taking place every 90 minutes, which is as long as this debate will last. I believe a lot of this stems from education in schools and from a lack of attainment, and to tackle this epidemic, we need to take a new approach. There have been some incredibly effective adverts and advice—Norwich City FC's incredibly powerful "You Are Not Alone" advert springs to mind—but they focus on tackling symptoms, not on addressing the causes of male suicide.

To address any problem, and especially this issue, we must start with young people. Schools are the perfect place to build self-esteem and character and to grow the boys of today and the men of tomorrow. However, on the facts, it is clear that many schools are not yet the welcoming, nurturing place where all young men can thrive. As we have discussed, boys are more than twice as likely to be excluded. Even by the end of reception, their attainment is already significantly behind that of girls. These shaky foundations do nothing for the rest of boys' education, eventually leading to tens of thousands fewer boys attending universities than their female peers.

Crucially, this trend is exaggerated by external factors, especially in less well-off areas. Boys on free school meals continue to be let down by schools that fail to provide an environment geared towards them, and that has a consequential effect on their grades and thus their lives. After all, everything from earnings to employment and from happiness to suicide rates is heavily in favour of university graduates. The picture is even worse for white working-class boys from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are the least likely to gain entry to our elite universities of any socioeconomic group. Universities often pride themselves on their diversity and inclusiveness statistics but, when it comes to white working-class boys from disadvantaged backgrounds, all universities are abjectly failing. There are not enough—frankly, there are barely any—outreach programmes for this demographic group, who are just not going to university. Through no reason other than being born a boy in a working-class area such as mine, they are being pushed away from higher education and face a statistically worse quality of life—and even an earlier death.

What, then, is to be done to support these boys through education, so that they can grow into happy, fulfilled men? If the problem starts with early education, how can we foster a healthier, more boy-friendly education system? Getting more men into teaching is clearly a good start. Male role models can play an important part in a boy developing a healthy sense of self and growing into a well-adjusted man. Only a quarter of teachers with whom boys in school might spend the majority of their time are male, so we must do more to encourage men to re-engage with schools, and bring about a shift towards helping to understand young men, rather than excluding them.

However, when we go to the nursery sector—even before schools—that figure is dramatically worse. Only 3% of nursery teachers are men. That is a shocking statistic. At the very earliest age—I thank the Government and the Minister for opening up childcare places, which my girls are benefiting from—only 3% of teachers are male. That is an absolute disgrace. We need to make sure that men are seen by young boys as role models—as leaders, learners and educators—literally from as soon as they go to university, because at the moment they are not, and unfortunately that sets in train later failures.

However, the problem cannot be solved just with more male teachers. I know that young women can and do make brilliant and inspiring teachers, and are clearly good role models for young men. But there are thousands of small changes that could be made right across the education system that could incrementally improve it for boys—for example, encouraging them to play sports or perhaps learn an instrument, both of which have proven beneficial impacts on education and therefore on life. Perhaps we should be opening up diverse scholarships to working-class boys at schools, making higher education more open and accessible to a group who our universities are failing.

Perhaps, though, the most important thing we can do is continue to open up the conversation about our failure to properly provide a suitable education for boys, and especially white working-class boys, that can allow them to reach their full potential. We need to encourage a sense of togetherness and allyship, where currently there might be division or gender bias, to make sure they are supported in their educational career. We need

[*Alexander Stafford*]

an open and honest conversation, both within schools and between schools, to explore how to best support boys in their development towards becoming young men. We need to recognise the effects of education, and particularly the rejection from education that some boys feel, on the rest of their lives, and to build schools and universities designed to welcome and champion them.

I completely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) about bringing back former male teachers and alumni to talk to boys. Schools in Rother Valley such as Wales High School do that very well, but all schools should be bringing back as many people as possible—to talk to boys, to show success, to show that there is a future, to encourage them and to show them that they can achieve anything.

That leads me to a couple of other points I want to make about the current structural failings, which I do not think we have touched on yet. A University of Kent study from not that long ago found that boys felt they were not expected to do well at school. I am sure we have all seen this “Boys will be boys” attitude—“Oh, he’s misbehaving. Boys will be boys. They’ll be fine. It’s the girls who are sitting and reading.” Yes, boys will be boys, of course; but they are no less good than girls, especially when it comes to education. If boys are allowed to run amok or run riot, or are treated differently, they will not have the same expectations. We need to make sure they have those expectations. The University of Kent study was incredibly insightful, because the primary school boys who were interviewed felt that they did not need, and were not expected, to achieve the same as girls. But that is wrong: they need to be expected to achieve the same as girls, and we need to make sure it is the same.

Another point—I hate to say this, and I know my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley will criticise me for using this phrase—is gender bias. The University of Trento in Italy found that there was a gender bias in the marking of educational papers. When girls’ names and boys’ names were on the same papers, boys were found to be statistically marked lower—harder—than girls. However, in a blind test of exam papers, they were found to be equals, so there clearly is some sort of gender bias against boys when it comes to marking. If that is happening in school, it will lower the expectations of boys and retard their progress. That is wrong.

I think every Member here has mentioned that boys need to be encouraged, nurtured, treated differently and given better role models, and another aspect we should talk about is single-sex schools. Only 6% of schools in the UK are single sex, and the majority of those are female single-sex schools. I am not saying that single-sex schools are the best, or better or worse than mixed schools, but surely there needs to be an open conversation. If boys are doing worse at school—clearly, they are, and we all agree with that—surely there need to be schools that are geared to raising up boys, including some of the white, working-class, disadvantaged boys, and perhaps that should be in a single-sex educational space.

I declare an interest: I went to a single-sex male school and had a great time. It was wonderful; I felt nurtured and loved, and it was a very good school.

I now have two girls, who will do well wherever they go to school. We need to look at this issue, because the drive since the 1970s has been to get rid of single-sex schools, and yet for some boys—and for some girls—single-sex schools might be the right place to be educated.

The last thing I want to touch on before I close is the ultimate responsibility for boys’ education, which is parental responsibility. We cannot get away from the fact that the majority of a boy’s time will be spent with his family, and the family is the bedrock of society, of education and of his future. We need to do more to support families, because it is families, the role models in families and the way boys are treated in families that will have the biggest effect on how boys do at school—not what a teacher says, but where they spend most of their time. We need to ensure that all policy has that family-friendly and family-centric approach first, because that is the most important thing for success for everyone, male or female.

I want to sum up by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley and the all-party group for its report on how improving the lives of half of those in education will improve the lives of everyone else. Turning schools towards, not away from, young men will only serve to improve their lives and those of everyone in the community. We cannot allow the unseen killer of suicide to continue to claim men’s lives, and we must address the root cause of those tragic deaths. Schools are clearly where we need to start.

10.31 am

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Mr Paisley. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing this debate, which seeks to dig deeper into the educational attainment of boys at school, and other hon. Members on sharing their views this morning.

The attainment gap between boys and girls is something that starts at an early age and grows throughout a boy’s time at school. In 2022-23, according to Department for Education statistics, by the end of the reception year, just under two thirds of boys had what is classed as a good level of development, compared with about three quarters of girls. By the end of primary school, the proportion of boys reaching the expected standards of reading and writing remained lower than girls. Going into secondary school, boys lag behind girls across every headline measure collected by the Department for Education and, as hon. Members have mentioned, boys are more likely to be excluded from school during that time.

As hon. Members have also touched on, other significant attainment gaps exist in our school system. For example, following the covid pandemic, the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and others grew, while white boys from disadvantaged backgrounds underperform compared with those of other races and ethnicities. Labour has set out how we would tackle the inequalities in our education system with our plan to break down the barriers to opportunity for everyone in this country, because all boys and girls should have the same opportunities to have an excellent education, leading to a good job and a good standard of living.

We know that the gap starts at a young age, where boys start school at a lower attainment level and with less developed language skills. Indeed, the pandemic shone a light on how a child's early language development goes on to affect their later education. That is why Labour has called for primary schools to be equipped with funding to deliver evidence-based, early language interventions. That is something we would prioritise in government. Better communication skills would boost boys' and girls' outcomes and improve engagement with school.

Research has also consistently shown that the attainment gap is largest for those on free school meals, coming from the poorest families. Again, that issue has been raised by hon. Members today. We all know that there are shocking levels of child poverty in this country, leaving children too hungry to learn. That is why we would introduce free, funded breakfast clubs in every primary school to provide children with a softer start to the school day. That would give them an opportunity to play and socialise with their friends, developing their communication and social skills, as well as providing them a breakfast, setting them up well to learn throughout the day.

We know that the quality of teaching is a huge driver of pupils' attainment. Quite simply, there are not enough teachers in our schools. Many teachers feel overstretched, and turnover is higher than before the pandemic, and there is no real plan to tackle the issues with their working conditions. They feel badly let down by this Government. To ensure that we have the best—and necessary—teachers in our schools who can deliver the best life chances for all our young people, Labour would recruit 6,500 new teachers to fill the gaps. We would pay for that by ending the tax exemptions that private schools currently enjoy.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her words and comments. It is World Book Day this week, and an event for it is taking place in Portcullis House. Looking to the future, should the Government change, is it the shadow Minister's intention to ensure that books and reading would be a clear, core part of any child's education?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Indeed, we will have a debate here tomorrow about World Book Day and how important reading and literacy is for children. We recognise it as the absolute core foundation of every child's start in life, ensuring the best education for every child. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has highlighted that today.

We would also reintroduce a school support staff negotiating body to ensure a proper voice for support staff, because we know that they power our schools, but unfortunately are currently leaving the profession in droves.

Peter Gibson: Turning back to Labour's plans to tax education, I wonder if the Labour party has actually done any modelling on how many children whose parents are struggling really hard to put their children through private education will end up in the state sector, and how many children on assisted free places, bursaries and so on, funded by those private schools, will end up back in the state sector?

Catherine McKinnell: As I said earlier, Labour believes that education should be a priority, and should be at the centre of national life for this country. That requires the necessary funding to ensure that there are teachers. We know there are teaching gaps throughout our school system. Young people are not being taught by specialists in their subjects, and we know there is a shortage. Teachers are struggling to manage the workloads as a result. Labour would prioritise supporting the teaching workforce for the 93% of children who are educated within the state sector. That would come by removing the current tax exemptions that private schools enjoy. That has been modelled by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, showing very clearly that we would have a net benefit from the policy, closing—I know hon. Members are here to debate this very point today—the attainment gap between the outcomes for all children at school, and particularly boys.

Peter Gibson: The hon. Lady has not given us the figure that I asked for in my earlier intervention. It is simply my view, and I am sure that of all hon. Members on the Government side, that we do not level up opportunity by robbing opportunity from those who are already enjoying it.

Catherine McKinnell: It is interesting that hon. Members are here today to discuss an education system that they are highlighting is currently letting children down, which we in Labour agree is letting children down. After 14 years in government, it is quite remarkable that hon. Gentlemen would take that attitude to a costed proposal that seeks to meet the huge demands within our education system and the requirement to ensure that every school has the teaching workforce it needs. That will be Labour's priority. The choice we make in government will be to ensure that we have an education system that can meet the demands we are hearing about today.

I want to echo the points that have been raised about mental health. As has been highlighted, we know that boys are far less likely to reach out for support and often struggle to speak about mental health challenges. That is holding children and young people back, impacting on their ability to learn as well as their health, and the number of children waiting for support continues to rise, along with absence from schools.

Alexander Stafford: I have been following the hon. Lady's argument, which I believe is to put VAT on private schools and use the money from that to top up and improve the education system. We have also talked about suicide prevention. Obviously, suicide is a very complex issue when it comes to men and includes factors such as mental health. If the Labour party wants to put VAT on private schools to help education, then, following the same logic, the hon. Lady should agree with putting VAT on private healthcare to improve healthcare outcomes. Is it the Labour party's position to put VAT on private healthcare to improve mental health outcomes?

Catherine McKinnell: The Labour party will present our offer for Government when the general election comes, which we are all waiting for at the moment, and we will put our fully costed plans in our manifesto. We are focused on improving and increasing mental health support for young people, which I will get to.

Sir David Evennett: Will the hon. Member give way?

Catherine McKinnell: I will respond to the previous intervention first. We will pay for that by ending the loopholes that non-doms enjoy in this country. We will fund mental health support, as well as breakfast clubs, which are intended to tackle the issues that hon. Members have highlighted in this debate, which are getting worse, not better. I hope that hon. Members would be minded to note that, because they are making the case to their own Government to find solutions to these problems—problems that a Labour Government would respond to.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Member gives way, I remind colleagues that this is a debate on educational attainment of boys, not a general debate on the Budget, which will come later in the week.

Sir David Evennett: I have been listening with great interest. Obviously, the hon. Lady is putting forward Labour party policy generally. I am very concerned about what Labour would do if it ever got into government to help these working-class boys to achieve. The issues she is raising are very generalised.

Catherine McKinnell: I would not suggest that the right hon. Gentleman has not been listening to my speech, but I have set out a whole range of measures that Labour would put in place to raise the attainment of every child.

Going back to mental health support, we would ensure that there are dedicated counsellors in every secondary school and that there are mental health hubs in every community. Children and their families are waiting and waiting for the mental health support they need. The absence levels in schools are clearly being affected as a result.

It is clear that there is an attainment gap between boys and girls. It is Labour's view that we need to do everything we can in government to break down the barriers to opportunity that too many of our children face, and we will do that. I agree with hon. Members: there is no silver bullet to solve this. That is why we have proposed a whole range of measures that match the ambition we have for every child. We would put the education of all our children at the heart of national life. It is the very least that our children and our country deserve.

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing a debate on this important subject. The last time that he and I were at an event on this topic was a meeting of his APPG, where he had invited Richard Reeves to come and talk about his book, "Of Boys and Men". We discussed a lot of these issues. The book is very interesting and thought provoking. In my previous life as a charity director I was involved with lots of organisations that did great work to support boys through education and employment pathways, so I have a lot of sympathy with the issues that my hon. Friend raises. I thank him for his continued campaigning on this important issue.

The Government's track record in education has been in improving standards dramatically. We have been rising up the league tables internationally in stark contrast to Labour-run Wales, which has been falling down them. Girls continue to outperform boys across most headline measures, although the gap has been narrowing. At key stage 2 the gap between boys and girls at the expected standard in reading, writing and maths has fallen since 2022; it is the lowest since 2016. Although that is in part due to a slight decrease in girls' attainment, increased attainment for boys in reading, writing and maths combined has also supported that. Similarly at key stage 4 there was a gap of 6.6 percentage points between girls and boys achieving a grade 5 in English and maths in 2018-19. That was down to 4.3 percentage points in 2022-23.

However, we know there is more to do. Raising attainment for all pupils, including boys, is at the heart of the Government's agenda. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley is right that boys' attainment is not currently as high as that of girls. He will know that the attainment of some ethnic groups is not as high as some others, and that the attainment of free school meal children is not generally as high as non-free school meal children. I know that the issue of white working-class boys is something he has spoken about many times, as have my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett). I was on the Education Select Committee when it did its report on the attainment of white working-class boys, which the Government at the time welcomed.

Our approach is to provide schools and teachers with the resources and expertise to target support at those that need it most. Often it will be targeted at disadvantaged young people. The pupil premium helps to provide extra support to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. The funding will rise to more than £2.9 billion in the coming financial year—an £18 million increase from the year before. We are targeting a greater proportion of the schools' national funding formula towards deprived pupils—more than ever before. That will be more than £4.4 billion, or 10.2% of the formula allocated to deprivation this year.

More broadly, we have invested significantly in education to ensure that all young people can reach their potential. The core schools budget next year will be the highest ever in real terms per pupil, helping schools in their vital work to close attainment gaps and level up educational opportunities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley talked about the importance of literacy, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson). This is a key area of focus for us because evidence shows that high quality early childhood education, including language development and literacy, has a positive impact on outcomes in both the short and long term.

Alexander Stafford: On literacy, does the Minister agree that there should be a statutory requirement for every primary school to have a library? At the moment one in seven primary schools do not have a library.

David Johnston: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; I was not aware of that statistic. I absolutely agree with him about the importance of libraries and of

children reading. When I visit primary schools in my own constituency, I tell all the children that the most important thing they can do is read a book. I share his enthusiasm for that.

We have invested more than £17 million in the Nuffield early language intervention programme, improving the language skills of reception age children who need it most following the pandemic. Our English hubs programme is improving the teaching of reading, with a focus on phonics, early language development and reading for pleasure. That has provided appropriate and targeted support to more than 5,000 schools across England since it was launched. Targeted support is also being provided through the national tutoring programme, with almost 5 million courses started since it began in November 2020. In 2022-23, more than half of the pupils tutored under the programme were boys, and we expect tutoring to continue to be a staple offer from schools, providing targeted support for those children who need it most.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington raised the important issue of SEND, and I completely agree with him. I had a very good visit to Beaumont Hill Academy in his constituency, and was impressed by the dedication of the staff team there. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay talked of the educational challenges in coastal areas such as his. He will know that Cornwall is one of our education investment areas, precisely for that reason, to be given a package of additional funding and support.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; he is being incredibly generous with his time. May I place on the record my thanks to him for visiting the fantastic Beaumont Hill Academy last week? My sincere apologies for not being able to join him on that visit. Was he able to visit the site of our planned 48-place new special school?

David Johnston: Unfortunately, I was not, although the plans were indicated to me. Attendance is obviously fundamental. Ensuring children reach their potential requires them to be in school, which is a big priority for us. We are more than doubling the number of attendance hubs to support 2,000 schools, investing £15 million to expand one-to-one mentoring to help 10,000 children. Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley, talked about the importance of mentoring. We will require all schools to share data to support early intervention. Our plan is working, with 380,000 fewer children persistently absent or not attending last year, and numbers continuing to fall.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) was right to raise how few men work in early years education. I wrote a piece a few weeks ago, trying to encourage more men into that area. On the teaching workforce more broadly, my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley is right to say that men make up a smaller proportion of the teaching workforce than women. It is important to attract more male teachers to the profession.

We have seen some change. In state-funded nursery and primary schools, we have seen an increase of more than 6,500 male teachers since 2010, but we want to go

further, through our campaigns to attract and retain excellent teachers, including more men. We want teaching to be an attractive and competitive profession. From September 2023, starting salaries rose to at least £30,000 in all areas of the country, alongside a 6.5% pay award for experienced teachers and leaders in the past financial year, ensuring all teachers launch their careers on a competitive starting salary.

On exclusions, creating a culture with high expectations of behaviour is very important. Our behaviour in schools guidance provides clarity and support to schools, to help them create calm, safe and supportive environments. We are clear that permanent exclusions should be used only when absolutely necessary, as a last resort, and should not mean exclusion from education. I was concerned by what my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay described, and we are looking at what action may need to be taken there.

Briefly touching on professions, I used to work on widening access to professions before I became an MP. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley is absolutely right that professions, such as medicine, the law and others, have seen a huge shift from being overwhelmingly male to overwhelmingly female in their entrants. That is less so at senior levels, but certainly in entrance to those professions, that is the case. I used to work on this issue, partly from the aspect of class and socio-economic background. Actually, a lot of those professions had been successful in recruiting more women and ethnic minorities, but disproportionately from private schools and professional families. Whether male or female, black, white or Asian, it was considerably harder to get into those professions if from a working-class background. Indeed, an individual is 24 times more likely to become a doctor if a parent is a doctor, and only 6% are from a working-class background. I agree with my hon. Friend about the issue and would only say that there are a number of issues about access to those professions and more work is needed to make sure that who gets into them is representative of the country at large.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others set out the importance of people, and especially boys, understanding the full range of jobs and careers open to them and of having mentors and other support to encourage them along those pathways. That is a big part of the Careers & Enterprise Company's network of enterprise advisers, who are volunteers from businesses who help schools in that regard.

We accept that there is always more that can be done to improve outcomes for children of all backgrounds, including boys, and we will continue our work to ensure that in every area, children can access excellent schools and high-quality technical and higher education and go on to good jobs. I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley for continually raising the issue of educational attainment for boys. The Government agree that boys should feel included and supported at school to help them reach their full potential and we will continue to work to deliver our commitment of building a world-class education system for all children and young people.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I call Mr Fletcher, who has a couple of minutes to wind up.

10.56 am

Nick Fletcher: I thank everyone who has taken part in this extremely important debate. I also want to put on record my thanks to Mark Brooks OBE, who is a colleague and friend. He has done a huge amount of work on the matter over the past few decades.

I am genuinely pleased by many of the points made. One thing that has come through is the importance of family. We put an awful lot on teachers, but I genuinely believe, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) said, that we tend to put too much on teachers a lot of the time. The family is the silver bullet for everything—I genuinely believe that. Unfortunately, we have 2.6 million separated families out there with 4 million children, so there will be an awful lot of boys who do not have a male role model in their lives. We really need to take that on board. It is a huge problem that is coming down the line and we need to do everything we can to get mentors and role models in front of those young boys. If we do not, they could quite easily end up on a path that we do not want them to take—and that will not just cost us with a society we do not want to belong to, but it will cost us a fortune to look after those boys once they have taken that wrong path.

I had hoped we would have got a little more from the Minister today. There are some easy wins there for us that will not cost us any money. For instance, if we just write to schools and say to them, “Please look at the gender attainment gap and whether it exists in your school. If it does not, fantastic. Well done. Come back to us and tell us what you are doing to make sure it does not. If it does, just acknowledge it.” We need to acknowledge that there is a gap there. It is said that the first sign of madness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. We cannot be in a position like that with our boys. If we let boys down at 11 years old, we will have a huge problem in future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) and I mentioned one word: expectation. We should expect boys to do well. They can do well and with the right support they will do well. Once again, I thank everyone for coming. I am sorry for the Minister that, unfortunately, there are no Back-Bench Labour MPs here today. That is really disappointing. It just proves what they would do with working-class boys and boys as a whole if they did get into Government: not a lot. Unfortunately, we are where we are, but I thank everyone on this side.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the educational attainment of boys.

Farming in Wales and the UK

11 am

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I will call Jonathan Edwards to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up—as he knows; he is an experienced Member—as is the convention for 30-minute debates. I suspect, however, that he will get a number of interventions.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered farming in Wales and the UK.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and to have the opportunity to raise the concerns expressed in rural Wales in particular, but seeing that there is an honourable turnout from Members from all constituent parts of the UK, I suspect we will hear about the concerns of other farmers across the UK.

Feelings are running at fever pitch in Wales, and last week a mass protest converged on the capital city of Cardiff. For those in the rural heartlands of Wales, Cardiff is not the easiest place to get to. My hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) will attest that it is easier to get to London than to Cardiff from Caernarfon.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): It is easier to get to Dublin.

Jonathan Edwards: Yes, it is even easier to get to Dublin. The turnout was extraordinary and showed the strength of feeling that has erupted over recent weeks. I was listening to the Wales podcast on the BBC on the train down over the weekend, and it said it was the largest demonstration that the Senedd has ever seen. That is testament to the strength of feeling in rural Wales.

Although I do not come from farming stock directly, my father and his brother were raised on Ffos y Ffin farm in Capel Dewi following the death of their father from tuberculosis. He got involved in the local young farmers movement, and his best friend was David Woods, who farmed Waunryddod in Cwmfelin Mynach in the west of Carmarthenshire, near Whitland. Some of my fondest memories as a child include visiting the Woods family at their farm on weekends, watching my father and Mr Woods milk the herd, and helping out as I got a bit older. I witnessed at first hand the unwavering dedication of our farmers and grew a huge appreciation for their work and for the pride they feel in being food producers for the general population.

The pressures farmers work under are considerable. They are open to hugely fluctuating costs and prices while their payments largely flatline, and they work on extremely small margins. One of my first meetings after being elected was with a dairy farmer, who explained the huge financial difference that a 1p increase or decrease in the price of milk would cause his business. The inflationary pressures squeezing our economy are hitting farmers particularly hard, with skyrocketing input costs severely impacting their income. Last year, I received a justifiably angry message from a constituent complaining that fertiliser costs had doubled in less than 12 months. He was talking about having to drastically cut back on

production. The inflationary pressures have driven up costs across the industry, yet farmers have not had the option of passing those costs on to consumers due to their position in the supply chain.

Mental health has become a major issue in the agricultural community. Suicide rates are far higher than those of the general population. Economic pressures undoubtedly play a role, as do the insular nature of the job, the relentless hours and the demanding schedules. A recent survey revealed that over a third of farmers experience clinical depression and nearly half struggle with anxiety. I have been there myself on many occasions, and it is absolutely no joke. Being in that state of mind while working in an extremely dangerous workplace obviously makes matters even more serious. I know of a farmer who has had his struggles over the years. Recently he walked into a slurry pit before snapping out and phoning the emergency services, which thankfully got there in time. Mental health in farming should be a priority for policymakers, and I pay tribute to charities such as the DPJ Foundation, based in Carmarthen, for their work in providing advocacy and raising the profile of those issues.

From an economic perspective, agriculture is comparatively more important to the Welsh economy than that of the UK as a whole. Take out farming and other sectors will be severely hit. To further make the point, National Farmers Union Cymru recently hosted a meeting with over 100 stakeholders who are worried about the new sustainable farming scheme of the Welsh Government. A wide range of organisations and companies were represented, including agricultural contractors, vets, academic institutions, farming charities, legal firms and trade associations, as well as major meat, milk and food service companies based in and operating in Wales.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate forward. He is absolutely right to highlight the issues for Wales, and indeed for the whole of the United Kingdom. Does he agree that there are many issues facing farmers UK-wide, and that the farming community needs support to ensure that we are providing opportunities to not only those from farming backgrounds but those outside, so that they can realise that there is potential for a fulfilling career in the countryside? Perhaps we need to push for this vocation as passionately as we do for the NHS or even engineering.

Jonathan Edwards: I am extremely grateful for that very valuable contribution. Later in my speech I will talk about how the agricultural community needs to perceive us as wanting to work with them, as opposed to being unsympathetic towards them, which, unfortunately, is especially the case in Wales at the moment.

Returning to my point about the NFU gathering, following the meeting, NFU Cymru president Aled Jones said:

“The food and farming supply chain is an £8 billion industry in Wales that employs some 233,000 people, Wales’ biggest employer. As a sector we are completely interlinked with each part of the supply chain relying on the other for their viability.

A productive, progressive and profitable Welsh farming sector is essential to the wider supply chain, farmers spend around £1.4bn annually on products such as feed, fertiliser, veterinary and medicines, farm machinery and contract work. The produce from our farms is processed and sold in retail and food service markets in Wales, across the UK and globally.”

To return to the issue of intervention, we get the impression that policymakers at a Welsh level in particular view our farmers as some sort of economic burden. Their mindset needs to be turned around, and a key part of that is accepting the anchor status of farming for the whole rural economy.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate, and I very much agree with all the points that he has made. He will be aware that in much of East Anglia, just as in Wales, one in eight jobs in rural communities are linked to agriculture, food and drink, and the wider supply chain. I wonder whether more can be done to support the agricultural sector through public sector procurement, such as the UK Government and the devolved Governments introducing minimum requirements for food in our hospitals and our schools to be purchased from local farmers.

Jonathan Edwards: I am extremely grateful for that intervention. I think that such a policy would give the added bonus of providing high-quality food in hospitals and schools, which we should be aspiring to achieve as policymakers.

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what is going on in Wales—the real disappointment faced by Welsh farmers under the Labour Government provided by the Welsh Assembly—is the gypsy’s warning for farming across the whole of the UK? If we were unlucky enough to get a Labour Government, what is happening in Wales would happen in the rest of the UK, and there is not even a Labour MP present to defend the Welsh Government. It’s a shocker!

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his passion and his support of the farming industry. I do not want to write his election leaflet for him, but I will certainly be concentrating on Welsh Government policy further on in my speech.

Earlier this month, 3,000 farmers converged on Carmarthen market under the protest banner “Digon yw Digon”, which translates to “Enough is Enough”. I pay tribute to my constituents Gary Howells and Aled Rees for mobilising so many farmers in my home county. Indeed, protests have been erupting across Wales and England. As an aspiring historian in a past life, I have to mention that those massive protest meetings have parallels with the Rebecca rioters’ mass gathering at Mynydd Sylen, near Pontyberem, in the summer of 1843—I had to get that in. What we are witnessing today, however, is colossal discontent in the agricultural community. Thankfully, organisers and the unions have done a great job in ensuring that matters have remained peaceful and within the law.

Much of that anger has been growing since the EU referendum, as farmers have witnessed the destructive approach taken by policymakers to the development of post-Brexit agricultural policy. There is no doubt that leaving the European Union has been a disaster for Welsh farming. They were promised sunlit uplands by the leave campaign but have been let down, and in the post-Brexit trade deals that have been signed, the interests of our farmers have been sold down the river by the UK Government. I acknowledge that there seems to have been a slight change of approach with the

[Jonathan Edwards]

current deals, such as the one with Canada. However, that is too little, too late in relation to some of the previous deals.

The Welsh Government calculate that, for the period 2021-25, rural support funding will be £243 million less than had we been under EU farming support policy, and that figure does not account for inflation. The difficulty faced by the Welsh Government in managing an overall budget declining in real terms perhaps explains some of the unfavourable policy approaches that we have seen towards agriculture over the last few years. If the UK Government have left themselves open to accusations that they have neglected agriculture, the Welsh Government are open to accusations of hostility.

Hywel Williams: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate; he is making a fine speech. He points to the double whammy facing Welsh farming. It is not only Brexit and the subsequent disaster—of course, the Canada deal is far from settled; a cruel pantomime is going on at the moment, as we shall see later in the main Chamber—but there is also the incompetence and lack of understanding and listening from the Welsh Labour Government, as witnessed at the very large protests last week. Clearly, we need a change.

Jonathan Edwards: My hon. Friend's point about the Welsh Government is well made. I do not know of any farmer who votes for the Labour party, and I suppose one can understand why the Labour party takes the approach it does. But it is disastrous for agriculture to have a Government who are open to the accusation of being hostile to farmers.

One of the most emotionally difficult meetings I have had as an MP was on the case of the farm that was struck down with bovine TB. It is difficult to explain the mental health impact on those affected. Earlier this month, "Ffermio", an agricultural programme on S4C, unmasked those horrors graphically on the Castell Howell farm of Mr and Mrs Davies in Capel Isaac in my constituency. The family had to witness their cattle herd shot in front of them, one by one. It was absolutely harrowing for the viewer and utterly despairing for the family. It has become a tipping point for the emotional outpouring we are witnessing in rural Wales at the moment. It was an incredible piece of filmmaking by the "Ffermio" programme team, led by my constituents Ellen Llewellyn and Meinir Howells.

The failure of the Welsh Government to get to grips with bovine TB, and the continued faith in the policy of destroying cattle herds, has become a perfect metaphor for the unsympathetic environment farmers face from their own Government. I am glad that the Welsh Government committed to reviewing their policy on farm slaughter last week, but there should be a wholesale review of policy, including dealing with TB in wildlife.

To compound matters, the Welsh Government partnership parties have acted with blatant disregard on changes proposed to school terms and the potential impact on the Royal Welsh show, one of the marquee events in the Welsh national calendar. Proposed school term changes could see the show fall outside the traditional summer holidays, with the organisers warning that they will face a £1 million-plus shortfall, making the event

unviable. Last week, the Minister hosted an event by the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society in the very room where the idea to form it came to fruition, Committee Room 12, to celebrate the 120 years since that initial meeting. England has lost its royal show, and we in Wales now have the most successful, and possibly the largest, agricultural event in Europe. Yet the event operates on small margins, and a £1 million operational loss could be fatal. The Welsh Government need to sit back and think this policy through, and make sure that the Royal Welsh show and the National Eisteddfod are protected.

The all-Wales blanket approach to nitrate pollution by the Welsh Government has irked farmers further due to its disproportionality and the estimated cost of £400 million to the industry. Everybody acknowledges the need to reduce agricultural pollution. However, why the Welsh Government feel the need for a sledgehammer approach is beyond me. Coleg Sir Gar's Gelli Aur Agricultural College in my constituency has been pioneering slurry treatment technology that separates waste into two reusable products by separating the water. Water can then re-enter the environment safely or be reused on the farm, with the remnants being a dried product that can be used as fertiliser with little pollution risk.

Instead of coming down on farmers like a ton of bricks, why are the Welsh Government not providing grants for farming businesses to upgrade their waste systems? That could be done on a collaborative basis among farmers. One system could service a number of farming businesses and would potentially provide an income source from a waste product. It ticks all the boxes.

There is huge innovation in Wales. Aled Davies and his company, Pruex, also based in my constituency, is pioneering using natural bacteria to disinfect chicken and cattle sheds from ammonia pollution instead of chemicals. The results I have seen look very impressive. I was delighted to receive an email last week from Mr Davies saying that he had secured a research contract from the Welsh Government—I will give them a bit of credit for that. That shows what can be achieved if the Welsh Government work with the sector. Wales can pioneer change.

Unfortunately, that brings me to the new sustainable farming scheme for agricultural payments proposed by the Welsh Government. Their own assessments indicate that the scale of job losses in the agricultural sector would be around double the expected steel job losses in Port Talbot. Unamended, the new policy would also lead to a loss of £199 million to farm incomes and an 11% reduction in livestock numbers—that is the Welsh Government's own figures. The knock-on effect on the wider rural economy would be catastrophic.

Page 6 of the partnership agreement between Labour and Plaid Cymru endorses the SFS as a commitment in which both parties will develop the new agricultural support regime.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On support for farmers, yesterday I was speaking to a former president of the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society, a Mr Finlay Munro, a farmer in my constituency. He made the point, which I found quite thought provoking, that when we talk about carbon sequestration, we are not really giving grassland its full value, and that, if that

could be worked into the equation, it might be a support mechanism for our farmers. Does the hon. Gentleman—who is making an excellent speech—agree that the Government should look at that?

Jonathan Edwards: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; indeed, that is the criticism of the SFS coming from farmers. The Welsh Government made a statement last week saying they were going to review it, which is a positive step forward in response to the protests. However, reviewing is one thing; what we want is policy implementation. The hon. Gentleman's point is well made, and it is often made to me by my farmers in Carmarthenshire.

Returning to what I was saying, it is worth reading out the section on the SFS in the partnership agreement, so that it is on the record. It says that both parties will work together to:

“Introduce a transition period as we reform the system of farm payments so stability payments will continue to be a feature of the Sustainable Farming Scheme during and beyond this Senedd term. We will agree the longer-term arrangements for Welsh agriculture, recognising the particular needs of family farms and acknowledging ecologically sustainable local food production.”

It pains me to say this, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) will not be too happy with what I am about to say, but it seems to me that Plaid Cymru has been completely outmanoeuvred by the Labour party in the partnership agreement. They have effectively been lead down an endless 20 mph road to nowhere by Labour.

There is a clear case that the farming community has a vital role in helping the Welsh Government to reach their environmental targets, especially in terms of carbon sequestration—to return to the point made by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). The alternative is letting the speculators buy up Welsh agricultural holdings—as has been happening—and planting trees on productive Welsh farming land. As always, the Welsh Government would be better advised to take farmers with them on a journey, as opposed to dictating and imposing. Just to reiterate the point I made in response to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, there has been a Welsh Government statement saying that there will be a review, but what we really want to see is action.

My understanding is that in Scotland the SNP aim to enable farmers to continue to access a level of basic payments, which seems to be a better approach. In Wales, we would do well to rethink the SFS, look at what Scotland is doing and meet the demands of the farming unions for a new universal baseline payment. As my constituent Ian Rickman, the president of the Farmers' Union of Wales, has said:

“The reality is that if the scheme remains in its current form, and if the modelling report is correct, farmers uptake will be minimal and everyone will lose out—Welsh farmers, the environment, the public and ultimately the Welsh Government. There is a real worry that even under a scenario where scheme payments come nowhere near to compensating for the loss of the Basic Payment Scheme, there will be some farm businesses that will have no choice other than to participate in the SFS. This will, no doubt, place further pressure on farmers' workload and mental health.”

He continued:

“The Sustainable Farming Scheme must be accessible by all, and provide long-term stability for farming businesses and the wider rural economy that relies upon agriculture. The SFS needs

to provide a meaningful income stream which properly rewards farmers and underpins the importance of a high quality food supply chain, produced here in Wales.”

The deadline for the final stages of the Welsh Government's consultation on the SFS is later this week, and I will be sending them a copy of this speech. As Ministers and negotiators on behalf of Plaid Cymru and the Government consider the responses, I urge them to tread very carefully before announcing their final plans. Conceding reviews is one thing; what matters is the policy environment that will be implemented, and unless concerns are addressed, the protests that we have witnessed to date will be magnified.

Hywel Williams: May I just say that the hon. Gentleman does a slight disservice to my party by lumping Plaid Cymru in with the Welsh Labour Government. We do have an agreement, as he knows full well, having been involved in discussions on this issue in past times, but that is far from being jointly responsible together as a coalition—as some parties have recently titled it.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention because what he said is what a lot of the public discourse around the protests has been. However, I read out the actual partnership agreement—

Hywel Williams: Which has since developed.

Jonathan Edwards: Yes, there is a negotiation going on, and the hon. Gentleman is aware that his colleague in Arfon is the lead negotiator. I think she has been blindsided by the Labour Government.

He will like this bit now, though—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to bring his remarks to a close.

Jonathan Edwards: R. S. Thomas, one of our greatest national poets, would often portray in his work how farmers and the land of Wales are one and the same. I have to be honest: I find the culture war tactics used against farmers difficult to comprehend. As R. S. observed, nobody understands nature and the intrinsic link between the preservation of nature, industrial toil and food production better than our farmers. Everyone understands that practices will have to evolve, but the role of policymakers must be to lead industry on a journey that it can buy into, as well as one that safeguards farming, as opposed to one that industry considers to be undermining it.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley; I know that, given your constituency, this is a matter of interest to you as well. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing today's debate. I thank the hon. Members who have contributed so far; I am pleased to see colleagues from right across the United Kingdom, because all too often farming in Wales does not get the attention it needs. I am delighted to see so many people contribute.

Sir Bill Wiggin: Where is Labour?

Fay Jones: My hon. Friend, from a sedentary position, makes a good point about the startling lack of Labour Members in the debate. I will come back to that in a moment.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr drew attention to many of the key pressures facing farmers at the moment, and I particularly commend him for talking about mental health. I join him in praising the DPJ Foundation, which I know. My constituency adjoins his, and I have been to a farmer, in Hundred House in my constituency, who pointed out the beam at the top of the barn that he contemplated using when things got so desperately bad. I am grateful that with the support of the DPJ Foundation he is worlds away from that place now, and I credit it for all the work it has done to support farmers, because it is a very difficult time.

We know that farmers are used to working in incredibly difficult conditions, whether that is from the weather, a difficult lambing or poor global prices—whatever it might be. Farmers are often at the bottom of the chain, and it is right that we thank them for what they do, not only in producing our food but in stewarding our environment. We simply would not have the incredible rolling hills of mid-Wales without them. I am incredibly proud of them, and this is another opportunity for me to restate just how much we owe to farmers the length and breadth of the United Kingdom.

There was much in speech by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr that I agreed with, and sadly I do not have time to talk through everything. I gently challenge his points on trade, which he brought up on the Floor of the House yesterday.

Jamie Stone: I was tempted to intervene because of the mention of farmers across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. It is of interest that there are no Scottish National party Members here. Again, when I talked to Mr Finlay Munro, we spoke about the lack of forward planning. We do not know where we are on what will be environmental, what will be wild and what will not. Is it hedgerows or is it feeding the nation? That is something that I think we need to be very wary of.

Fay Jones: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. It is not a political point to say that Members are not here, because all Members from all parties ought to be engaging and listening to farmers at the moment. It is absolutely right to point out that what farmers need is certainty. In my maiden speech, I talked about how farmers can withstand drought, flood and Government interference if they are able to plan and are given the certainty. Sadly, that is very much lacking for farmers in Wales, and I believe in Scotland we need to see a little bit more detail. I urge all Members to come to the table.

To return to the points made by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr about trade, he referred to the Australia trade deal. I would push back gently against some of the language that he used there. There are safeguards within the Australia trade deal that protect farmers right across the United Kingdom from any kind of dumping. I wish that would get a little bit more attention.

Hywel Williams: I do not know whether the Minister has met the Australian and New Zealand ambassadors, but I have along, with the Plaid Cymru group. I can

inform her that both ambassadors were delighted at the wonderful deal they achieved with the United Kingdom, and slightly puzzled as to what we were getting out of it.

Fay Jones: I will carry on with the point about protections in the trade deals. I understand that Plaid Cymru is quick to talk down trade deals—in fact, I am not sure that it has ever supported a single one. However, there are a number of safeguards in both free trade agreements that protect agriculture, so there are huge reasons to be positive, not least about the fact that the Australia trade deal brings us access to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. That is a hugely promising market for Welsh agricultural products.

As I have not yet even started my speech, I will try to return to some of the points I was going to highlight. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr is right to point out some of the issues with the sustainable farming scheme. He used the phrase “digon yw digon”, and we in Wales understand what farmers mean when they say that: they have had enough of feeling as though they are not being listened to.

I was really disappointed to hear a Labour Member in Prime Minister’s questions last week refer to some of the protesting farmers as extremists who are sharing conspiracy theories online. If Labour Members were willing to listen to them, they would understand that they are raising legitimate grievances about the future viability of their businesses, for example over bovine TB, which the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr raised incredibly well. That is an example of where the Welsh Government have set their face against farming. In England, we introduced a badger cull in 2013—I pay credit to the Liberal Democrats for their determination to see that through as part of the coalition Government. We have seen statistics that show that the rate of bovine TB is reducing, but in Wales we have no such support. In England, we are being led by the science; in Wales, I am afraid that it is being ignored.

I am afraid to say that the sustainable farming scheme is frankly unworkable. We had a long debate on the Floor of the House last night, when we talked about some of the challenging elements of that scheme. I am afraid to say that farmers will be required to carry out six online training courses each and every year. They will be required to submit data on the amount of medicines they use in their flock or herd, the rate of lamb loss, soil, worm numbers, and seed receipts. It is simply unworkable. That is before we even get on to the two headline items of the sustainable farming scheme: the condition that farmers must remove 10% of land for planting trees and a further 10% for habitat construction. Given the global uncertainty we face, it is madness that the Welsh Government want to reduce the amount of land available for food production. We should be boosting our food security, not reducing it.

I will try to wrap up my remarks in the last couple of minutes. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr is right to point out that the sustainable farming scheme will, according to the Welsh Government’s own analysis, cost 5,500 jobs on farm, not to say anything about the impact on the wider supply chain. I have a huge amount of time and respect for the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), but he criticised me in his intervention on the hon. Member for Carmarthen East

and Dinefwr for the fact that the Welsh Conservative party has pointed out Plaid Cymru's support for Welsh Labour over the last few years. If it looks, sounds and smells like a coalition, I do not really know why the hon. Member for Arfon wants to call it a co-operation agreement.

However, the fact is that this is in Plaid Cymru's hands. To make the sustainable farming scheme go away, all it needs to do is vote against the Welsh Government's budget and force them to go back to the table, listen to farmers and make improvements to the scheme. Were it to withdraw from the co-operation agreement—or coalition, as I call it—it could get this off the table, which is what all farmers want. They want to deliver for the environment and food production, and they want their Government to listen to them. Plaid Cymru has the power to make that happen. I urge the hon. Member for Arfon to hear the message coming from Westminster Hall and the main Chamber that his party has the power to do that, and I very much hope that it does.

In the final minute, I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr once again for bringing this debate to the House. The importance of food production and environmental delivery must go hand in hand. It is absolutely incumbent on all of us here to speak up for the important industries that power our nation, whether it is steel, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, or farming, which is a historic, dynamic and proud industry that powers rural Wales. In the few seconds I have left, I commend him for his comments about the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show, which is the largest show in Europe.

Sir Bill Wiggin: Only just.

Fay Jones: I am sorry to contradict my hon. Friend. Farming is the beating heart of rural Wales. I am incredibly proud to represent so many farmers, and I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr for his work in doing the same.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Neonicotinoids and other Pesticides

[GORDON HENDERSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the environmental impact of neonicotinoids and other pesticides.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I thank all Members who have joined this debate. I also thank everyone who has signed the many petitions linked to the debate, including a significant number of my constituents in Chester. It is clear that the concern about this issue is overwhelming. Before I start, I should say that I will do my best to refrain from any bee puns.

On 18 January this year, the Government approved emergency authorisation for use of the highly damaging neonicotinoid on sugar beet for the fourth year in a row, going against the advice of their own advisers and the concerns of campaigners and environmentalists across the country. That decision is yet again ill-judged and wrong. It directly contradicts our national and international obligations, such as the commitment to halt species loss by 2030 and the obligation under the global biodiversity framework to reduce the overall risk from pesticides by at least half.

Those decisions are being made against expert advice, waved through without a parliamentary vote and made on the basis that they are temporary and in the case of an emergency. Have we really had an emergency for four years in a row or is this just the Government's way of nodding through harmful practice on a yearly basis?

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. I am sorry for intervening early, but I have to go to a meeting and wanted to make my point.

I am a beekeeper myself. I was recently speaking to the Somerset Beekeepers' Association, which called the Government's ongoing war on insects "unfathomable". Does the hon. Member agree that we must have rigorous testing of chemicals before they are approved for agricultural use, and that the Government should introduce a clear qualitative target for significantly reducing the overall use of pesticides in agriculture?

Samantha Dixon: I agree with the hon. Lady and I thank her for the intervention.

Last night, I noted a BBC article entitled "Bee-harming neonicotinoid use 'makes a mockery' of ban". There is no doubt that there is an issue with virus yellows, but we are facing a biodiversity emergency and lifting the ban is not the way forward. We have got to find another way. I support the calls made in the article by Richard Benwell, the chief executive of Wildlife and Countryside Link, for the Government to urgently deliver their long-awaited strategy on sustainable pesticide use.

Bees and other pollinators have for many years been facing an increasingly difficult task in the face of changing agricultural practice. That is a challenge in itself for our farming community, but it can also lead to a decrease in available forage and produce monoculture deserts for

[*Samantha Dixon*]

much of the year, making insect existence increasingly challenging. It is well known that neonicotinoid pesticides can be very harmful to a wide range of insects and invertebrates, including our beloved bees. They affect the nervous systems of bees and other insects, resulting in paralysis and eventually death. In fact, author and academic Professor Dave Goulson has warned that just one teaspoon of this type of chemical is enough to kill 1.25 billion honeybees. That is equivalent to four lorry loads.

Environmentalists, campaigners and local beekeepers have been in touch with me ahead of this debate to share their views and concerns on this topic, including the Wildlife Trust, our own Chester zoo, and Angharad, a local beekeeper who kindly alerted me to a report by the expert committee on pesticides that states:

“There is new evidence regarding the risk from neonicotinoids globally which adds to the weight of evidence of adverse impact on honeybee behaviour and demonstrated negative impacts on bee colonies”.

Bees play a crucial role in our food supply chain by pollinating crops, and their decline could have cascading effects on biodiversity and agricultural productivity. We should be protecting them, not putting them in harm’s way. Insect populations have suffered drastic declines in the UK. Recent evidence suggests that we have lost 50% or more of our insects since 1970 and that 41% of the Earth’s remaining five million insect species are threatened with extinction. Of course, other human factors and habitat loss are also to blame, but so is the widespread use of neonics. Given that a third of our food crops are pollinated by insects, we have a lot to lose.

The Government’s emergency authorisation allows the seed coating of sugar beet crops with neonics—a method of application that results in only 5% of the pesticide reaching the crop. The rest accumulates in the soil where it can be absorbed by the roots of wildflowers and hedgerow plants visited by bees, or it can leech into watercourses and affect the wildlife that lives there. If we thought sewage in our waterways was not enough, we are also adding harmful chemicals into the mix. Harmful neonics have been found in more than 10% of English rivers despite a widespread ban in 2018. In more than half the rivers where neonics were detected, they were at levels that pose a significant risk to wildlife. I back our farmers and am concerned that sugar beet farmers are experiencing a difficult time. However, lifting the ban is not the way forward. In fact, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ own economic analysis found that there was little impact of the beet yellows virus on sugar beet yield in untreated crops.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Pollinators, which are obviously the subject of the debate, are particularly important, but what about human health? Norfolk County Council is the first council in the country to ban glyphosate. That is an important move forward, and perhaps the hon. Lady will give her thoughts on that. More importantly, should we not be trying to find naturally produced, sustainable products that are not harmful to pollinators or human health and to repeat what has happened with Norfolk County Council and glyphosate? We should be rolling that out and putting all our scientific efforts into trying to find those products for the future.

Samantha Dixon: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. In fact, that underlines the importance of the strategy coming forward on the use of all pesticides. I thank him for his intervention.

We must find a science-led way forward that not only protects our bees and safeguards our future biodiversity and human health, but helps the farming sector by supporting initiatives that promote alternative, bee-friendly pesticides and sustainable farming methods. Despite the emergency authorisation being granted in 2022 and 2023, the proportion of farmers who decided against using neonics was 29% and 40% respectively. That shows that an increasing number of growers are trying to farm in a way that does not harm nature or rivers, yet there appears to be no support for those growers from the industry or Government.

The Government have instead focused on short-term solutions that will undermine the long-term sustainability of the farming sector and disadvantage those growers trying to do the best for nature. Emergency pesticide authorisation risks not only the floodgates opening for other harmful pesticide use, but slowing down crucial research on the alternatives. Without those alternatives, climate change will only lead to increased demand for neonics. The use of pesticides in the agricultural industry has become commonplace for many years, and there are good cases to support the use of targeted pesticides to help secure successful food production. However, some of those treatments are not being used in a targeted way and are affecting beneficial pollinators, as well as pest species.

Sarah Dyke: Scientists increasingly believe that there is no safe level of pesticides for humans to be exposed to. There is growing evidence that pesticides become more harmful when they are combined together—something known as the cocktail effect. I spoke to an arable farmer last summer, who told me he would never allow his children to eat bread made with his wheat. When I challenged him, he simply said, “Well, I know what’s gone into it, don’t I?” Does the hon. Member agree that the Government need to regulate, incentivise and support farmers to lead the transition away from pesticide use?

Samantha Dixon: I agree. The hon. Lady makes a very compelling case, which I hope the Minister is listening to.

The widespread use of the pesticides is not seeking to target known pest species but, as the hon. Lady has mentioned, being used as a blanket catch-all that preloads the crops with deadly chemicals that can transfer into the pollen and nectar, and into the food chain. We must look for positive alternatives, and not settle for short-term harmful solutions.

Will the Minister comment on the assessment the Government have made on the impact of their emergency authorisation of neonics for the last four years? Will he explain why the Government have ignored expert advice, which puts our vital pollinators under threat? Will he commit to any future decisions on this issue being put to a parliamentary vote? Finally, will he tell us all when the long-awaited strategy will be published?

I thank all Members who have joined today’s debate. I know we are all busy bees with packed diaries, and I hope the rest of the debate will create a real buzz about this issue—sorry, I really couldn’t help myself. On a serious note, nature has a critical role to play in both

integrated pest management solutions and tackling climate change. It cannot do that if it is under attack from harmful pesticides such as neonicotinoids.

2.42 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Henderson. I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) on setting the scene so very well on a subject that should really interest us all. If it does not, then there are questions to be asked—that is the reason we are all here. It is a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who has a deep love of farming. It is an especial pleasure to see the Minister, who is always here whenever debates such as this are to be answered. I know that he, like me and others in this room today, understands the importance of the subject.

I declare an interest—not because I am a beekeeper, but because my neighbours down the road, Chris and Valentine Hodges, are. A couple of years ago, I let them put some of their beehives on to my land, because I wanted to see the natural environment that I live in enhanced. It quite clearly has been. They have what is called a black bee species, which is almost extinct; they are responsible for ensuring that it comes back. This is not just on my farm, but in the constituency across the whole of the Ards peninsula, up into North Down and as far over as Strangford lough. By the way, the honey is absolutely gorgeous. Every morning before I leave my house, I have two spoonfuls on my brown toast. Fibre is very important when getting to a certain age, so the honey gives me that wee bit of flavour and taste, and I thank the Lord for it. It is really special.

I am ever mindful of the responsibility that we hold to be good stewards of our environment, which I know is an obligation that our farmers honour in every sense. All the farmers I know want to do that; I know the Minister does that, and other people here do the very same. Many farmers see themselves not as landowners but as caretakers of the land for future generations, as the hon. Member for City of Chester said clearly in her introductory speech. The responsibility for producing food that is safe is of great importance. For that reason, many old-school farmers—I am probably one of them—have encouraged their children to attend agriculture college to get a basis of generational knowledge, while working hand in hand with modern techniques, and to be taught how to get the most out of the land and diversify where necessary. Our agriculture colleges are vital to the future food security of this nation, and that should also be noted today.

The complexity of grant applications and red tape has been somewhat reduced, but it is still a matter of concern to the farming community. The need for the Ulster Farmers' Union—the sister organisation of the National Farmers Union in England—is very clear. The two work together and provide some of the best insurance rates possible; maybe I am a wee bit biased, because all my insurance is with the Ulster Farmers' Union. That is why I looked to see what the NFU's view was on this issue, knowing that it has hands-on knowledge and science at its fingertips.

I can understand that there are situations in which the use of these pesticides is important. Most recently, the Government approved an application from NFU

Sugar and British Sugar for the emergency use of the seed treatment on sugar beet seed in 2024. That was a vital application, and we need to look at it and recognise why that decision was made and its implications. The authorisation was granted on the condition that the product will be used only if the threshold for virus lessons is reached. Michael Sly, the chair of the NFU Sugar board, said:

“The British sugar beet crop, which safeguards more than 9,500 jobs, continues to be threatened by Virus Yellows disease.”

That terrible disease can do all sorts of damage to the countryside and to bees in particular. He continued:

“In recent years the disease has caused crop losses of up to 80%.”

We cannot ignore that; those are the facts, figures and statistics. He went on to say:

“I am relieved that this has been recognised by Defra”—

particularly the Minister who is here in Westminster Hall today—

“in granting the derogation which will be invaluable if we see a return of severe pest pressure.

An independent, scientific threshold is used to forecast the severity of pest pressure on the British sugar beet crop and any seed treatment will only be used if this threshold is met.”

So there are conditions; this is not a wild abandonment of the process, which is very much controlled. DEFRA and British Sugar have it well under control. Mr Sly added:

“the industry will again deliver a comprehensive stewardship programme to ensure safe and responsible use of the treatment if the threshold is met.

Led by the British Beet Research Organisation, the homegrown sugar industry is working hard to find viable, long-term solutions to this disease.”

This process is about the long-term vision and how we find a cure or something that ensures that this disease does no more damage.

Duncan Baker: I am the first person to say that we need to look at insecticides and make them safer. However, I represent a constituency that produces a large amount of sugar beet, and this derogation is for a limited period and for a non-flowering plant in its first year, so pollinators will not be at risk from it. The fact that we are spraying the seeds of this plant actually mitigates a huge amount of risk. I think the public do not fully appreciate that absolutely key point.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very salient and helpful intervention, which put the facts on the record. He explains why and how these things have been done, the controls that are necessary and why these things are necessary, and I am sure nobody here will have any concerns about the way they have been done, how long they will last or their importance. As I said, Mr Sly concluded by saying that the homegrown sugar industry is working hard to find a viable long-term solution to the disease, but it is imperative that we recognise the necessity for that.

To conclude, that application shows the level of thought that must go into having an application approved by British Sugar. The use of these harsh chemicals is not the first solution; it is a final solution. For that reason, I believe that they should remain available, but they should always—always—be closely monitored. We owe a duty to our environment, but also to our food security. The balance between them is so delicate, but it can be struck; I believe in my heart that if there is a will,

[*Jim Shannon*]

there is a way. I look to the Minister, as I always do, to ensure that we in this House are doing the best we can to put the garden back in the shape that it should be in.

2.49 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) for introducing the debate in the way she did. There are strong supporters of bees and pollinators in all parties, and she set out clearly that there is genuine concern among the people we represent about the continued use of emergency authorisations of bee-killing pesticides for the sugar beet crop.

Having called similar debates in previous years, I am hugely passionate about this issue. I bloody love bees, and I am desperately concerned that the public's concern about bees is not being reflected in Government policy. It is not being reflected in the way the Government follow expert advice or in the way they are treating this House on an issue they know matters to nearly every single Member of Parliament.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the point about greater awareness, does the hon. Member agree that such debates are essential in not only the beekeeping fraternity but the wider community, who sometimes do not understand the importance of beekeeping and what it contributes to wider society? They are helpful in broadening knowledge among the 95% of the public who take beekeeping as a small, almost irrelevant pastime and do not see the importance.

Luke Pollard: Beekeeping is a pastime that is enjoyed in rural and urban areas, and it is something that matters. It is not just about local produce; it helps to support an ecosystem that we all depend on—from our vibrant, beautiful gardens through to the food we eat. What matters to bees should matter to us all, because it affects every single one of us.

Bees, along with other pollinators, play a crucial role in our ecosystems. The decline in bee populations affects not only our country's biodiversity but our food security. It is paramount that we as politicians take the issue more seriously. One third of the UK's bee population has disappeared in the last decade, and the UK has already lost 13 out of our 35 native bee species. That should make us think about what we are doing to safeguard those remaining species and ecosystems, and how we are not only protecting habitats from being lost, but increasing available habitats for insects, for pollinators and for nature.

I have listened intently over many years—from when I sat on the Front Bench, where my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) is sitting today, to where I sit now—to Ministers talking about the importance of nature-based recovery and of encouraging more of our farmers to take nature-based solutions to heart. I welcome that change in language, and we have seen an important policy shift in recent years, but if we are to make it real and deliver that nature-based solution, emergency authorisations for bee-killing pesticides simply cannot sit alongside it; they are incongruous with it. Continuing the use of bee-killing pesticides amounts to environmental vandalism.

I back British farmers. One of my two little sisters is a farmer, and the other works in agricultural products. This issue matters. I represent an urban constituency in the south-west of England, but I know just how important farming is to the south-west and to our rural communities, because without farmers, there is no food. It is really important that we understand that, so I back farmers' concerns.

I understand that there is a real issue around the viability of crops affected by the diseases that the emergency authorisations are seeking to address, but I want to look at those authorisations. When we left the European Union, the Government said they would follow the evidence and not make decisions without it—DEFRA said that on a number of occasions, even though a prominent former Environment Secretary might not have been very kind about experts. However, the Government are not following the evidence here. Will the Minister explain why they are not following the expert group's advice? When do they expect to be back on track with that? Do they have alternative science that gives a different perspective from that of the expert group? And what guidelines have they given the experts about commenting on the authorisations?

It is important to recognise that this is the fourth year in a row where neonicotinoids have been allowed for emergency use, but if we look at the words in the emergency use authorisation, I doubt there has been an emergency for four years in a row. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester: four years in a row is not emergency use; it is a pattern that has allowed a type of behaviour to continue. If it was an emergency, there would have been one year of emergency use, and activity to correct that would have taken place.

In the first of the debates I called a number of years ago, one of the Minister's predecessors told me that these were temporary emergency authorisations that would last only three years at most. We are now in the fourth year of temporary emergency authorisations, and I am not certain from anything I have seen from the Government that there will not be a fifth, sixth and seventh emergency authorisation if they are re-elected. I do not get the sense that there is a destination that the Minister is driving us towards, and what I would like to see is a clear destination.

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): I am grateful to the hon. Member because he is making an important point. It may be helpful to the House to understand that a further check and balance on the authorisation for emergency use is whether the threshold is met for the product to be deployed. Only where that threshold is met is the product deployed in the open market. In 2021, that threshold was not met, so the product was not deployed in the open market—that was not felt necessary. The science says that where there is an issue and a challenge, we will use the product, and where there is not, as in 2021, that product will not be allowed.

Luke Pollard: I agree with the Minister about the thresholds, but they do not detract from the fact that the Government have effectively established a baseline that they will authorise emergency use of neonicotinoids every year, notwithstanding that emergency use is subject to a threshold being met.

I do not see how we can be in the fourth year of an emergency without some urgent and emergency action being taken to address it. It would be kinder and more honest in this debate to say that the Government now have a standing policy to authorise the use of bee-killing pesticides for sugar beet crops, but a threshold has to be met. For me, that would seem a more honest appraisal because, after four years, it is a reality that this is authorised every year, and I do not think it should be.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I am sympathetic to a lot of the points the hon. Gentleman is making, but does he not think that authorisation every year is a fairly reasonable position to get to in the absence of an alternative to neonics? One important thing that has not been discussed in this debate is that there is currently no viable alternative to neonics when the threshold has been met. Until we are in that position, authorisation may well be the reasonable course of action.

Luke Pollard: One advantage, or disadvantage, of having spoken in and called debates on the use of neonics is that I have listened to a number of Ministers cycle through the arguments for why authorisation is justified each and every year. In one earlier debate, the argument was put that we need to use the emergency authorisation because the new crop species are not yet online. In another, a Minister said that we need to use the emergency authorisation because the insurance scheme that would support sugar beet growers where there is disease in the crops is not yet online.

Those debates were many years ago, and we need to see honesty and transparency in this debate. I think the hon. Gentleman is saying that it would be reasonable to argue for using these pesticides if those things happen. What I am saying to the Minister is that we now have a standing policy that bee-killing pesticides are used on an annual basis, subject to a threshold. Let us be honest that it is a standing policy, and then we can debate whether the Government's policy is right and what the alternatives are. At the moment, the annual reauthorisation is against the expert advice of the Government's own scientific body, which does not support the position that we should be allowing these pesticides to be used on an annual basis.

Dr Poulter: I will give the hon. Gentleman a medical analogy—I am a practising doctor, as he may be aware. I may prefer certain medications over others and recognise that a medication I prescribe may have unpleasant side effects. Although I may wish that there was an alternative to that medication in development, at this moment it may be the only option available to me in my prescription repertoire to make the patient better. That is a similar situation to the one we are facing with the use of neonics. The issue here is what is being done to accelerate the finding of effective alternatives to neonics. That is the question we need to ask here, because we do not want to put farmers in a situation where the only viable treatment is completely banned.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful for that intervention. I am not a doctor, so I will not try to butcher a health analogy that might be shot down. I think the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) is saying that we need to hear from the Minister about authorising

neonicotinoids against expert advice, which the Government say they are following but are not, with a different excuse every year. I would like to see the destination we are going to. We have a standing policy now from DEFRA that that is authorised every year. It does not necessarily mean from what the Minister said in his intervention that they will be used every year, but they will be authorised every year. That is the standing policy.

The reality is that for the majority of years in this Parliament the Government have authorised neonicotinoids to be used in emergency cases. I do not believe we can have four years' worth of emergencies. If a patient came to the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich four years in a row, I suspect he would challenge the use of the word "emergency" in that context. That is why I want this made clear. What is the Government's destination? What is their plan? What are their alternatives for the use of neonicotinoids?

I do not want to limit what I say to farmers' use of neonicotinoids. As this debate is about the broader use of neonicotinoids and we have established that neonics kill bees, that bees are essential for our ecosystem and that there is cross-party concern about the Government's use of bee-killing pesticides, we have established that neonics are the problem. How they are deployed into our ecosystems is also a problem. We have looked at the neonic deployment in agriculture and sugar beets, but I want to talk about neonics in two other areas.

One is neonics' use in imported food. For the countries where we have now signed trade deals that use neonics as standard in their agricultural production, how are we safeguarding our ecosystem and food supply against importing neonics in food, on coatings of food and in other agricultural products? We know that neonics, when exposed to the natural environment, get everywhere. We have seen studies recently, as cited in *The Guardian* only a month ago, that refer to neonics now appearing, according to a Swiss study, in children—in every child that was tested in the study. So we know that neonics are present.

We also know that neonics are present in our wildlife and in our rivers, as has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester, and in our wider ecosystems. So we need to look at how we are getting neonics into those things and where neonics are imported in food.

Also, I have a concern that neonics are being used in flea treatment far too frequently. Dog and cat owners, in an attempt to look after their pets and make the right decision, are using neonicotinoids. Fipronil and imidacloprid are two different types of neonics used in flea treatment. We are advised to use it on the back of our pet's neck and we are not supposed to touch the pet until it is dry. In practice, we know that the effects of those neonics and their ability to spread last for the duration of that flea treatment. We are seeing more neonics going into our rivers and watercourses as a result of flea treatments.

At the moment there is not enough focus on that area. If we have established that neonics are a concern for bees, we also need to understand the direction of travel. I do not come with a prescription for the Minister to cut and paste into policy; I am saying there is an issue here. It is important that we have an honest debate with members of the public who, I believe, are trying to do the right thing by their pets. Many of them would be

[*Luke Pollard*]

utterly horrified and aghast if they found out that in trying to do the right thing to support their pets and prevent diseases they are harming our wider ecosystem.

There is a debate worth having, as the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich suggested, on a destination and how we address the problem. The authorisation for emergency use of bee-killing pesticides on sugar beet crops affects a certain part of the country primarily. It does not affect every watercourse or river catchment area, yet we are finding neonics in a wider variety of areas when bee-killing pesticides are used, so it is incumbent on us all to make a strong case against bee-killing pesticides in agriculture and also look at bee-killing pesticides used elsewhere.

Professor Dave Goulson, whom my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester mentioned in her remarks and whom I met at a bee roundtable that I hosted a year or so ago to talk about bee-killing pesticides, warns that flea treatment harms fish and invertebrates that live in our waterways. Those are chemicals that were banned for agricultural use in the UK several years ago, and which remain banned for that use, but are allowed to be used in pet treatment—that is a question mark we have to look at. I have already spoken about the human health impacts; they are concerning and also need to be properly understood.

It is incumbent on all of us who campaign on bees, and who love bees, to make sure that our answers to this issue are clear on where we need to see action. The emergency authorisations for bee-killing pesticides in agriculture should end; they should not be allowed. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge will restate the position he has held in every one of the debates on this issue that I have spoken in over the course of this Parliament—that we should stop.

However, it is clear that there are also other challenges that we need to look at and investigate. Could the Minister explain where else we can look, and what science his Department is commissioning about the wider use of neonicotinoids and their pollution of our wider ecosystem? I do not think that any one of us present has the answer, but if we can agree on the problem, that will at least get us moving towards starting to address it.

I thank the campaigners—not only the wildlife trusts—who have been working on this and who are championing insects. Apart from bees, insects get a pretty bad rap—there are not many charities holding out for the daddy-long-legs, but without insects there is a really significant impact on our ecosystem. Insects should be championed much more. They are not just scary creepy-crawlies; they are absolutely essential for a vibrant ecosystem and the nature-based recovery that we all want to see.

In particular I want to thank Anabel Kindersley of Neal's Yard Remedies for her tireless campaigning on this matter. No debate could happen without her continued pressure on MPs and her encouragement of us to keep pushing further and further. Bees and nature matter; if we are not having that constantly said, there is a risk that the wider use of neonics becomes something that is just accepted, and that their authorisation becomes an annual occurrence that passes without a parliamentary vote.

In previous debates I have spoken about the importance of a parliamentary vote. If something damages our environment, as we know that these pesticides do, and that is against Government advice, and against the principles of evidence-based policymaking and “following the science” that the Minister's Department has set out, there should be an extra step before it is authorised.

The reason we do not have a debate and a vote on authorising bee-killing pesticides in agriculture is very simple—the Government would lose that vote each and every time. The Opposition MPs would vote against it and their own MPs would vote against it, and that is why we do not have a vote on it. That in itself should tell us a story about whether the use of those pesticides is acceptable behaviour.

In this latest authorisation, those chemicals are being used against the Government's expert advice, and that is ill-judged and wrong. There has been no parliamentary vote on it, nor do I think the Minister wants one—it will not happen. I do not think we can have an emergency four years in a row without bigger action. That is why, whether we like it or not, bees are an election issue, and matter to the voters who we all represent. They are in decline across the country, despite the incredible efforts of local councils planting wild flower meadows and bee corridors, and of local people encouraging the use of hives. Pollenize is an amazing community interest company in Plymouth that puts amazingly-painted beehives all over our city and collects the honey, supporting nature-based recoveries. However, despite their work we know that that recovery is not working in the way we want it to.

This is not just about the emergency authorisation of bee-killing pesticides; it is about something else as well. This involves habitat loss and the wider use of neonics in our economy, and we must look at all of those. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, but I also look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge, so that we can be absolutely clear that those bee-killing pesticides would not be authorised if there were a change in Government. I would encourage my hon. Friend's position on this matter to go in that direction.

If that were the case, there would be a greater focus on the issue that the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich mentioned—finding better ways of supporting our farmers who are affected by this issue. Not all farmers are affected, but some are, and they deserve support. If this were a genuine emergency it would be all hands on deck to try and solve this matter, but four years later it is still not all hands on deck. Four years later we are still here, having emergency authorisations passed without a parliamentary vote, and bees are still dying. That is why this needs to change; we need a change of approach, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister and the shadow Minister what that approach should be.

3.9 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Henderson. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) for securing the debate. Her introduction was full and thorough, and I will echo many of her points. I am also grateful for the other speakers. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has left us. I have long wondered what

he was on to keep him going, and now we know the answer: two spoonfuls of honey on a piece of toast in the morning. We will all have to try that.

I was particularly taken with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). His passion for bees is legendary and he raised a series of important points, many of which I will touch on. I thought that the exchange between him and the Minister on the threshold issue was illuminating. I fear that, because of the weather this year, we are likely to cross that threshold again, so in reality we are talking about a derogation that will be applied this year. He made a point about flea treatment for pets, and I think that issue will rise and rise in salience. It is clearly a significant problem.

The key point is that we are here again—for the fourth time. It is almost an annual debate—the annual neonicotinoids debate. It really is a case of *déjà vu*. We are also still waiting for the national action plan on pesticides. I have had this brief for four and a half years now, and Josie Cohen and others from the Pesticide Action Network have been pressing me on this point all the way through. I have lost count of the number of changes in terminology so, if the Minister cannot give us a date, perhaps he could tell us whether it is soon, imminent or in due course, or maybe, just possibly, after the election—who knows?

There is a serious point here: why on earth has it taken so long to deal with these issues, which have already been raised? Why can't we find a way forward? How many times is it that the Government have ridden roughshod over expert opinion by allowing yet another emergency authorisation for the use of Cruiser SB? We have already heard the answer; it is four times. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said, that hardly constitutes an emergency because, once again, the Government have ignored the advice of Government scientific advisers on the UK Expert Committee on Pesticides. Back in September, it said that it was unable to support an authorisation for Cruiser SB because

“the potential adverse effects to honeybees and other pollinators...outweighs any likely benefits.”

It is right. We simply cannot afford to allow further devastation to the number of bees in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport has already quoted the statistics: one third of the UK bee population has disappeared in the last decade. Since 1900, 13 of 35 native bee species have been lost. There has been a dramatic decline in the number of all pollinators, which has fallen by over 50% between 1985 and 2005.

This is a fundamental threat to the survival of a much-loved part of our natural world—a threat that we should challenge not only for its own sake, but because the economic consequences are severe. Quite frankly, we would struggle to survive without bees. They are crucial to our physical health and the health of the wider environment. In the UK alone, approximately 75% of our crop species require pollination and around 70 crops depend on, or benefit from, bee pollination. Though there are of course other methods of pollination, wild bees can pollinate on a much bigger and more efficient scale than the alternatives.

The economic benefits are estimated to be worth approximately £690 million to the UK economy in terms of the value of the crops they pollinate. From a global

perspective, bees pollinate 70 out of the top 100 foods we eat and an astonishing one third of every mouthful of food we consume. They are also essential for the crops used for animal feed. Without them, it would be harder to produce much of our meat, egg and dairy products. I am told that in China they have had to resort to pollinating fruit trees by hand because pollinators have been nearly wiped out by pesticide use. That should serve as a warning to us. Estimates suggest that it would cost UK farmers an incredible £1.8 billion a year to manually pollinate their crops. Without bees, it would not be long before our ecosystem was in severe trouble.

Not only are bees in more danger every year, but they are more important every year. According to the UN, the volume of agricultural production dependent on pollinators has increased globally by 300% in the past 50 years. The UN also found that greater pollinator density results in better crop yields, so it is also good for farmers.

These pesticides are not only toxic for bees; at certain levels, they are toxic to aquatic life and build up in river systems. Research by the Rivers Trust and Wildlife and Countryside Link found neonicotinoids in more than one in 10 English river sites tested by the Environment Agency. The levels of neonicotinoids in many of our rivers was above the environmental quality standard deemed safe for aquatic wildlife. The rivers most affected by the pesticides were found in the east of England, south-east England and west midlands, including the Ivel, Waveney, Nene, Ouse and Tame. The evidence is pretty clear. It is no surprise that other countries are heeding the advice of their experts on banning these pesticides.

A European High Court ruling last year found that no derogation concerning seeds treated with neonicotinoids was justified, including in exceptional circumstances invoked to protect sugar beet. The French Government announced on 24 January 2023 that they had decided not to pursue a further exemption for neonicotinoid use on sugar beet, in the light of the court ruling, effectively putting an end to the emergency use in Europe of three banned substances—imidacloprid, clothianidin and thiamethoxam. We are going in the opposite direction from scientific and legal consensus in comparable countries.

I recognise the problems that growers face in combating diseases transmitted by aphids. I am an east of England Member of Parliament and I absolutely understand the importance of the sugar beet industry to our region. Virus yellows, in particular, causes significant yield losses. The National Farmers Union, as has been said, reports that for some that can be up to 50%, and I thank the NFU for its background briefing. The most complex and serious example is that spread by the peach potato aphid, and it is hard to control. In 2020, the sector lost 40% of the national sugar beet crop, bringing down the five-year average yield by 25%.

I was grateful to the NFU and British Sugar a few months ago; I met their representatives and some from the British Beet Research Organisation in Rougham near Bury St Edmunds. We stood in a field and looked very closely at the impact of the disease on a variety of sugar beet plants. That was an informative and chastening experience, because one could see the damage being done to those plants. I fully appreciate the challenge that farmers face. I also think that most farmers know

[Daniel Zeichner]

that the use of this chemical will not be a long-term solution. In 2023, 40% of sugar beet farmers in England chose not to use them, despite the authorisation allowing their use. That is up from 29% in 2022.

To go back to earlier discussions, many have been able to successfully deploy integrated pest management systems. There was an interesting piece in *Farmers Weekly* a few weeks ago detailing the recommendations being made by BBRO, including a move to more tolerant varieties. That is part of the issue—it is an economic one. The problem is that, in moving to some of those more tolerant varieties, there is a yield penalty, a financial calculation. What that tells us is that there are choices, and that it can be done. The question is whether we choose to do so.

My view is that the future will be different, and I think that is why so many people are exasperated and genuinely shocked by the Government's continuing stance. The reaction to the Government's latest decision to authorise the use of Cruiser SB has been damning. The Wildlife Trusts called it a

“deathblow for wildlife, a backwards step in evidence-based decision making and a betrayal of farmers who are producing food sustainably.”

The chief executive officer of Wildlife and Countryside Link said the decision

“flies in the face of ecological sense”.

It is not just environmental and wildlife groups who are outraged. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport has already referenced the campaigning work of Anabel Kindersley, chief executive of Neal's Yard Remedies, who helped to establish the “Save the Bees” campaign with a number of businesses that have repeatedly called for an end to the use of bee-killing pesticides. That is partly because they see the threat to bees as a threat to their businesses. In the modern world, that is the challenge: not just to produce food, but to do so in an environmentally sustainable, nature-positive way. I acknowledge that that is hard, and we may need new tools to help us, but change has to come, and it should start now with an end to the use of these toxic chemicals in our fields.

3.19 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a farmer, although we do not and have never produced sugar beet at home. I thank hon. Members for their contributions to this interesting debate. We agree on more than we disagree on, including the necessity to find a way forward, to which I wholly subscribe.

Decisions to allow or not to allow the use of pesticides are based on careful scientific assessment of the risks. The aim is to achieve a high level of protection for people, animals and the environment while improving agricultural production. The decision to grant the emergency authorisation of Cruiser SB was not taken lightly and was based on robust assessment of the environmental and economic risks and benefits.

The emergency authorisation was issued with a strict threshold for use. The seed treatment was authorised to be used if—and only if—a virus incidence rate of 65% or

more over the summer months was forecast by the independent model developed by Rothamsted Research. That forecast was made on Friday 1 March.

The use of Cruiser SB on sugar beet in England will be allowed this year as yellows virus incidence thresholds, as predicted by the Rothamsted model, has been met. Emerging sugar beet seedlings and young plants are vulnerable to feeding by aphids, which transmit several viruses collectively known as virus yellows. These viruses lead to reduced beet size, lower sugar content and higher impurities.

We withdrew authorisation for the use of pesticide products containing three neonicotinoids on outdoor crops at the end of 2018. Since then, sugar beet growers have been adjusting to the new conditions. In 2020, there was severe damage, with 24% of the national crop being lost, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), recognised. Many individual growers were severely affected and less sugar beet was planted in 2021, because some growers were reluctant to take the economic risk. In recent years, the virus threat has been relatively low.

This year, the threshold has been set at a predicted virus incidence of 65% or above. That is a slight increase from last year's threshold. The change reflects our improving understanding of the fit between the model used to predict virus incidence and the real-world outcomes. The aim of the threshold is to ensure that Cruiser is used only if damage is predicted to sugar beet production.

Members will be aware of the strict conditions of use that have also been set as a requirement of the emergency authorisation. As the threshold has been met and neonicotinoid-treated seeds will be planted, those conditions are in place to mitigate risks to the environment, including risks to pollinators. Neonicotinoids take time to break down in the environment, and during that period, may be taken up by flowering plants. The conditions for use of Cruiser SB therefore allow only a limited range of crops, none of which flowers before harvest, to be planted in the same field within 32 months of a treated sugar beet crop.

Growers must also comply with a stewardship scheme. As part of that scheme, treated fields are monitored to determine the levels of neonicotinoids in the environment. Full details of the conditions of use have been published online.

To be clear, we remain committed to the existing restrictions on neonicotinoids. Emergency authorisations are approved only where strict legal requirements are met. There must be special circumstances. Use must be limited and controlled, and the authorisation must appear necessary because of a danger that cannot be contained by any other reasonable means.

Daniel Zeichner: I wonder whether we could turn the question round. What would need to happen for the Minister not to grant a derogation? I cannot really see circumstances in which this situation is likely to change.

Mark Spencer: There are circumstances where it is likely to change. There are advancements in other products that are coming forward in the marketplace. The gene editing Act offers opportunities for research institutes to find alternative genetic possibilities to help improve resistance within the sugar beet plants to some of these pests and diseases. In those circumstances, as those new

technologies come forward, of course they will be assessed on their merits. We are very keen to support the development of alternatives to try to help sugar beet producers and the environment at the same time.

Daniel Zeichner *rose*—

Luke Pollard *rose*—

Mark Spencer: I give way to the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner: As I said in my speech, it is not that tolerant varieties or alternatives are not already available; it is that there is an economic cost. I do not really see how that is different from the situation the Minister has described. They will not necessarily provide the same level of yield, even with the gene editing. There will still be a cost.

Mark Spencer: Let me give way to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, and then I will take both points at the same time.

Luke Pollard: I support what my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said. The Minister set out the reasons for Cruiser SB's authorisation. Could he be equally clear about the plan to address it? What measures are being taken, how are those measures being assessed and how can we as interested parliamentarians scrutinise progress against those measures, so that that we are not here next year having the same debate with the same possible alternatives, but not yet having them in action? Can he set that out in a reply to Members in this debate, or as a written ministerial statement, so that we can see what plan his Department is pursuing?

Mark Spencer: The plan that we are pursuing is working with the sector and the scientific community to try and bring those advances forward as soon as possible. It is not possible for me to stand here today and predict what those advances may be in the next 12 months or five years. Clearly, we have to work with the sector. British Sugar is putting an awful lot of work into trying to improve sugar beet growing in terms of its practice and the products available.

To return to the point I was making, the aim of the threshold is to ensure that Cruise will be used only if there is predicted to be a danger to the sugar beet crop. Those criteria have been met at the moment. There must, of course, be special circumstances. Use must be limited and controlled, and the authorisation must appear necessary because the danger cannot be contained by any other reasonable means. That emergency authorisation allows a single use of neonicotinoid on a single crop under very strict conditions to mitigate the risk to those pollinators.

My decision was informed by the advice of DEFRA's chief scientific adviser, the Health and Safety Executive and the UK Expert Committee on Pesticides. I also considered economic issues informed by analysis from DEFRA economists. The scientific advice concluded that with the proposed conditions of use there were no concerns for human health. In respect of environmental risk, potential risks to bees were considered in particular detail.

HSE concluded that a number of potential risks to bees, including acute risks to bees from all routes of exposure, were not of concern for this use of thiamethoxam under the proposed conditions of use. Further advice from the chief scientific adviser was that remaining risks, including those from following crops, were likely to be acceptably low given the conditions of the use proposed.

In taking the decision, we have wanted to be as transparent as possible and to give access to the information considered during the decision-making process. We have published documents outlining the key elements involved in making the decision, which can be accessed on gov.uk. That includes the HSE emergency registration report, where Members can access the full HSE risk assessment.

Looking to the future, we do not wish to see the temporary use of neonicotinoids continue longer than is strictly required. The development of alternative sustainable approaches to protect sugar beet crops from viruses is paramount. That includes, as I was saying, the development of resistant plant varieties, measures to improve crop hygiene and husbandry, and alternative pesticides. British Sugar, plant breeders and the British Beet Research Organisation are undertaking a programme of work to develop such alternatives. The Government are closely monitoring progress and in January provided £660,000 towards a precision breeding project to develop resistance to virus yellows in sugar beet, helping to expedite the transition away from neonics.

In addition, the Government recently held a roundtable with members of the British sugar industry and environmental organisations to discuss the industry's progress on implementing alternatives. I have urged British Sugar and others in the sector to drive forward the plans so that their outputs can be implemented in the field at pace. This afternoon's discussion gives us an opportunity to recognise the need to develop alternative, sustainable approaches to tackling these plant diseases.

The Government are fully committed to the agricultural transition to repurpose the land-based subsidies we inherited from the EU, which did little for the environment or farmers. That is why we are delivering on a new and ambitious system that rewards farmers and land managers for their role as environmental stewards, which starts with the sustainable farming incentive. Last year saw the roll-out of the sustainable farming incentive, which includes the introduction of paid integrated pest management actions. Specific actions to support more sustainable pesticide use include: paying farmers to carry out assessments and produce integrated pest management plans; establishing and maintaining flower-rich grass margins, blocks or in-field strips; and payments for not using insecticides or for planting companion crops. Those actions are already supporting farmers to minimise the use of pesticides and incentivising the uptake of alternative pest control methods. Encouraging lower-risk and alternative approaches to pest management will be a prominent feature of the national action plan on the sustainable use of pesticides, which will be published shortly.

As I have outlined, the decision to allow the limited and controlled use of new neonicotinoid-based pesticides on a single crop was not taken lightly and is based on the most robust scientific assessment. We will continue to work hard to support our farmers, and to protect and restore our vital pollinator populations.

Luke Pollard: I do not quite buy the Minister's argument. Will he reflect momentarily on the other uses of neonicotinoids in our wider economy, including in flea treatments? I recognise that he may not have the answers in the folder in front of him, but this might be an area that he could ask his officials to investigate. We are at the start of exploring the issue, and I would be grateful if he could set out the path that he thinks would be useful to take in order to explore the matter further.

Mark Spencer: I am more than happy to continue to explore that issue. It is interesting that the hon. Member should raise it at this moment in time because we are doing some work in that regard, and there is a statutory instrument coming on veterinary medicines and their deployment. He will be aware that some flea treatments require a veterinary prescription and some can be done under the jurisdiction of an expert—I hesitate to use that word; for example, it might be in a pet shop, where there is some expertise. Others treatments can simply be bought of the internet, so there are different levels of treatment. The Department needs to be careful that such products are of benefit to pets, but also of their impact on the environment. We will consider that robustly as we move forward. I thank him for highlighting that matter and thank hon. Members for their contributions.

3.33 pm

Samantha Dixon: I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner)—and other hon. Members for joining the debate. I am not sure that I am particularly reassured. I have heard that, as of Friday, growers may be spraying this particular chemical on their crops.

Mark Spencer: On a point of clarification, the product is not sprayed. There is no aerial spraying of neonicotinoids at any point, and I would not want to inadvertently mislead the House.

Samantha Dixon: Crops are being treated with this particular chemical, which I find disconcerting. As I set out in my speech, concerns are shared by constituents up and down the country that instead of the chemical being used in an emergency situation, its use is becoming routine.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for broadening the debate into the use of the chemical in pet treatments, and I thank the Minister for his comments about how the Government are considering addressing the issue. An SI may not be the most appropriate way to do that, given the need for the wider concerns about neonicotinoids to be aired, as he said, as transparently as possible; an SI is not the route that most of my constituents would want to see followed. I go back to the point I made earlier about the use of parliamentary time to consider and debate these issues.

Hopefully, this time next year we will not be debating this issue. Hopefully, that will not be necessary, as alternative means of controlling the specific disease referenced today will have been found, but I hope that everyone here understands how worried people are about the future health of bee communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the environmental impact of neonicotinoids and other pesticides.

3.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Wine Duty

4 pm

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): I shall call Will Quince to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered wine duty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I am pleased to have secured this important debate the day before my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer delivers the Budget statement to the House. I am grateful to the Minister for responding. I know he will take very seriously the points I will make further to our correspondence on this issue. I would also like to thank the unusually great number of right hon. and hon. Members present for supporting this 30-minute Westminster Hall debate. I hope the Minister has noticed the strength of feeling on this important subject.

I applied for this debate as a result of meeting the chief executive officer of Majestic Wine, which is the UK's largest specialist wine retailer, with more than 200 stores across the UK, including a large store in my constituency. They raised a number of concerns relating to wine duty that I felt were important for the House to hear and reflect on. The UK is a major global hub for wine and spirits. It is the world's second largest importer of wine by volume and value, and the largest exporter of spirits. It supports over 390,000 jobs, £69 billion in economy activity and £8.6 billion in excise duty revenue.

Like all businesses, those across the wine supply chain have had to confront some tough trading conditions over recent years, but a number of the challenges they face are unique to the wine and spirit trade, and these were brought to my attention by Majestic. The challenges faced by Majestic and other similar businesses stem primarily from the new alcohol excise system, which was introduced last year. In particular I am referring to the impact of the historic duty increases and the changes to the way wine duty is calculated. The introduction of the new duty regime last August followed a review of the inherited EU duty rules. When the review was announced, it was welcomed across the drinks industry, which backed wholeheartedly the aims of the review, which were to make the new duty system fairer, simpler, less distortive and easier to administer.

Sadly, particularly for wine and spirit businesses, the new regime is not fairer. In fact, in many ways it has reinforced the existing market distortions. For wine businesses, the new system is anything but simpler to administer—in fact, it is exactly the opposite. The new system that was introduced on 1 August 2023 levies excise duty on all alcoholic products according to strength, but at different rates. This reinforces pre-existing market distortions by continuing to tax wine and spirits more harshly than other categories of alcoholic drink.

When introducing the new system, the Government recognised the impact it would have on wine businesses and rightly put in place a temporary easement mechanism that pegged the amount payable for wines in the range of 11.5% to 14.5% at the amount payable on a wine of

12.5% alcohol by volume. That amount is currently £2.67 per bottle. Wines falling within this easement mechanism account for 85% of the wine sold in the UK market. That is 1.1 million out of 1.3 million bottles sold. This easement is set to end on 1 February 2025.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I represent the Wine Society, which is headquartered in Stevenage and is a large organisation struggling under this pressure. It will cost it £300,000 to £400,000 to upgrade its systems. It is being asked to price wine before the level of alcohol is known, as wine is an agricultural product, and it is having to re-evaluate the range of wines it is able to output, which is having a knock-on effect on the supply chain. Does my hon. Friend agree that this seems to be a difficult case of unintended consequences, and if the easement he refers to were to be made permanent rather than temporary, it could solve the problem?

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He is right to champion the cause of the Wine Society, which is based in his constituency. There is both a significant cost implication and an administrative burden for such organisations, so the impact of these changes should not be understated.

The easement that is set to end on 1 February 2025 will affect wine businesses ranging from major retailers such as the big supermarkets to specialist retailers such as Majestic. However, as my right hon. Friend has just alluded to, there are also thousands of independent wine merchants who have all said that having to implement fully the strength-based system would impose significant costs, running to many millions of pounds, both in the short term and once the necessary systems are established.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for his great speech. We are constituency neighbours and he knows that it is not just wine merchants that will be affected but thousands of wine businesses across the UK. We have a strong and flourishing wine sector, but this regime has failed to meet one of the original key objectives that the Treasury sought to establish, which was to make the system easier to administer. Instead, unit labelling and ABV is putting a burden on producers and merchants, which means that they face pricing and cost implications. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is increasing red tape at a time when the Government should be doing much more to reduce it and ease the costs and the burdens of regulation for businesses?

Will Quince: My right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is absolutely right to raise that issue, and she has long championed cutting the red tape and bureaucracy that British businesses face. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) said, this unintended consequence means that business faces not just extra cost but the significant administrative burden that comes with cost and time. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) is right to point out that the new system is not simpler or fairer and that it has a huge cost implication.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. James Nicholson Wine in Crossgar, which is in my constituency, is one of

[Jim Shannon]

those excellent wine businesses that draws lots of people, not just because of the quality and wide variety of its wines but because it has also become a bit of a tourist attraction. It does lots of things. When it comes to the retention of jobs, does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Government's proposed changes will undoubtedly—though I hope not—have an impact on job creation and job retention?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman is right to intervene on that point, because job creation and retention, including in his constituency, is important, as is our flourishing tourism sector. The growth in wine production across our country is something that we should celebrate; we should be proud of that and support it.

This debate is timely because we have some time on our hands. Obviously, the sooner we give notice to industry that the easement can continue, the lower the cost and administrative burden borne by industry. We have until 1 February 2025 to address this issue. I will have an ask for the Minister in a few moments, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will agree with.

I will just touch on one other element first, which is why wine is different. The easement recognises that wine is different from other categories of alcoholic drink. Wine cannot be made to a predetermined strength; the alcoholic strength of wine is determined by climate. I know that I do not need to teach anyone in this Chamber to suck eggs, but wine from warmer climates tends to be higher in alcohol than wine from cooler climates. Wine is not like beer or cider. And wine is subject to strict production rules, so in that respect it is also unlike beer and cider. As a consequence, there is very little that wine makers can do to lower the alcohol content.

It is estimated that there are over 100,000 different wines on the UK market. By comparison, there are less than 1,000 different ciders. Different vintages of wine can vary in strength, as is the case with some wines from the same year. Of course, that is one of the great pleasures of wine; wines from around the world are unique, while different vintages from the same vineyard can differ in strength and taste.

Taxing alcohol by strength, with lower rates for lower-strength products, might seem simpler on paper, but it takes absolutely no account of how different alcoholic products are consumed, including in what quantities and whether the product is diluted. This new system is much more complicated to administer for wine businesses and it penalises wine from warmer climates.

The differences between wine, spirits, beer and cider will remain if the easement ends. In practice, if the easement is abolished as planned, there will be 30 different payable amounts for wine in the 11.5% to 14.5% ABV range.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important argument. I met with Liquid Indulgence, a small wine supplier in my constituency that supplies commercial businesses around York, as well as selling direct to customers. The point my hon. Friend is making is exactly what that small business said to me about the impact this change would have on that business and whether it could continue. It will surely have a massive impact on small wine suppliers across

the country, and will potentially have a negative impact on what those businesses can bring in in tax, compared with what the Government are trying to achieve.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point on behalf of the small wine supplier he represents in York. Of course, this change will have a massive impact. When Majestic originally brought this matter to my attention, it did so not just on its own behalf, but on behalf of the thousands of wine organisations and companies across the country, ranging from one-person bands through to small and medium-sized enterprises, all of which will bear the administrative burden of this cost.

I want to reiterate one point. If this easement ends—I hope it is “if”, as I very much hope the Minister listens and it will not end—there will be 30 different payable amounts for wine across the 11.5% to 14.5% ABV range. Prices will range from £2.45 to £3.10 per bottle. The practical arrangements that would need to be made as a result of this change are countless, including the reality that two wines from the same independent vineyard in France, say, would have to be labelled differently.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Other right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned wine merchants, but what we have so far not discussed are the wine growers in the UK. I had better declare an interest, being the chair of all-party parliamentary group for wine of Great Britain. Wine production is one of the fastest growing agriculture sectors, employing about 2,300 people, with a predicted 50% growth in jobs by 2025. Last year, 2023, was an absolutely vintage year, with an estimated 25 million bottles. This easement affects not just wine merchants, but a very important and fast-growing agriculture sector.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not just about wine merchants, of course; it is also about the growers. It is a boom industry in this country, and not just for tourism, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, but because English wine, and wine from across our four nations, is being consumed far more frequently than ever before. It is something that we should encourage as a country. I know the Chancellor is keen, in particular, to encourage sparkling wine.

I want to reiterate a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). I am sorry to labour this point, but it is important. The abolition of the easement would introduce massive ongoing red tape costs that concern supermarkets and large retailers, which, of course, we are concerned about. However, what I am more concerned about, as my right hon. and hon. Friends have eloquently pointed out, is the disproportionate costs for smaller wine businesses in constituencies across this country.

As I have said, wine has far more stock keeping units, or SKUs, than other alcohol categories. It is estimated that there are in excess of 100,000 wine SKUs on the UK market. A specialist SME wine retailer, for example, will carry more than 2,000 SKUs at any one time, while larger wine retailers may carry up to 10,000 SKUs. If the easement ends, the duty will have to be calculated individually for each SKU; this will have to be done on an annual basis, as alcoholic strength can vary between vintages.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good case. I speak on behalf of Direct Wines, which is based in my constituency. It has pointed out that now is not the time to remove the easement because the hospitality industry is still struggling to recover from the pandemic. Just over the weekend, we read that a number of pubs are closing regularly. Now is surely not the time to bring about more cost pressures to the industry.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend makes a valid point about time. Arguably—I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham on this—there is no time to impose additional red tape and bureaucracy on SMEs across this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) is right, however, and as I said at the outset, businesses are coming out of what has been a difficult economic situation. We need to support them as much as we can. As a constituency MP, it sets off alarm bells when I hear that a large organisation such as Majestic—in fact, the largest in the UK—informs me that it will struggle with the additional bureaucracy and cost. We can therefore only imagine how difficult it will be for the tens of thousands of smaller UK wine businesses in constituencies across our country.

As I said at the outset, the UK is the world's second largest importer of wine by volume and by value. In 2022, we imported the equivalent of more than 1.7 billion bottles of still and sparkling wine. I know that the Minister—a good man and a great Minister, whom I respect hugely—recognises the economically significant contribution that the wine industry makes to the United Kingdom. I invite him to commit today to visiting the Majestic Wine headquarters in Watford before the Easter recess, because I think that will allow him to understand—as I have by meeting people from Majestic—the full implications for wine businesses of ending the easement.

For all the reasons that I, and right hon. and hon. Members have set out, I genuinely believe that there is still time to do the right thing. The more notice that we give business, the better. I hope that the easement will continue—but I hope that that decision can be made soon—that we will do the right thing and that we will make the easement permanent. It is a simple fix, which would benefit business and consumers, and make very little difference, if any, to Treasury receipts.

4.16 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, as always, Mr Henderson.

I congratulate my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), on securing the debate and on the attendance that he has achieved. I recognise the strength of feeling on this across the House and in particular in this Chamber today. I completely share his support for our broader alcohol sector. Not only is it a significant contributor to our gross national product, but I would suggest that it pays a little towards our gross national happiness. It is part of our heritage. From Shakespeare's plays to our modern British sparkling wines, we have long recognised how life's triumphs and trials—weddings, wet weather and the working day—can be soothed or celebrated with a glass of our favourite tittle. I recognise that.

In the past few weeks alone, therefore, I have for example met the head of the all-party parliamentary group on wine and spirits, my right hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), and the highly active Wine and Spirit Trade Association to discuss how this remarkable industry's potential can be truly uncorked. My officials have engaged with businesses and representatives of the UK industry up and down this country as part of budgetary processes that one might expect, from the more well-aged players such as Majestic Wine to the younger vintages such as Ambriel Sparkling.

On behalf of the Government, I am proud to represent our alcohol duty reform package and to present it to the House. We have introduced the biggest reform of alcohol duties for more than 140 years. We introduced a new, simplified alcohol duty system based on the common-sense principle of taxing alcohol by strength to modernise the existing duties, to support businesses and to meet our public health objectives. This is the first time that public health objectives have been inserted into the alcohol duty system.

That reflects four key principles, which it might be helpful for me to set out: the duty system should be fair to the producers that make and grow the drinks we enjoy; it should recognise the importance of jobs, and of pubs and their role in our national life; it should tackle the problem of harmful high-strength products being sold too cheaply; and it should support innovation and modern drinking trends, in particular today's trend of moving towards lower-alcohol products. Our reforms do just that.

As part of the changes, which came into effect in August last year, we have supported our wine sector. Let me set out how we have done so. First, we removed the sparkling wine premium. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) rightly spoke about our domestic growers, a really important part of our wine industry. I recently met the chief executive officer of WineGB. I can tell her that we have removed the English sparkling wine premium. Since 1 August 2023, sparkling wines attract less duty than they did under the previous duty system. That is one of the points that I want to make today.

In such a reform some duty has gone up for some sectors in the alcohol industry and some has gone down. For our domestic growers of English sparkling wine it has gone down significantly, even with the retail price index increase that we saw last year. That is the right thing to do for our domestic growers. It will ensure consistency in our system and build success for British wines, which my hon. Friend and I want to see.

Secondly, as has been extensively discussed today—I will come on to this in more detail and address some of the points that have been made—we introduced a wine easement for 18 months until February 2025. As a result, all wine between 11.5% and 14.5% alcohol by volume will be subject to duty as if it were 12.5% ABV. That means we have effectively given the wine industry time to adapt to the new system and allow wine producers to adapt their systems. I recognise completely that a shake-up of a system that has existed for more than 140 years will raise some eyebrows and cause change for a number of businesses, but we should be confident that the bureaucratic burden under the new system is manageable.

[Gareth Davies]

Every other product is already subject to duty based on our strength-based system. We have included, as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester rightly pointed out, the weather impact of wine, and included cider, which is also subject to seasonal variability challenges. We are mindful of unintended consequences, as several right hon. and hon. Members have outlined, but to make the wine easement permanent, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) has called for, would go against the principle of the alcohol reform to move to a strength-based system that brings in the public health element. As I have already said, although the impact on wine is clearly being felt, we have provided an easement over a period of time that was decided in consultation with the wine industry in four rounds of consultation before the reform comes into being.

I can commit to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester that we will monitor the reforms and their impact. We have outlined that three years after they come into effect, which is enough time for us to be able to assess them, we will conduct an impact assessment, which will allow His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to gather the relevant information to understand any long-term impacts in the alcohol market. That commitment complements the broader fiscal approach, because at the last autumn statement we announced tax cuts that supported the alcohol and hospitality industry.

We froze alcohol duty for six months until 1 August 2024. We also announced a package of business rate changes and tax cuts worth £4.3 billion over the next five years. My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) was right to highlight the difficult time that our hospitality industry has gone through in recent times. That is why we extended the retail, hospitality and leisure relief scheme—a 75% relief—up to a cash amount of £110,000 per business between 2024 and 2025. In addition to the work being led by my colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs on their package of wine reforms, which will increase flexibility and innovation, the Government have announced a freeze to the small business multiplier for the fourth consecutive year, for 2024-25, protecting over 1 million ratepayers from a multiplier increase. That builds on the unprecedented support that we should never forget we offered the industry during the pandemic—some £16 billion of business rate support. We have also held the tax rate steady over the last three years, which has protected businesses from inflationary pressures at a cost of £14.5 billion to the Exchequer.

This Government have never given the sector reason to doubt our commitment to it, because it has received many cuts or freezes to duty over the last decade. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester that the wine industry has benefited from cuts or freezes to wine duty at five of the last 11 fiscal events. Compared with 2015, wine duty is some 12% lower in real terms. That is something we can all raise a glass to.

Finally, I will address the comments by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who, rightly, has consistently raised the issue of red tape for businesses in the House. She specifically mentioned labelling. Overall, these reforms to our alcohol system simplify our tax duty. That is a Brexit freedom. Under the last slight change to our alcohol duty system in 1996, we had to take duty from the European Union, which was incredibly complicated, completely inconsistent, and did not include any provision for public health. Our easement gives businesses time to adapt to the new system and put in place measures to be able to administer it. Wine can still be labelled to 0.5% ABV. DEFRA has introduced guidance and an option to label to 0.1%, but I want to be really clear that that is optional.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester for raising this important sector and this important issue. It is right that the Government's fiscal approach continues to be scrutinised in this way. I am confident that this policy is the right one, not just for the wine industry, but for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

South West Water

4.30 pm

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of South West Water.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Henderson. I am delighted to have secured this important debate, one year on from another debate that I secured on the performance of South West Water. It is another opportunity to hold South West Water to the highest possible standards in the House.

Last year, I described the performance of our water company and its historic lack of investment as “shameful”, and many of my constituents shared my point of view. This year, I want to focus my speech on the facts facing my constituency of East Devon. The public want to see evidence of improvement and delivery of the promised investment, and they want South West Water to clean up its act and our water. South West Water must deliver better services for our constituents, improve our bathing waters, and protect our natural environment. Not doing so puts the vibrancy of our coastal communities under threat.

As the MP for East Devon, I am determined to push South West Water to deliver the standards expected by local residents, visitors and businesses. I want the unacceptable pollution we have seen in Exmouth, Sidmouth and Budleigh Salterton to be met with the full force of the law. Thanks to this Conservative Government, we finally have the tools to hold South West Water to account. It is the biggest crackdown on sewage spills in history: the Government have introduced unlimited fines, accelerated investment plans, legal targets to reduce discharges from every single storm overflow and eliminate all ecological harm, as well as compulsory storm overflow monitors, and they have forced live spill data to be made public. I voted for all that. The Government have passed a suite of new laws to crack down on spills, including the Environment Act 2021, the Environmental Targets (Water) (England) Regulations 2022, the Environmental Civil Sanctions (England) (Amendment) Order 2023, and the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2023.

Those new laws, brought in by this Conservative Government—and no previous Government—are forcing the hand of water companies, but new laws on their own will not clean up our water: more investment, better data, and tougher enforcement are clearly needed. On investment, we know that South West Water has historically failed to invest; we pay the highest sewerage bills in the country, and we have not had our fair return for decades. On data, we now know the scale of the problem, because this Government lifted the lid on the water companies’ infrastructure and made them pay to monitor the results of their own failures.

On enforcement, the Environment Agency must be appropriately funded to carry out its enforcement work. In order to crack down on water pollution, this Government have boosted funding for the Environment Agency, with a budget of £2.2 million per year specifically for water company enforcement activity. That means more officers focused on regulation, more compliance checks, and more data specialists. Environment Agency workforce numbers are higher than a decade ago—there are now

13,200 staff, and it is growing at its base in Exeter. In the past two years, staff numbers have grown by 2,300 across the Environment Agency.

So are things moving in the right direction? Well, the Environment Agency has said:

“There is still much work to be done.”

Its latest annual rating for South West Water is now two stars. That rating is for 2022; in 2021, it was a one-star water company. The Environment Agency has said that the two-star rating is evidence of “modest improvements”, but it has also said that pollution is still at “unacceptable” levels. I agree: only last year, South West Water was fined £2.1 million after admitting that it caused pollution across Devon and Cornwall dating back to 2016. The year before last, it was hit by £13 million in fines in the form of bill deductions for customers. Since those fines were handed out, the Government have legislated to introduce unlimited financial penalties on water companies and expand the range of offences for which penalties can be applied.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way. It is interesting to note that a £2.1 million fine was levied against South West Water, but does he think that fine is going to make any difference to a company that has a debt in its water business of £2.8 billion?

Simon Jupp: I think every little helps. When we look at the scale of fines and potential future fines from ongoing investigations, which I will come to, I think we will see more money levied in that way from South West Water. Money raised by fines will then be channelled back into improving water quality, supporting local groups and community-led schemes, which help to protect our waterways.

The bosses of water firms that commit criminal acts of water pollution will be banned from receiving bonuses. I am pleased that the chief executive of South West Water led by example in not accepting a bonus last year. Meanwhile, the industry regulator, Ofwat, is currently investigating South West Water’s wastewater treatment works and leakage reporting. I and many colleagues look forward to seeing the outcome of those investigations. The need for independent regulators—Ofwat and the Environment Agency—to act decisively in these investigations is crucial.

Unfortunately, I have to report that the start of 2024 was particularly poor for South West Water in my constituency. Exmouth has faced several major incidents resulting from failures in South West Water’s infrastructure and the lack of investment in the town. South West Water has been using tankers to take sewage from burst sewer pipes to pumping stations, causing additional spills due to the disposal of additional tankered sewage. Those incidents are currently under investigation by the Environment Agency. The situation was—and is—completely unacceptable.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Incidents such as the one he has just described have been happening in Kingsbridge in my constituency, where there have been significant floods and raw sewage has been coming out of the network. The problem is that the investigations are not quick enough, nor are the actions to resolve them, and the damage done to residents and businesses

[Anthony Mangnall]

is not well enough understood by South West Water, which needs to engage at a far quicker rate. Does he agree?

Simon Jupp: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The extra resources being pumped into the Environment Agency in our region will no doubt be helpful. Coming back to Exmouth, unfortunately some of the ground team, both contractors and people who work for South West Water, who were trying to fix this mess faced harassment and abuse during the weeks of disruption. Historical underinvestment and poor management by South West Water executives are not the fault of workers on the ground, who are out day in, day out in all weathers. I thank everyone who worked so hard to fix those failures, come rain or shine.

As investigations continue into this extremely sorry state of affairs, I continue to work with the Environment Agency, Ofwat and the water Minister. Every option must be on the table in response, including hefty fines. The recent debacle in Exmouth has once again demonstrated the dire need for fast-tracked investment into Exmouth's water infrastructure, fully funded by South West Water. I have asked Ofwat to include Exmouth's recent pollution incidents as part of its ongoing investigation into sewage treatment works, and I am pleased that that is happening.

I visited the Exmouth burst pipe alongside the Environment Agency, and I challenged South West Water on the timescale for a permanent solution. I repeated my calls for it to speed up its plans for £38 million of investment in Exmouth. That work includes upgrades to reduce spill frequency at Phear Park and Maer Road pumping stations, and upgrading the sewage treatment works outlet through Sandy Bay holiday park.

That is apparently due to be completed by March 2025, but let me be exceptionally clear: I remain to be convinced that plans to manage spills by moving them across town from one part of the network to the other, or by building pipes further out to sea, will deliver the result that the people of Exmouth dearly deserve. Nor will I or anyone else be grateful for a partial fix. I would add that we still do not know the precise location of an important sewer overflow in Exmouth. After so many months, South West Water still has not determined where the Maer Road combined sewer overflow spills off Exmouth beach. That is unacceptable.

Anthony Mangnall: I apologise for intervening twice, but my hon. Friend has just made an essential point about the impact that water companies are having on our aquaculture businesses. Some of them are based out of Brixham, but some out in Lyme Bay, off his constituency, and they are severely jeopardised by the network that South West Water operates and by its lack of ability to treat the sewage. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to ensure that South West Water takes into account the businesses that will be affected by those networks?

Simon Jupp: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend, who makes a powerful point about the impact of this unacceptable performance on businesses. We need to know the location of the end of the pipe off Exmouth beach,

not only because of a potential breach of the Environment Agency's permit conditions, but for the safety of bathing water users. I remain on the case with South West Water. The saga has gone on for far too long. Both the Environment Agency and I agree that investment to reduce sewage spills in Exmouth is well overdue and I will not relent in my calls for more investment from South West Water in Exmouth and across all parts of East Devon.

Near to Exmouth is the gorgeous town of Budleigh Salterton, at the mouth of the River Otter, with a new national nature reserve that I was privileged to visit a couple of weeks ago. A couple of hours ago I learned that the sewer pipe in Budleigh Salterton burst last night. South West Water were using tankers to transport flows from Budleigh to Maer Lane sewage treatment works. I understand from South West Water, with whom I remain in touch about this recent incident and its impact on the local environment and disruption to local residents, that the repair is now complete. I have already received several emails on the matter. I have asked South West Water for more details on its longer-term plans for Budleigh Salterton and what its investment will mean in terms of spills.

Following my debate in Parliament last year, South West Water announced a new multimillion package to upgrade Sidmouth and Tipton St John's sewer system and to reduce the number of spills. I have been calling on South West Water to speed up that already announced investment, and I reiterate that call today—I know the company will hear me. We have seen far too many reports of spills off Sidmouth beach in the last few weeks. If it is possible to go further and faster, while balancing the cost to customers, South West Water must not hesitate to do so.

If South West Water believes its sewage systems cannot cope with new housing developments, it must say so. The Government are looking to consult on whether to make water companies statutory consultees on major planning applications. I wholeheartedly support such a move, and I urge the Minister to press ahead with that as quickly as possible.

I firmly believe that applications for new planning developments should only go ahead if it is clear that local water infrastructure can cope. I also urge the Minister to get water companies to install monitors on all emergency overflows. There cannot be any excuses for pollution. I understand that the Government want to do that, and I would be grateful to hear the timescale for when that could happen.

For my part of Devon, South West Water must make its water infrastructure fit for the future. When the new town of Cranbrook, which I am proud to represent, was being built, South West Water opted to upgrade an existing sewage treatment works in Exeter rather than build a new plant. If further development east of Exeter is to go ahead, I strongly urge South West Water to draw up plans for a new plant, with urgency.

Councillors on East Devon District Council very much jumped the gun to sign off a further new town of 8,000 homes in our district—just weeks before the new national planning policy framework was announced, which provides the tools to challenge such housing targets, especially in these circumstances. That was spectacularly short-sighted and risks further challenges for the district's water infrastructure.

I will not use much more time; I am conscious that other colleagues would like to speak. Outside Parliament, I have been working with East Devon parish, town, district and county councillors—this must be a cross-party endeavour—and with environmental groups. I have raised their concerns with South West Water's bosses, the Environment Agency and Ofwat. We all want to hold South West Water to account for its plans to invest in East Devon and to fix local problems urgently, as and when they crop up—and they do crop up all too frequently.

I have previously secured compensation for residents of Clyst St Mary after foul flooding in the village and I recently helped local charity Sidmouth Hospice at Home to reach a resolution over a hefty bill from South West Water. I have also facilitated meetings between Sidmouth town and Lympstone parish councils and senior figures in South West Water to look at data and delve into the issues in granular detail.

South West Water has held community meetings in Exmouth and Sidmouth recently and I publicly urge the company to continue to talk regularly with the communities that pay for its services. I also urge South West Water to publish its post-2025 investment plans online as soon as they are finalised. After all, it is we the public who are the billpayers. We have the right to know what is going on.

We all want to protect our stunning coastline, rivers and streams and hold South West Water to account for its failings. We finally have the tools to do so, through targets, fines, monitoring, data and investment plans. I am pleased to have secured this debate on the performance of South West Water and I very much look forward to hearing the contributions of other colleagues and the Minister this afternoon.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): I was about to remind hon. Members to bob if they want to speak, but it looks as though I do not have to. I gently urge Members to restrict their comments to about five minutes. I call Luke Pollard.

4.44 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Henderson. It is good to follow my fellow Janner, the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp), who brought forward this debate. The performance of South West Water is not good enough: that is felt by the constituents both he and I represent. We need renewed cross-party pressure on the company to invest in the services required to cut sewage spills and to return reliable water usage all year round, as well as to address the concerns about drought in our area.

Raw sewage is the perfect metaphor for the last 14 years. For years, South West Water dished out huge dividends to its shareholders while dumping sewage into our rivers and seas. Our region deserves so much better than that. The most recent data from the Environment Agency has not been published for 2023, but the 2022 figures show there were more than 37,000 sewage spills in the south-west. In Plymouth alone, there were more than 2,000—an average of five spills every day, or 12,750 hours of sewage dumping.

According to South West Water's live, interactive storm overflow map, as of half-past 3 today there are 26 bathing water locations across Devon and Cornwall that may be affected by the operation of overflows, including two in Plymouth. Having more data is a necessary part of being able to respond to the challenges of a lack of investment in infrastructure over a long time. However, that data must lead to enforcement and to a change in investment behaviour by South West Water in order to start shutting down those storm overflows for routine discharge.

All of us in this House recognise that, in the event of extreme weather, our water system cannot hold that much water—but we are not talking about extreme weather on a day-to-day basis; discharge is a routine daily occurrence from a water company that knows it should not be doing it, but is still doing it. I would like the water company to be more honest with customers and parliamentarians about what needs to be done to get to a point where all those storm overflows do not routinely discharge on a daily basis.

Richard Foord: The hon. Member talked about how data on sewage spills is gathered. Does he agree that, rather than water companies having complete control over gathering data on sewage spills, that function ought to sit with the regulator, the Environment Agency?

Luke Pollard: I am not a huge fan of the Environment Agency—I like the people who work there, but there are just not enough of them. Certainly, since 2010, Environment Agency funding has been cut by over 50%, which creates real challenges in the efficiency of prosecutions. Prosecutions that take years do not represent justice delivered quickly, or fines going to the affected communities quickly; they represent justice delayed, and something that can be built into the company's daily business operations.

I will pick up on a final point before I finish: the investment that South West Water is making at Devil's Point in Plymouth. As a regular wild swimmer there—I swim all year round, in shorts or wetsuits, depending on the time of year—I am grateful that the Minister and his predecessor authorised the campaign I was running for a new bathing water status at Devil's Point and Firestone Bay. That is very welcome. The data collection there shows excellent water quality nearly all year round, but the two private raw sewage outlets that pump untreated human effluent into that important part of Plymouth Sound are not acceptable. I am grateful to South West Water for starting the work on closing those and adopting those raw sewers, but that work is taking too long and I would like to see a greater urgency in delivering it. We know raw sewage is going into our sea, and the action taken there should be quicker.

I encourage the Minister to keep pressure on South West Water, because as a water company it is not investing enough in the infrastructure we need. I have long-term concerns about the amount of water in our system to prevent future droughts and water restrictions in the summer. I would be grateful if the Minister could keep that pressure on South West Water, so that the region gets the water and sewage services that we deserve.

4.49 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I will focus my remarks on water supply rather than pollution. To give some context, the Environment Agency predicts

[Anne Marie Morris]

that England risks running short of water by 2045—not very far away—due to climate change and population growth. The Government are struggling to get our daily usage down to 122 litres per person by 2050—currently that figure is 145 litres. We have built no new reservoirs since 1991, and we know that the Environment Agency is going to reduce river abstractions.

In 2022 we had one of the hottest summers on record, and yes, we did almost run out of water. What happened in the south-west? Reservoirs were at a record low—Roadford lake was 30% below its usual water level—and, much to everyone’s consternation, hosepipe bans were implemented for over a year, from August 2022 to September 2023. The Environment Agency was not impressed; as a result of a Freedom of Information Act request, a leaked email from the Environment Agency said that South West Water

“were not honest, open and transparent with regulators about their drought projections”

and that there was

“a lack of understanding of their own supply system”.

Basically, it was not prepared.

What did South West Water do? To its credit, it did start putting measures in place. It introduced the option of water audits and made a number of water-saving products available—although not everyone can use them and they run out very quickly. Its “stop the drop” and “save every drop” campaigns were well regarded—indeed other water companies have followed suit—but they did not deliver the savings expected. The target was a 5% reduction in consumption, but the campaigns achieved only a 3% reduction. The company also introduced a non-household innovation fund.

So far, so good, but as we head forward, climate change is not going to improve much; it is going to make things worse. Looking forward to the water plan for 2024, there is an assumption that there will be a sixteenfold increase in heatwaves by 2030 and we will have 15 megalitres less water available per day by 2050. Yet the population of Devon will have increased by 350,000 by 2050, with many working from home, increasing demand, and we know that abstraction licences will continue to decrease, so we will need extra 30 million litres of water per day net for that plan period.

I have a real concern that the supply and demand calculations made by South West Water are unrealistic. There is a huge overreliance on smart meters to deliver the goods, and indeed on every one of us using less water. South West Water was rated as red on the supply demand balance index for 2022-23 because two of the four water zones were in deficit. By 2050 we will need 200 million litres of water per day. It is not realistic. We already know that the figures from South West Water are questionable, and work is going on with Ofwat looking at the leakage and consumption data.

Smart meters have proved a bit of a challenge in the electricity industry, and I see no hope that they can be better for water, not least because they are going to be under paving stones. The apps—it is not clear what sort of device South West Water will use—do not work very well. If the electric market is anything to go by, if one’s

property is too far away from where the core meter is, the app simply does not work. I put in a smart meter, but I still have to give my readings every six months.

To top it all, if we do not have proper guidance for individuals and they do not know how much water they are using in a bath, or shower or washing machine, and if we do not have manufacturers putting grading systems for water usage on their machines, we are never going to change behaviour to meet the need that is clearly there. Water companies are bearing the brunt of trying to convey this message, and the Government need to do some more heavy lifting here. It feels like the measures are being done to consumers, not with and for consumers.

I am pleased that there is going to be a consumer-focused condition introduced into water company licences, but when? The Government said 2024; will the Minister confirm whether that will be the case? That measure will mean that we, as customers, should be well informed and feel that we can rely on South West Water to fix problems. This weekend, my residents in Ashcombe were very concerned because a pumping station that supplies their water, and that has been off-on with different problems since 2017, failed again. This is 2024, seven years since 2017—the consumer duty cannot come soon enough.

The water supply is just as important as pollution, and we need to focus on it. We cannot rely on reduced demand assumptions. We need more infrastructure—we cannot just sit on our laurels—and it needs to be innovative. We need to look at desalination as, to its credit, South West Water is beginning to do, but that is only the start of a very big mountain that still needs to be climbed.

4.55 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Henderson. A policy paper says:

“the costs of cleaning up coastal waters, a national resource, have not fallen fairly across the country. Thirty per cent of the cost has fallen on Devon and Cornwall, which have just 3 per cent of the nation’s population. The chair of the South West Water Consumers Committee believes their average bill will go up by a further £150 a year”.

That was written in 1996. It is a Liberal Democrat policy paper from almost 30 years ago, and it is a story that continues to chime today and echoes through the decades. It is good that we are talking about the performance of a single water company, and South West Water is plainly one of the worst performing water companies in the country, but we should not focus myopically on the performance of one single water company and miss the big picture: the regulatory environment in which all water companies work. That is what I shall address my remarks to.

It is true that South West Water pays out some staggering dividend payments. Since 1990, South West Water has paid out in dividends an amount equivalent to £2,931 per property. That is more than any of the other 13 English water companies. A constituent of mine from Seaton recently pointed out to me that South West Water, or its parent company Pennon Group, owes £3.1 billion, which is similar to the amount paid in dividends since 1990, which is £3.2 billion. By those measures, South West Water is a poorly performing water company, but we have to look at the environment

in which it is working. The water companies are working to the incentives that their shareholders set for them, rather than for the public benefit and good.

There were 146 recorded dry spills over a 12-month period last year. To recap, those are illegal spills made by water companies when there is no heavy rainfall. Just yesterday evening, I was talking to Jo Bateman from the East Devon constituency, who attended the End Sewage Pollution coalition meeting that I brought together. She explained to me that she is suing South West Water for those illegal dry spills. I am not at all persuaded that water companies will simply do the right thing without Government intervention. We know the Environment Agency has been denuded of resources in recent years. The agency had £235 million cut from its budget when the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) was the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Simon Jupp: Obviously, the hon. Member was in the room for my speech, and I explained that more investment is going into the Environment Agency to tackle the issues he raises. Would he shed some light on Lib Dem policy? Does his party still want to abolish the EA or keep it? It is not clear—it is a muddle and a farce.

Richard Foord: Liberal Democrat policy is to abolish Ofwat but very much to bolster the Environment Agency. We need to ensure that we have a regulator with teeth. As I have said to the hon. Member before, if the Environment Agency has teeth, they are in a glass of water by the side of the bed. He says he thinks that South West Water will hear his concerns, but I point out that the chief executive only forfeit her bonus when it was plain that the level of outrage and campaigning in the west country was such that anything else would have been unacceptable. I should say that it is under pressure from parties like the Liberal Democrats that the Conservatives seem to have been talking in recent weeks about water companies and their executives not taking their bonuses when their performance is so poor.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): In clarifying Liberal Democrat policy and the actions they have taken, perhaps the hon. Gentleman could explain what his party's leader, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), did to tackle this issue when he was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change between 2012 and 2015.

Richard Foord: I would be very happy to. Of course, at that time the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change had different responsibilities.

Our policy now is very much about reforming water companies' boards. They need to be transformed into public benefit companies. We need boards to have grassroots campaigners such as those I gathered together last night. We had Surfers Against Sewage and the Women's Institute, which is pushing its "Water You Waiting For?" campaign. Fantastic campaigners such as these need a voice at the board level of these companies, otherwise we will face the catastrophe of our tourist hotspots being struck with the affliction that is water pollution. According to Blue Flag, four of the 10 beaches most affected by pollution last year were in Devon, including Sidmouth, which endured over 600 hours of sewage spills.

We heard earlier in the debate about the Environment Agency. In my view, we need to see the end of operator self-monitoring, which is where water companies get to gather their data themselves before passing it to the regulator. It means that they can potentially vary the data they are collecting. Water companies are essentially marking their own homework. This is having a devastating effect on some tourist areas such as the ones in Honiton.

I feel that there is a mismatch between the rhetoric we have heard this afternoon from some hon. Members and their voting records. I point them to 25 January 2023, when we voted on the draft Environmental Targets (Water) (England) Regulations 2022 and when I was very proud to insist that the Government should have more stringent targets for water pollution. I can see, Mr Henderson, that you are suggesting I have reached the end of my time, but I am grateful to have had the chance to make my remarks.

5.2 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for securing today's important debate.

I must declare an interest: I surf. I surfed on Sunday on a beach that South West Water's website advised it was safe to surf on and had been for 24 hours. However, a well-known campaign group assured me that it had a sewage alert on it. This happens week after week. A campaign group has chosen to misrepresent the data it has, issuing sewage alerts when the combined storm overflows run and scaring people from entering our beautiful waters. Yes, we would all like the combined storm overflows to not run so often, but they are over 95% rainwater, and on most of North Devon's stunning surf beaches they rush out into the Atlantic ocean. It does not take 48 hours for the tide to sort that out. The recommended gold standard for removing overflow waters is one tidal rotation, which is 12.5 hours.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank South West Water for the work it has done to date, which saw Croyde, one of the jewels of the surf crown, move from having "good" to "excellent" bathing water quality last year. I also thank the company for working with the event organisers—the ones who accepted—over the Christmas period to try to get our big Christmas swims out safely. Huge confusion is being caused on our beaches, with a Victorian bathing water season still in place, meaning that the most accurate data from the Environment Agency is not available from September through to May. We are a hardy bunch in North Devon. We are out all year round.

With that in mind, I want to focus on the serious problem that occurred in North Devon just three weeks ago, when there was a raw sewage spill from a sewage treatment works due to an electrical fault caused by a contractor on site. This resulted in six hours of raw sewage running into a large river that runs straight out to sea. Yes, there are questions for South West Water about the incident, but accidents do happen. South West Water reported it in line with all procedures.

The Environment Agency recommended closing four beaches and posted details of the sewage incident on its website. Unfortunately, it informed only one of the two councils that needed to be notified. No one told people on the beaches. The well-known campaign group, which

[Selaine Saxby]

we would think would rush to issue a sewage alert, did nothing of the sort. Its “sewage alert” has no definition; it literally means that the storm overflow had gone at some point in the previous 48 hours. The group chooses not to use the information that is available to it from the Environment Agency, which details when there is a real sewage pollution issue. In that respect, I have an issue with the South West Water website as well, which only includes data on its own storm overflows. However, it is at least clear that that is what the company is doing.

Most people do not use the Environment Agency website, which is not a fancy app that says when there is a problem. On that day, although we now know that sewage was being released, the campaign group that apparently prides itself on supporting surfers did not use the data available to it and surfing lessons went ahead.

Many people who regularly use the beaches in North Devon gave up on the campaign app some time ago. One surf school said, “We’d never go surfing if we listened to them.” I ask the Minister this question: what more can be done urgently to provide accurate information to those wishing to bathe or surf at this time of year? I urge the campaign group to think a bit harder about the information it is spreading—

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but she has mentioned many times this “campaign group”. I assume she means Surfers Against Sewage, but can she be clear for the record whom she is being critical of?

Selaine Saxby: I am happy to clarify, but by the same token the group does not actually like it when I mention it by name.

As I was saying, I urge the group to think a bit harder about the information it is spreading and at least try to issue a sewage alert when there actually is sewage. I say that because when the group set itself up 40 years ago, it ran a brilliant campaign and quite rightly so, as there was a lot of work to do. However, the group now privately states: “With regard to the beaches in your constituency, we totally agree that huge improvements have been made to water quality there and in many places around the country.” However, the group does not like me repeating that in public, as it undermines its very existence.

Yes, South West Water has more to do. I want to know how that incident at Ashford and two more incidents at Croyde over Christmas happened. Most of all, however, I want people to have easy access to accurate information about when it is safe to enter the water on some of the finest beaches in the world.

5.7 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure, Mr Henderson, to serve under your chairmanship, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) and fellow Janner on securing this debate.

It is worth recalling what our water quality was back in the mid-1980s. For decades, the south-west had some of the cheapest water bills in the country for one simple reason: we just used to dump our sewage straight into the sea, with no real investment to end that practice

until that time. Those who try to pretend that public ownership innately means great standards of environmental practice need to think again.

There has been major investment since that time, but it is another initiative that began under the coalition Government that has brought the issue of water quality back into the headlines. In 2013, only 7% of storm overflow outlets received any monitoring; as of the end of last year, 100% of those outlets receive monitoring. Put simply, the issue—the use of storm overflow outlets—has always existed, but it was just ignored and not monitored.

Bathing water quality is vital for Torbay, especially given the popularity of water sports and sea swimming among both residents and tourists. I have done some considerable work on the issue of bathing water quality since being elected to the House. Achievements so far include the completion of a major project at Torre Abbey sands by South West Water to ensure that our bay met the tougher legal bathing water standards introduced since my election in 2015. Those standards remain in place today.

To provide some background information, the majority of beaches in Torbay have outstanding bathing water quality, with 11 of the 15 registered beaches in the English Riviera classified as excellent for water quality in 2023. However, with Goodrington’s bathing water quality rated as sufficient, there is a need for further work to get all our beaches to a rating of good, then excellent.

To push forward action in the bay, over the last year I have met the chief executive of South West Water at Meadfoot beach, which does not have a storm overflow outlet, despite some claims that it does, and I met the company’s chief operating officer at Goodrington beach to discuss water quality across the bay and the next steps to invest in it.

During my most recent meeting, South West Water recognised the popularity of bathing at Goodrington and the need to improve the rating of Goodrington’s water quality. I pushed it for a target for the water quality being rated excellent by 2030, and to be fair to the company it agreed to that target. We will therefore see a £6-million programme of investment by 2030 in infrastructure near Goodrington and Paignton sands to help to achieve that goal. That work alone will not improve the standard of the bathing water at that beach to excellent, given the issues with items washed into the sea from surrounding parks and facilities, but it will provide further improvement. One thing we sometimes miss in this debate is the fact that water quality can be as easily affected by what is washed in from a park, particularly animal waste, as by whatever discharge may be coming from an outlet. The plan for Goodrington and Paignton is part of a £27-million plan for investment in the bay between now and 2030, with the clear goal of all our beaches reaching the excellent standard.

The Tor Bay Harbour Authority needs to stop using the same term for both rainfall drainage predictions and actual sewage releases—an issue which the previous Lib Dem-independent coalition-run council and the current Conservative leadership have raised regularly with the Environment Agency. The aim is to create clarity for residents, ensure that investment is targeted at sewage and end any misleading presentations of data by third parties.

I look forward to the Minister's response, and I ask that he cover some specific points. First, what work will be done to hold South West Water to the commitments it has made to invest in further improvements in water quality? Secondly, alongside the wider plans for our region, how will local communities be able to hold South West Water and other partners, such as local councils, to pledges such as the ones recently made relating to Goodrington and Paignton sands? Finally, what steps will he take with the Environment Agency to create greater clarity about what is rainwater draining from land and what is an actual sewage spill? The aim is to bring clarity for the public and focus for resource investment.

Progress has been made, but there is more to do. We need to keep a focus on the issue and ensure that our water company is held to account, so that the progress residents expect to see is delivered.

5.11 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) on securing this debate. I have spent many summer holidays in his constituency over the years, so it was great to hear those names.

This issue is vital, so I welcome the opportunity to discuss the performance of South West Water in more detail. There are lessons for us to learn about the whole sector by examining this case, but many of the issues that have been raised are specific to the south-west. Although there are strong opinions on this issue, there were some very valuable contributions to what has been an excellent debate.

The first point made by the hon. Member for East Devon that is worth repeating is the fact that across the country, many people working for water companies have become the victims of harassment. They are not in any way responsible, and I echo his point about that. He welcomed, as others did, the recent increase in funding for the Environment Agency. However, the context is that the Environment Agency had a 50% cut from 2010 to 2022. If it is the case, as I believe it is, that more money for the Environment Agency will improve the quality of its monitoring, it must be accepted that the huge cuts it experienced in the first 12 years of this Government have been a contributory factor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) spoke about the need for more honesty from South West Water, which other Members repeated. He spoke powerfully about how important the issue is for his constituents. He also invited us to imagine him swimming in various amounts of Lycra, which many people will have enjoyed when thinking about his outdoor swimming. It is important that we reflect on the fact that swimming is key to both the enjoyment of people in the south-west and the economy down there.

The hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) reflected on the lack of investment in infrastructure over many years. She also said, in what was a very good speech, that she believed that South West Water had not been honest. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) spoke about the specific challenges in the local area, particularly the fact that it is a popular tourist destination, with the population expanding hugely

in the summer months. That has specific consequences, and is not necessarily reflected in who pays the bills. He also questioned where the responsibility for companies stood between shareholders and the general environmental good. Businesses have a statutory responsibility to respond to their shareholders, which is why it is down to Government to have responsibility for ensuring that they perform to environmental standards as well. That informs much of the approach that the Labour party takes.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) identified a failure of investment between 2012 and 2015. She placed responsibility at the feet of the Lib Dems, who were in government with the Tories at that time, but we would say that it has happened throughout the past 14 years. She also took the unusual step of suggesting that the major issue that people were angry about was the performance of the local campaign group, which I have to say is a new development that I was not expecting.

The recent report by the Rivers Trust, "State of Our Rivers", which was published only last week, shows that the dial overall has not shifted on the health of our waterways. Not a single English river is in good overall health, and that has not changed since the previous report in 2021. A multitude of factors inform water health, but 54% of rich river stretches failed because of activities attributed to the water industry. That simply is not good enough.

Yesterday, along with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, I spoke at the launch of the election manifesto for the Surfers Against Sewage campaign. It was a shame that the Government were not able to send the Minister, although he was intending to go. It is an important coalition, because the issue is of huge importance to our constituents, particularly to the economy of the south-west. As the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton reflected, we heard from Jo Bateman about the powerful campaign that she is fighting for the ability to swim in clean waterways, recognised as an amenity that should be available to us all.

In preparing for this debate, I was pleased to hear about the work of Jayne Kirkham and Perran Moon, Labour's parliamentary candidates for Truro and Falmouth and for Camborne and Redruth, respectively. They have supported protests and started petitions that add to the community fight to preserve Cornwall's waterways. Jayne stressed that the discharges into Cornwall's rivers was impacting on tourism and costing millions alongside the environmental damage.

Many people are concerned that Ofwat's new growth duty will further reduce its ability to be a force for environmental good. When the Minister responds, I hope that he can set out how he sees that duty working alongside Ofwat's responsibilities to improve environmental outcomes. Does the Minister agree that the perception that our waterways are not fit to swim in is damaging to growth as it depletes tourist revenue? If so, will he confirm whether he has instructed Ofwat that its new growth duty must mean that no sewage discharge is liable to reduce tourist growth?

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): Order. May I stop you? I am afraid you have run out of time.

Mr Perkins: Okay. Thank you, Mr Henderson.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for bringing the matter of the performance of South West Water before the House, which has proven to be an incredibly important debate. I am disappointed in the continued poor performance shown by South West Water and its impact on our local environment.

Recently, I undertook a tour of the south-west and heard at first hand how pollution can impact coastal communities and local economies. I want it to be clear that this Government have made improving water company performance a top priority. While performance may have improved in the 2022-23 reporting year, South West Water remains one of the worst performing companies, with a long way to go still—in particular on pollution incidents and storm overflow discharges, both of which were significantly above the industry average in 2022. That is completely unacceptable. South West Water should be under no illusion: it must take urgent steps to reduce its pollution incidents significantly, as well as addressing other performance concerns, such as increasing resilience of the water supply.

Among the concerns expressed by Members, my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon raised the issue of sewage discharge into Exmouth bathing water. I have recently had discussions with him about that, and he has written to me several times. Although the condition of the bathing water is currently classified as excellent by the Environment Agency, I wish to reassure the House that the recent incidents raised by my hon. Friend are currently being investigated by the Environment Agency. It has required South West Water to provide data and information to support its investigations. It would be inappropriate for me to comment from the Dispatch Box while this investigation is ongoing, but please rest assured that the regulator will not hesitate to hold the water company to account if a breach has occurred.

The Environment Agency is also scrutinising South West Water's overall pollution reduction plan to ensure that the company has the right plans in place to prevent future issues. I will also be personally seeking assurance from the chief executive of South West Water, Susan Davy, that the company is doing all it can to mitigate the environmental impacts and protect bathing waters both in Exmouth and across the south-west for the sake of both the environment and public health.

I am also aware of the concerns of Members and the public following high-profile sewage spills, such as those at Harlyn bay in Cornwall. I am pleased to see that South West Water has outlined an £800,000 investment in this area by 2025 to reduce surface water ingress into the combined sewer network to help reduce storm overflow spill frequencies. However, its actions are again coming too late, following years of neglecting its civic duties. This Government will not be shy of holding the company to account.

Richard Foord: Would the Minister agree that the problem is not just with one single water company but with the regulatory environment in which water companies operate? That is why at last night's #EndSewagePollution coalition meeting, which I brought together, we had

present the Rivers Trust, British Canoeing, the Angling Trust, River Action UK, Swim England, Surfers Against Sewage and the Women's Institute. Does the Minister regret being unable to attend?

Robbie Moore: I find it a huge misfortune that it is Lib Dem policy to get rid of one of the key regulators, Ofwat, as has been confirmed in this debate. We have just given Ofwat powers to take a much more robust approach to dividends and water company bosses' bonuses, so I fear for the future of holding water companies to account if Lib Dem policy is get rid of it. This Government know that the industry needs to go further and faster to address these issues.

In 2022, data indicated that 6.47% of South West Water storm overflows spilled 100 times or more, which was twice the sector average. That is quite simply unsatisfactory. That is why we have introduced our storm overflows discharge reduction plan—the most ambitious plan to address storm overflows discharges in water company history, which will deliver £60 billion of capital investment by 2050 and target our most important sites, including bathing waters first.

The Government have also driven water companies to ensure that we now have 100% monitoring of storm overflows; that is up from 7% in 2010 under the previous Labour Administration. It was the last Labour Administration who brought out self-monitoring; we want to overturn that as we have better data from the roll-out of 100% monitoring.

However, I recognise the progress happening in the south-west. Indeed, I recently visited a pilot scheme at Combe Martin village with my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), where smart water butts and sustainable drainage had been introduced to better manage rainwater. That was having a positive impact. I commend my hon. Friend on the good work that she has been doing in her constituency, working together with her constituents and with campaign groups to ensure that a partnership-led approach can actively work on the ground when it comes to tackling sewage pollution.

Mr Perkins: The Minister mentioned something that some of his colleagues have referred to. Self-monitoring was either a big problem, in which case I do not know why the Government have not got rid of it in the last 14 years, or it was not. He needs to be credible about this. If he is trying to say that self-monitoring is a problem, they should have done something years ago.

Robbie Moore: That is why this Government have rolled out 100% monitoring of our storm overflows; once we have the data, we are able to hold failing water companies to account. That is exactly what this Government intend to do through our "Plan for Water", which is all about more investment, stronger regulation and tougher enforcement.

I also wish to address some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) regarding South West Water's resilience to drought, as I know many in the region experienced extended hosepipe bans. I am pleased to say that South West Water has informed us that, as of 22 February 2024, the Roadford reservoir is now at 100% capacity and Colliford is at 87%, showing significant

improvement. The Environment Agency continues to work with the company on a range of new sources to improve resilience. I recently visited Hawks Tor, a former clay pit, that has been brought into the water supply to try to deal with some of those water resilience issues.

Many Members mentioned the issue of investment. Of course, addressing these concerns requires investment, and this responds to some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). Following a DEFRA commission, Ofwat—which, it seems, the Lib Dems want to abolish—agreed to accelerate £128 million of funding to accelerate smart metering, build nutrient removal systems to improve river water quality and accelerate 15 storm overflow improvements in the Falmouth and Sidmouth catchments.

South West Water's latest business plans include a significant £2.8 billion package of investment, which Ofwat is now scrutinising to ensure that it will truly deliver for customers and begin to turn its poor record around. Its commitments will also include achieving the lowest level of pollution incidence in the sector and significantly increasing water quality and water resilience by investment in new treatment works, reservoirs and tackling leakage. South West Water must now deliver on those ambitious plans, and this Government will hold it to account every step of the way. I look forward to my next meeting with the chief executive to be able to get an update on those plans.

I also wish to assure the House that the Government and our regulators, Ofwat and the Environment Agency, do not take underperformance lightly. As a result of failing to meet its performance commitments, Ofwat has directed South West Water to return £9.2 million to customers during the financial year of 2024-25, in addition to the £13.3 million returned in the financial year 2022-23. I again reiterate that, if the Lib Dems want to get rid of Ofwat, I am not quite sure who would be directing South West Water to do that.

South West Water was also instructed by Ofwat to produce a service commitment plan to demonstrate how it will meet the commitments made at the start of the current five-year price review period, and that was

updated in November 2023. As I have said, I will shortly be meeting the chief executive of South West Water again to discuss progress on its plans and to hold the water company to account on its specific failures on pollution incidents.

When water companies fall short, we will not hesitate to hold them to account. Since 2015, the Environment Agency has secured fines of over £150 million, including a £2.1 million fine for South West Water in April 2023. Furthermore, under the action taken by this Government, we will be strengthening regulation to ensure that regulators have the tools to hold water companies to account. I want to thank all Members for their contributions today, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon for bringing this important debate before the House.

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman has one minute to wind up.

Simon Jupp: Thank you, Mr Henderson. This has been a really good debate, following on from the debate that I led last year as well. It is clear that people, on a cross-party basis, care about this. We have been paying South West Water bills for decades—I know my family has—and we all want to get value for money. We do not think that we have got that historically. If I may, I will make a point to the Liberal Democrats again. In January, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), when talking about the EA and Ofwat, said:

“the Government probably ought to be stepping in and removing those regulators”.—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 916.]

As ever, Lib Dem policy is as clear as mud.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the performance of South West Water.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 5 March 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Last week, I attended the World Trade Organisation's 13th ministerial conference MC13—in Abu Dhabi with the Minister of State for Trade Policy, my right hon. Friend, the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands).

MC13 saw the world's Trade Ministers come together to discuss the most pressing challenges facing global trade and agree a way forward.

The WTO members agreed several outcomes, including: extending the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions, which protects tariff-free digital trade, thereby maintaining lower costs and predictability for business engaging in digital trade;

re-committing to find a solution to restore the dispute settlement impasse, which is necessary to uphold global rules of free, fair and open trade and to ensure that every member of the WTO has access to a system to protect their trading interests against the unfair practices of other members;

extending the moratorium on TRIPS—trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights—non-violation and situation complaints; a small package of outcomes on development, including easing the transition for countries graduating from “least developed country” to “developed country”, such as Angola and Bangladesh; the Abu Dhabi ministerial declaration, which emphasises the importance of work on a range of important areas, including WTO reform, women's economic empowerment, services trade and supporting micro, small, and medium enterprises.

MC13 also celebrated the accession of two new members to the WTO—Comoros and Timor-Leste—which will bring the total number of WTO members to 166 and help developing countries reap the benefits of free trade.

At the conference, we celebrated the entry into force of new disciplines under the Services Domestic Regulation Joint Initiative, which could lead to global savings of £99 billion through facilitating trade in services.

The UK is also pleased to have completed the investment facilitation for development agreement, which commits its 127 signatories to practical steps to make it easier to invest in developing countries. This means UK investors should benefit from reduced transaction costs in low-income countries under this agreement, which could increase stocks of outward UK FDI by £2.5 billion in participating members. The agreement will also cut red tape, providing a one-stop shop for investors to communicate with Government, and the creation of a single website that investors can go to for information.

The UK remains committed to the rules-based multilateral trading system as vital to the economic prosperity and trading stability of all the WTO's 166 members. MC13 did not deliver on all of the UK's objectives and was a stark reminder of the challenge of agreeing change on the consensus basis of the WTO. However, the WTO remains a critical, albeit imperfect, part of the global trading system that helps deliver global economic growth.

MC13 was also a great opportunity to meet with my international counterparts, including the Gulf Co-operation Council, the United States Trade Representative and the EU Executive Vice-President to progress MC13 negotiations, the New Zealand and Australian Trade Ministers to discuss implementation of the UK's free trade agreements, and the Canadian Trade Minister to discuss bilateral trade relations, including rules of origin.

[HCWS310]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Workforce: Revised Offer to Unions

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): After re-entering negotiations with the British Medical Association (BMA) and Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association (HCSA) committees last month, during which the consultants did not take up industrial action, I am pleased to inform the House that I have made a revised formal offer to both unions, which includes a package of reforms to be applied from 1 March 2024. Both unions will recommend this revised offer to their members.

If accepted by their members, this would end the prospect of damaging strike action, benefit patients and deliver for consultants by delivering much-needed reform.

All sides returned to the negotiating table in good faith and in recognition of the narrow margin by which the initial offer was rejected. I would like to thank the unions for their co-operation and willingness to come to a swift resolution.

This demonstrates that approaching negotiations constructively and with reasonable expectations can lead to a good outcome for patients, consultants and the taxpayer.

The principles and aims of the updated offer remain the same. The Government's position is that the headline pay uplift for 2023-24 was settled through the pay review body process. This updated offer adds further clarity and specificity, as well as addressing concerns that consultants have raised. The Government's position remained that the headline pay uplift for 2023-24 was settled through the pay review body process.

This is a reform offer. The core contract for consultants has not been updated for 20 years and this offer will deliver reform to reflect modern ways of working, such as enhanced shared parental leave, in line with other NHS staff. It invests in modernising the consultants' pay structure—reducing the number of pay points and the time it takes to reach the top of the pay scale.

As we originally proposed, this would make it faster for consultants to progress and help mitigate the gender pay gap, which was expressly highlighted in the independent review into gender pay gaps in medicine in England. Under the revised offer, the Government have agreed to include an uplift for consultants with four to seven years of experience, in direct response to members' concerns.

To enable these reforms, unions have agreed to end local clinical excellence awards going forward—an employer level bonus scheme that has been seen to contribute to pay inequalities.

The updated offer reaffirms our intention to introduce pay progression arrangements, which link pay progression and evidence of skills, competencies and experience, and further clarifies how this will work in practice.

In addition, the Government will enact changes to the operation of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB) to address matters raised by the BMA and HCSA. This offer sets out the detail of work to improve the process for the appointment of members to the DDRB, and revises the panel's terms of reference.

The Government have listened carefully to the concerns of consultants and their representatives, particularly around retention, motivation and morale. This revised offer has been carefully balanced to meet those concerns while also ensuring value for the taxpayer. This offer, should it be accepted, will improve the working lives of consultants while ending the prospect of damaging strike action, which has had a detrimental impact on patients and the NHS.

The BMA and HCSA will recommend this offer to their members in a vote in the coming weeks. No further industrial action will be called while this happens.

[HCWS311]

Breast Cancer Screening

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): I would like to inform the House that on Monday 4 March, NHS England wrote to a group of women who are at very high risk of breast cancer who have been eligible for annual MRI checks, but who may not have been routinely referred to the annual tests recommended in NHS guidance.

This is an historic cohort of women who from 1962 to 2003 received radiotherapy treatment above the waist to treat Hodgkin lymphoma. Because of their treatment, this group were at an increased risk of breast cancer, so in 2003 clinicians were asked to contact both previous and current patients to refer them for annual checks. Women do not start annual MRI testing immediately

following treatment—but between eight and 15 years after treatment depending on their age at the time they were treated.

A number of women who were eligible for more regular annual testing did not receive it. This was due to variable referral processes. To rectify this, specialists set up a database to identify how people were referred on to the very high-risk pathway for breast screening. Details of the missed group were shared with NHS England in late September 2023, and they have since analysed data to triangulate information about clinical history, current status and residency in order to identify the individuals in the affected cohorts. Ministers were notified in February 2024.

We have overseen a system that has resulted in the identification of these very high-risk women, and we are now taking the appropriate action. This week, NHS England has written to 1,487 women whom they have identified as not currently on the correct very high-risk pathway to receive annual MRI testing. This cohort will now be urgently offered an MRI follow up and inclusion in the very high-risk pathway. We expect all women to be offered a scan within the next three months.

The specialist team have also identified a much smaller historical group whose details are currently being verified, and they will be written to in the coming weeks.

NHS England has set up a helpline for affected women, the details of which will be included in letters sent to them. More widely, NHS England will undertake a review of the process that refers these women into the most appropriate service for their risk to mitigate any future impact of this issue.

Further details of this issue can be found in a letter from NHSE to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), which will be deposited in the Library.

Attachments can be view online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2024-03-05/HCWS312>

[HCWS312]

Petition

Tuesday 5 March 2024

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS dental appointments in rural areas

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares concern for the lack of NHS dental appointments available in rural areas.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to increase training places for new dentists, reform NHS dental contracts and make it easier to recruit experienced dentists to fill dental vacancies in rural areas.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tim Farron, *Official Report*, 9 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 271.]

[P002895]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom):

The Government acknowledge that there are areas of the country that are experiencing recruitment and retention issues and the Government are taking steps to address the workforce challenges across the country. We are making progress in increasing the workforce—there were 1,352 more dentists doing NHS work in 2022-23 than in 2010-11.

NHS England and integrated care boards are aware of the particular challenges in rural areas of England and are working with local dentists to enable practices to take on more NHS patients.

We recently published our plan to recover and reform NHS dentistry in England which will make dental services faster, simpler and fairer for patients and will fund around 2.5 million additional appointments, or more than 1.5 million additional courses of dental treatment. New dental vans will bring dental care to our most isolated communities and “golden hello” incentives will encourage dentists into under-served areas. We will decide on locations in the coming months and we will make sure we focus on the areas in greatest need.

We invest £3 billion each year to deliver NHS dentistry and £200 million will be provided to support our plan to recover and reform NHS dentistry.

Alongside this, we are recruiting more dentists than ever, with a 40% increase in dentistry training places as part of our NHS long-term workforce plan—the largest expansion in dentistry training places on record. We wish to undertake this expansion in a way that is targeted to improve provision in areas of the country where it is most needed.

We are exploring whether a tie-in would ensure that dentists spend a greater proportion of their time delivering NHS dental care. We will launch a consultation on this policy later in spring.

We also want to ensure that the process of achieving registration to practise dentistry in the UK is as efficient and fast as possible, while remaining a robust safeguard for patient protection. We have launched a consultation on provisional registration, which would allow an overseas-qualified dentist to practise in any dental setting under the supervision of a dentist who has full registration on the General Dental Council’s dentists register.

State-funded healthcare within the United Kingdom but outside England is a devolved matter and the responsibility of the devolved Governments.

ORAL ANSWERS

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PETITION

Tuesday 5 March 2024

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**not later than
Tuesday 12 March 2024**

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