

Tuesday
8 October 2024

Volume 754
No. 24



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 8 October 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

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

The Secretary of State was asked—

Zero Carbon Electricity System

1. **Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on meeting his target to have a zero carbon electricity system by 2030. [900536]

8. **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on meeting his target to have a zero carbon electricity system by 2030. [900544]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): In 12 weeks, this Government have hit the ground running for our 2030 target by ending the onshore wind ban in place for nine years under the Conservative party, consenting to more nationally significant solar projects than in 14 years of the last Government, and overseeing the most successful renewables auction in history compared with the Conservatives' disastrous auction round that crashed offshore wind. This is a Government in a hurry to meet our mandate from the British people, and we are just getting started.

Dr Opher: I thank the Secretary of State for his really rapid action to reach our 100% sustainable goals by 2030. It has developed a real excitement in this country, and the people I speak to are genuinely behind this action. In Stroud, we are developing a community energy programme of putting solar panels on every school and public building that agrees to it. What steps is he taking to support solar on schools and public buildings, and can he ensure there are no barriers to progress?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of both rooftop solar and ground-mounted solar. I can tell him that, as part of Great British Energy's plans, we want to work with local schools, local hospitals and, indeed, local leaders to have a solar panels programme, because this is a way to rapidly decarbonise and to save money off bills.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Cantonian high school in my constituency of Cardiff West will be the first Cardiff school to be

operationally net zero in line with Welsh Government standards, while the building work itself will feature a significant reduction in embodied carbon. Fairwater community campus will be a collection of highly energy-efficient buildings that are powered from renewable energy sources, helping Cardiff to deliver on its One Planet strategy, which outlines the city's ambition to mitigate climate change. Will the Secretary of State join me in celebrating the development, and agree with me that this sort of collaborative vision is required to deliver on our net zero commitments both here and in Wales?

Mr Speaker: Order. Just to help everybody, the hon. Gentleman is meant to go through the Chair, but he was looking at the Secretary of State. As good looking as the Secretary of State is, it is easier if the hon. Gentleman speaks to me, and then I can pick up what he says.

Ed Miliband: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker—and you, too, if I may say so. [*Laughter.*]

I congratulate my hon. Friend, but particularly the Fairwater community campus on the work it is doing. I think he highlights a very important issue. By helping to decarbonise public buildings, including schools, we help not only to cut our carbon emissions, but, crucially, to save money for those schools that they can then use for frontline services.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The previous Secretary of State commissioned the Department to produce a full economic costing for getting to a fully decarbonised renewables-based grid by 2030, as the Secretary of State wants. That is obviously the sort of information that should be placed before the House so that we can have an informed discussion. It may be a good thing to do, but we should obviously know what the cost is. When will the Secretary of State publish that information?

Ed Miliband: Of course, that work is ongoing—in fact, I think the right hon. Lady the shadow Secretary of State has written me a letter about it—and we will be announcing our plans in due course.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): In my constituency, two major offshore wind farms are currently being developed: Morgan and Morecambe. I recently met nearly 100 farmers who will be directly affected by the cabling corridor and the substation plans for the cabling route to connect to Penwortham. I am working with the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) on a potentially better route through her constituency, which would mean a major economic development revitalising an industrial area that has been looking for a major energy project for some time. We are jointly writing to the Secretary of State, and may I ask if he would commit to working with us on at least assessing that potentially alternative route for the cabling corridor?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman—and he knows this—will obviously want to stand up for what he sees as the best benefits for his constituency. I will be cautious about what I say, because there are proper procedures for planning decisions, including my quasi-judicial role. I will make this general point to the House, because I

think this may well be a recurring theme during questions, but if we want to get off the dangerous exposure to international fossil fuel markets, which we were left with by the last Government, we need to build the grid. Every solar panel we put up, every wind turbine we put up and every piece of grid we build will help to deliver energy security for the British people.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Not only is the Secretary of State a very good looking fellow, but we in this House all know that he is an incredibly hard-working and very open Minister, as indeed are his whole team. So I know that the reason he has not replied to my letter of 11 September is that he and his team will be working their socks off to get a full and open answer to all my questions. He has already made reference to one of my colleagues and said that he will produce “in due course” a full systems cost analysis. May I stress that it is incredibly important that we in this House have that systems cost analysis as soon as possible, so that not only can we analyse his ambitious plans for carbon-neutral targets, but we can also explain to our constituents exactly how much it will cost them in their bills to deliver his target?

Ed Miliband: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman a little about the situation that we inherited from the last Government, because it is very relevant—obviously, he was not a Minister in that last Government. We inherited a situation where there was no plan: no plan for their target of 95% clean power by 2030, no plan for their target of clean power by 2035, and no plan to avoid a repeat of the worst cost of living crisis in generations. This Government are developing a plan and will publish it in due course.

Climate Change: International Work

2. **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): What steps he is taking with his international counterparts to tackle climate change. [900537]

18. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking with his international counterparts to tackle climate change. [900555]

21. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking with his international counterparts to tackle climate change. [900558]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): This Government believe that we can only ensure climate security for further generations in the UK if we lead globally. That was the message of the Prime Minister at the United Nations General Assembly with our world-leading 2030 clean power plan, no new oil and gas licences, and playing our part in reforming the global financial system. Next month I will be attending the COP29 talks in Azerbaijan to stand up for Britain’s interests.

Johanna Baxter: It is brilliant to see the Secretary of State commit to putting climate diplomacy back at the heart of Cabinet, and I know he will bring a great amount of experience to that role. Sir David Attenborough

has repeatedly warned that our planet hangs in the balance, so will my right hon. Friend explain to the House what he will do to ensure that Britain is once again a main player on the world stage in tackling the climate emergency? Will he meet me and representatives from my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire South to discuss the work that they are doing on rewilding, in an effort to play their part in tackling the climate emergency?

Ed Miliband: It sounds like my hon. Friend’s constituents are doing important work. She is absolutely right. The last Government used to say that we have only 1% of global emissions, as if that was a sort of excuse for inaction on the world stage. We see it differently. We see that only by leading at home can we provide the platform to lead internationally. This Government have in a few short months put Britain back on the world stage on climate, and we will be working with our best endeavours to ensure that we tackle the situation we have inherited—I am afraid the world is miles off track for keeping global warming to 1.5°.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Vince.

Chris Vince: Thank you Mr Speaker—I’ve done the training. I welcome the Secretary of State’s warm words about our leadership on international climate issues, which is in stark contrast to the previous Government’s failings. I also publicly welcome his recent visit to Harlow college—less said about the racing game, which he won, the better. Does he agree that it is only thanks to the commitment shown by the new Government to drastically deliver on climate change issues that we can lead on a world stage?

Mr Speaker: Neatly done, although it was a little long. Come on Secretary of State.

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend did very well, and I agree with him. Part of the problem with the last Government—I do not doubt that there were people making good endeavours—is that when we do something different at home to what we preach internationally, such as say we are going to power past coal by opening a new coalmine, people say, “Well, you are saying one thing and doing another.” Consistency is the absolute foundation for global leadership.

Paul Waugh: I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to our international obligations, whether that is clean power lines or our own strong domestic climate policies that will help areas such as Rochdale, with billpayers in recent years facing the grim possibility of high bills. This will make a huge difference, and the obvious comparison with the previous Government is there for everyone to see. Will he outline to the House what further steps he is taking on the global stage at both COP29 and COP30 to increase our global reach on climate?

Ed Miliband: I will say one thing in particular to my hon. Friend. The Prime Minister said at the United Nations General Assembly that we will be unveiling our nationally determined contribution—our target for 2035—at COP29. We are doing that because the danger is that the world settles into a low-ambition equilibrium when

it comes to tackling these issues. By having a 1.5° aligned target, we hope to set a good benchmark and a good example for the world.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Climate Change Committee has said that there should be no more than a 25% increase in airport capacity, compared with 2018 levels, if we are to achieve net zero by 2050, yet current planned and recently approved airport expansions will allow for a 50% to 70% increase in demand. Can the Secretary of State explain why Ministers in the Department for Transport are considering giving a green light to a third runway at Heathrow? How on earth will that allow the country to meet its net zero targets?

Ed Miliband: The beauty of carbon budgets and the system that was introduced when I was last in government—to be fair, it was carried on by the previous Government of the past 14 years—is that they do at least in theory constrain what the Government do. It is very important that we take carbon budgets seriously in our plans. The plans we inherited from the last Government were way off track for meeting our carbon budgets, which is what this Government will do.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Secretary of State to his place. Climate change is real; it is not a myth. The quicker that everyone understands that, the better. Can I pose a question to the Secretary of State on rewilding? There are some suggestions among experts that rewilding by planting trees on moor and heather might not be the most constructive way of utilising rewilding. Has he had an opportunity to look at the issue of rewilding on moors and heather, which I understand that many experts think is detrimental?

Ed Miliband: I take the hon. Gentleman seriously on these issues, and I undertake to write to him or to have one of the Ministers write to him. I make the general point that rewilding and nature-based solutions are an essential part of tackling the climate crisis.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): International trade deals are a great way of using our leverage to make sure we advance our agenda on things such as tackling climate change. The previous Government let Britain down massively, conducting trade deals that let us down on farming, on food production and especially on climate change. Will the Secretary of State ensure that this Government use the creation of new trade deals to advance our agenda on tackling climate change?

Ed Miliband: Yes, and that is something I am already discussing with my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment of Rachel Kyte as his climate envoy to support his work with international partners? Before her appointment, did the Secretary of State declare to officials her links with Quadrature Capital, which donated £4 million to the Labour party? Also, did he declare her links to the Green Initiative Foundation, which gave him £99,000? A yes or no answer will suffice.

Ed Miliband: All the proper processes were followed by the Foreign Office, which was in charge of the appointment. I have to say that this is a very sad reflection on the Conservative party. Rachel Kyte is an esteemed person who is recognised for her leadership, and all the Conservatives can do is fling around baseless allegations.

Onshore Wind Energy

3. **Mr Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): What steps he is taking to help increase levels of onshore wind energy production. [900538]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): After nine years of the disastrous, bill-raising ban on onshore wind in England, this Government overturned the ban in our first 72 hours in office. We have also set up the onshore wind taskforce to restore the pipeline of projects destroyed by the last Government. In the recent renewables auction, almost 1 GW of onshore wind was secured at prices that make it among the lowest-cost power sources to build and operate.

Mr Amos: When will the Secretary of State bring forward proposals for community benefit for those living alongside wind and solar farms to greater incentivise the permitting of wind and solar farms, including Ham solar farm in my constituency? Will that include a minimum level of compensation for the communities affected?

Ed Miliband: I am sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman says. We are working on proposals on community benefit. I believe that when communities host clean energy infrastructure, they should automatically get benefit from it. I am also sympathetic to what he said about minimum levels of support. We are discussing that with industry at the moment and will come forward with proposals soon.

Energy Security

4. **David Pinto-Duschinsky** (Hendon) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve energy security. [900540]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): The energy shocks of recent years have laid bare the exposure of our energy system to the international fossil fuel market. That is why we have started a mission to reach clean power by 2030, to end that reliance and ensure that the British people never again go through the sort of cost of living crisis that they have faced in recent years under the Conservatives.

David Pinto-Duschinsky: People across Hendon have paid the price for the previous Government's failure over the last 14 years to invest in our energy system. Does the Minister agree that the only way to get us off the rollercoaster of high bills is to invest at pace and scale, as the Government are doing through our clean energy mission?

Michael Shanks: I completely agree. The only way to permanently protect hard-working families and businesses from the high energy bills from which many are still

suffering is to get ourselves off our reliance on the volatile fossil fuel markets. That is why we are rolling out at pace and at scale the clean power necessary to do so, which not only gives us energy security but creates good jobs, brings down bills and helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): The Secretary of State will be aware that 25% of the UK is situated on top of coalmines, which can provide geothermal energy to heat houses and businesses in places like Ashfield. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can make that work in coalfield communities?

Michael Shanks: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman's question—which I must say is somewhat of a surprise. I will absolutely meet him to discuss that. We have been clear that any technologies can be part of the solution and, if that can be part of the picture, I will meet him to discuss the options and the technology more generally.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): One of the ways in which we can increase energy security is through community-owned and co-operative energy schemes. They give greater control to local people, who get a say in where profits go, and crucially they build resilience from international energy markets. Will the Minister say a bit more about where community-owned energy will fit into the energy security plan?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for that incredibly important question. Community energy has so many benefits in our energy mix, including giving communities a stake in our energy future. We also know that there are many social and economic benefits that come from that. We are committed to our local power plan, which will deliver investment in community-owned projects. Great British Energy will have a key role to play in supporting communities, capacity building and in that initial funding to help them deliver these projects.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Could I invite the Minister to meet a cross-party group of MPs from the east of England to discuss how the review conducted by the electricity system operator can contribute to energy security and in particular to look at how undergrounding high voltage direct current cables could be cheaper in the long term than pylons and more efficient for achieving net zero? Will he agree at least to have a meeting with us on that basis?

Michael Shanks: I am always happy to have meetings with any right hon. and hon. Members across the House on a range of issues, so I will take that away. The evidence suggests that undergrounding is five to 10 times more expensive and that actually it can have more of a damaging impact on nature and natural habitats than pylons. The important thing with all of this is that this is nationally important structure, which is necessary for us to get to the targets that we want to get to. I know that the hon. Gentleman takes that seriously, and I will meet him and others, but we have been clear as a Government that we will build this infrastructure if it is necessary.

Job Creation: Industrial Communities

5. **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Great British Energy on job creation in industrial communities. [900541]

22. **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Great British Energy on job creation in industrial communities. [900559]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The Government have two key missions: to become an energy superpower, and to grow the economy. Great British Energy will help us deliver on both those missions. The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), will be taking the Great British Energy Bill through Committee today, and I am excited for the job creation potential in our industrial communities. From engineers to welders, and from electricians to project managers, Great British Energy will be powered by people across all the nations and regions of this great country.

Luke Myer: I welcome the Minister's response and last week's fantastic announcement about track 1 carbon capture investment in Teesside. Teesside has extraordinary potential for green jobs, whether in sustainable aviation fuel with Alfanar or in carbon capture, hydrogen and so much else. Does the Minister agree that only with Labour's plan for clean power by 2030, Great British Energy and our national wealth fund can we create well-paid long-term jobs in the industries of the future?

Sarah Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I thank him for his support. I doubt anybody would disagree with him on the benefits of our announcements on carbon capture and storage, which will create 4,000 jobs in the short term, with carbon capture more broadly creating up to 50,000 jobs over the next decade or so. [Interruption.] The Opposition Front Benchers chuckle, but I wonder whether, instead of dismissing that number of jobs, they might welcome them alongside Government Members. Alongside carbon capture, Great British Energy, our national wealth fund and our British jobs bonus, we are putting in place the levers to encourage growth across our country, and the Climate Change Committee estimates that up to 725,000 net new jobs could be created in low-carbon sectors by 2030.

Mrs Brackenridge: Does the Minister agree that GB Energy is a fantastic opportunity for Wolverhampton North East to capitalise on the opportunities for research and start-ups on our forthcoming green innovation corridor and to put Wolverhampton North East back where we belong: at the heart of industrial growth and British industry?

Sarah Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend: it is a fantastic opportunity. Publicly owned Great British Energy will partner with industry to help us to deliver our mission of clean power by 2030. I have been reading about the green innovation corridor, and I am interested to see what it will deliver. Working in partnership with the private sector, we can rebuild jobs across the west midlands and far beyond.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree with the head of the GMB union that the Government's plans to ban new licences for oil and gas will result in exporting jobs and importing virtue?

Sarah Jones: I agree with the GMB in its warm congratulations for our announcements yesterday to deliver carbon capture and storage across the country. We are of course working closely with our trade union colleagues. It is interesting: in opposition, the Conservatives suddenly quote the unions, when they refused to even meet them in government. We work very closely with the GMB and all our trade unions to ensure that we have a just energy transition and that we are creating the jobs and skills of the future by becoming a clean energy superpower.

Energy Social Tariffs

6. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of introducing energy social tariffs.

[900542]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): We know that people are worried about their energy bills going into the winter and that, for a growing number of people, energy is simply unaffordable. We are absolutely determined to take this affordability issue and tackle it head on. There are many different ideas about what a social tariff could look like, and it means different things to different people. We are clear that we will tackle the affordability question and look at the full range of options available to us. But our priority—my priority—this winter is to ensure that families struggling with bills have support through our warm home discount scheme, and to work with energy suppliers to provide support.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her response. I absolutely recognise that energy prices over the last few years have escalated, putting particular pressure on households with low incomes and also those with high energy needs, such as disabled people and pensioners. I agree that the warm home discount scheme is valuable, but it is limited and I am concerned for people with high energy needs but on low incomes, who might fall foul of the system as it stands.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We have been working flat out with energy suppliers to ensure that they are providing additional support to families who will struggle with bills this winter. In August, I met all the suppliers, and there was a shared commitment to do everything we can to support vulnerable households. We have been working with them, the industry body, Ofgem and Citizens Advice to ensure that there is a proper package of support in place this winter so that we can support families who we know are struggling with their bills.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Would it not have been better to put that proper package of support in place before the Government withdrew the winter fuel allowance from so many pensioners?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are having to clean up the mess that the Opposition left us. Yes, we have means-tested the winter fuel payment, but we have also been clear that we will do everything we can do to support vulnerable households. That is why we have extended the take-up of pension credit and the household support fund, and we are working flat out with energy suppliers to provide additional support to all vulnerable households this winter.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her work. Warm home prescriptions can target that support towards elderly people and those with underlying health conditions, saving our NHS as well as keeping people warm over the winter. The pilot has shown real benefit. Will she meet me to discuss that and other options to keep old people warm this winter?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We want to work with anyone who will help us reach vulnerable households. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to look at the full range of options available.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Ofgem's review of standing charges options paper closed for submissions on 20 September. Can the Minister offer any hope for bill payers in Scotland that they will stop being penalised with the highest standing charges on these islands? When will we see lower charges?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We as a Government are committed to getting down standing charges. Ofgem has consulted and will report back in due course.

Warm Homes Plan

7. **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to introduce his warm homes plan. [900543]

9. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps he is taking to introduce his warm homes plan. [900545]

19. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps he is taking to introduce his warm homes plan. [900556]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): We are running to deliver our warm homes plan, which will upgrade homes across the country to make them warmer and cheaper to run. We will set out the full plan in the spring, but at the heart of it will be an offer of grants and low-interest loans to support families to invest in insulation, low-carbon heating and home improvements. Critically, alongside that, we are committing to boosting minimum energy efficiency standards for private rented homes and social housing, to tackle fuel poverty.

Joe Morris: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her commitment to the warm homes plan. I congratulate her on the announcement over the conference recess to end the scandal of cold, draughty homes in the rental sector, which particularly affects people in my constituency in towns such as Haltwhistle, Throckley, Newburn, Hexham and elsewhere. Does she agree that often the

very poorest in our communities are forced to live in those cold and draughty properties, and it is important that we cut bills and give those families energy security?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I agree. One in four households in the private rented sector is in fuel poverty. We need to bear down on bills. Our commitment to improve and boost minimum energy efficiency standards will lift 1 million renters out of fuel poverty. We are determined to do this alongside our bigger package to deliver clean power by 2030, which will drive down bills for everyone.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: People across my constituency are worried about how they will afford to heat their homes this winter. I was shocked to hear the former Energy Minister, now shadow Minister, admit that his Government should have gone “further and faster” on insulating homes, which will certainly help. Does the Minister agree that this is an admission of failure by the previous Conservative Government, who have left working people to pay the price? Can she reassure my constituents that this Government will do better?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I completely agree. The legacy left to us by the last Government was woeful. Ordinary people—families across the country—have paid the price of that legacy. We are clear that we will do and must do better. Our warm homes plan will kickstart the upgrades that we need across the country so that we can deliver warmer homes that are cleaner to heat.

Dr Huq: Millions of cold, draughty homes need updating UK-wide, so it is great to hear that there will be a proper plan, rather than the itty-bitty approach of spraying bits of money here and there. In the plan, will the Minister look at the fact that there is no national retrofit advice service in the UK? Can the Government rectify that? They could take a leaf out of Sadiq Khan’s book, because his service in London has helped 24,000 households.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I agree with my hon. Friend. There is a critical role for national advice to ensure that people can access support and know the range of interventions available to them. We will be looking at that as we look at our warm homes plan. We are very clear that it will be a comprehensive plan that will deliver the upgrades we need to see across the country.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): One of my low-income pensioner constituents had a solar panel installed on their home through a Government scheme. However, they are now facing an issue with birds nesting in it, which is causing a huge amount of problems because the scheme does not come with protection. Will the Minister agree to meet me about this constituency issue, because it is really affecting one of my older constituents who, sadly, has also just lost her winter fuel payment?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Yes, I will agree to meet to discuss the range of things we can do.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I very much hope the Secretary of State and his Ministers agree that if we are serious about energy security and net zero, we must be serious about energy efficiency. What steps are they taking, in addition to working on insulating existing homes, to ensure that the promised

1.5 million new homes are built to net zero standards, have solar panels on the roof, and are fully insulated so that every new home is a warm home?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We have an ambitious plan to build more homes. We want those homes to be fit for the future. We will put out information in due course on the standards we want across those homes, but we have an opportunity to do insulation, energy efficiency and homes that are fit for the future, at the same time as building the homes we need.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Local authorities play an important role as trusted sources of knowledge and expertise, and guide householders, for example, to trusted installers, but they need the resources to do that. Will the Department devolve some resources to local authorities to fulfil that important role?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We see local and regional government playing an absolutely fundamental role to reach homes that we need to upgrade, but also to help us deliver the scale of ambition we want. Local and regional government will be a key part of our warm homes plan.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Keeping vulnerable people warm and lowering their energy bills is, I am sure, something we can all agree on across the House. Insulating homes is a key part of that puzzle. We welcome the news that we will see the warm homes plan in spring. However, does the Minister agree that ahead of this winter we need an emergency home insulation plan, particularly for the vulnerable, along with allocated funding? Does she have any idea of the amount and allocation of funding in this Parliament that there will be for insulating homes?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are really clear that as we develop our plans we absolutely need to get on with the job of upgrading homes. We have announced our warm homes local grant and our warm homes social housing fund, which are targeted at low-income families, because we know there is a job of work to do. We are committed to an additional £6.6 billion to invest in our warm homes plan over the course of this Parliament.

Workers in High-Carbon Sectors

10. **Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green):** What steps he is taking to ensure a just transition for workers in high-carbon sectors. [900546]

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones): We are committed to accelerating the just transition for workers in Britain to boost our energy security and ensure good, long-term jobs, especially in North sea communities. We will work with them and other industrial regions to develop a plan, ensuring those workers are the people who decarbonise our country.

Carla Denyer: I thank the Minister for her response. Unfortunately, the unjust transitions we are seeing in Grangemouth and Port Talbot are a damning indictment of the lack of a proactive approach to a just transition

over the last few years. Tomorrow at the Treasury, over 50 major unions and climate groups will be calling for a new approach to the energy transition where, instead of just de-risking private profit, there is a governmental ringfenced funding package for North sea oil and gas workers, including help with skills and job creation. Will the Secretary of State or Ministers please meet the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that those ringfenced funds are secure, so that we can stop betting on the industry to do the right thing?

Sarah Jones: Last week was the historic week when 142 years of coal-fired electricity generation came to an end, and this week we have announced the new era of carbon capture and storage. We will work in a different way from the last Government, adopting a proactive approach to ensure that the transition works for people and that we create new jobs as well. At Grangemouth we provided a package of support for workers, and at Port Talbot we managed to negotiate a better deal than the last Government. We will use all the levers that we have—Great British Energy, the national wealth fund, the British jobs bonus and the office of green energy jobs that we have set up—to ensure that we get the transition right.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): The Secretary of State and the Minister will know that civil nuclear has a higher employment multiplier than any other form of zero or low-carbon energy generation. As part of the transition from high-carbon sectors, what specific measures are the Government taking to retrain workers and transfer skills into the nuclear energy industry, thus ensuring that they benefit from job creation in this growing sector in my constituency and throughout the country?

Sarah Jones: Obviously the last Government did nothing about nuclear in 14 years, apart from coming up with a plan. We will ensure that nuclear is an important part of our country's future, and we will be working to provide the right skills and jobs in the right places to deliver that.

Grid Capacity

11. **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What steps he is taking to increase grid capacity [900547]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): We are halving the development time for new transmission infrastructure through reforms of planning, supply chains and other areas, delivering the grid capacity that is needed to achieve clean power by 2030 and meet a doubling of electricity demand by 2050.

Tessa Munt: Communities are doing their very best, and lots of people are trying to help each community to power itself. My own village has its community solar project, which was fully funded by local residents. There are non-profit organisations which have dealt with local schemes by putting solar panels on schools with an element of community ownership, and there are individuals who try but are faced with extortionate costs for connection to the grid. The grid was really designed for big old power stations rather than smaller power creators trying to plonk power into the system. What can the Minister

do to encourage National Grid to pivot, and help communities and individuals to create their energy nearer to their homes?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the importance of community energy projects throughout the country. We want to see many more of them, but we have inherited a grid that needs significant upgrading, and we are now working apace to ensure that that happens. Part of the work that I have been doing with National Grid and others involves trying to identify the next steps that are needed to shorten the connections queue, and also to make it more affordable for smaller community projects to connect. There is an important role for partnership as well, with some of the bigger renewables projects giving part of their connections queues to smaller ones, and that is already happening in some parts of the country. There is no doubt that there is much more to do, but we are, as I have said, working apace to try to move this forward after 14 years of inaction.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt), the lack of national grid capacity is holding back the UK's push towards renewable energy. There are numerous examples of projects that have been delayed because they are waiting to be connected to the national grid, or because connection is too expensive. In my constituency, we cannot even connect the solar panels and batteries for the ambitious plan to decarbonise and electrify the refuse fleet for South Cambridgeshire district council. The projects that have been delayed include the building of new homes, which is crucial at present. Can the Minister explain to us how we are to reach this stage on the scale and at the pace that is needed?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady is right to highlight those issues. The connections queue, in particular, is a huge challenge, with more than 700 GW waiting to join it. The last Government did some work to establish how the queue could be prioritised, and we will now implement that, but we need to go further. It is clear that by 2030 we will need to build four times as much new transmission network as has been built since 1990. This is a project to rewire the entire country, to improve the current connections availability, and to work with everyone, including the new national energy systems operator, on the road map towards 2030.

Clean Electricity Generation

12. **Abtisam Mohamed** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to increase clean electricity generation. [900548]

Michael Shanks: The latest contracts for difference round secured a record 131 renewable electricity projects across Great Britain. This will deliver a total capacity of 9.6 GW, enough to power the equivalent of 11 million homes. The Energy Secretary will continue to work with industry to explore how the contracts for difference scheme, and other energy policies, can be expanded even further.

Abtissam Mohamed: I commend the Secretary of State for his excellent work since he took office in accelerating clean electricity generation in the UK, and I commend the fantastic team he has with him. The Minister is right to say that there is a clean energy imperative if we are to tackle the climate crisis, boost our energy security and reduce our bills. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that this Government encourage and take advantage of the significant opportunity around community energy, and will he meet me and representatives from my constituency of Sheffield Central to discuss how we can boost the growth of community energy?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is absolutely right to say that, in order for us to meet our 2030 ambitions, we will need a whole range of different options. Community energy is a critical part of that, helping to deliver energy security and lower bills. Crucially, it also gives communities a stake in the energy future. That is why one of Great British Energy's five objectives is to support the delivery of a local power plan, which puts local communities, combined authorities, local authorities and others in the driving seat in restructuring our energy economy. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and others to discuss this issue further.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Contrary to what one of the Ministers said earlier, the last Government brought about one of the largest revivals in nuclear energy in 70 years in order to provide clean electricity generation, yet we hear precious little from the new Government on their plans for nuclear; we hear only their plans for inefficient technology that will destroy the countryside. Why are they so anti-nuclear, and when are they going to get on with delivering nuclear energy?

Michael Shanks: I will give credit to the Conservative Government on one thing: they were very good at making grand announcements. On delivery, however, they were much poorer. Looking at a whole range of things—carbon capture being a very good example—they had lots of warm words but no delivery whatsoever. On nuclear, they had lots of warm words but no delivery whatsoever. In 14 years, how many nuclear power stations were built under the Conservative party? None. We will get on with doing the work.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): If we want to see an increase in clean energy generation, we need more announcements such as the one we saw last week on the development of carbon capture, usage and storage. Although that is incredibly welcome and a sign of determined action from the new Government, there is still more to be done. Perhaps the Minister can give an indication of when he anticipates he will be able to announce progress on track 1 extension, and share some information on track 2, because that would secure thousands of jobs in the Humber region.

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that in the three and a bit months that we have been in government we have moved at pace to deliver the largest renewables auction in history and to make last week's announcement on carbon capture. We are

working through the next stages of the process at pace, and we will have further announcements in the weeks ahead.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it would be better to have the right electricity system in 2032 or 2035 than to have the wrong one because of an artificial target, which may be undeliverable by 2030?

Michael Shanks: I could be wrong, but I think the right hon. Gentleman previously said that his own Government's plans on onshore wind in England were not the right approach to take. I agree with him, which is why we lifted the onshore wind ban. The reality is that whereas the previous Government used to talk the talk on climate action, we are the ones now delivering—and delivering an energy system fit for the future.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): One way to increase clean electricity generation in the United Kingdom would be to invest at pace in new nuclear. We left government with a clear plan to get to 24 GW of nuclear power by 2050. Does that target remain?

Michael Shanks: This is the whole point about the Conservative Government, and it is why we have inherited such an economic mess: they made a series of announcements, with absolutely no funding to back them up. As you would expect, Mr Speaker, I pay close attention to the Conservative party conferences, and the hon. Gentleman made a very astute point, which I am happy to repeat for the benefit of *Hansard* and the House: "After 14 years of Conservative Government, we are now in a position where it's more difficult to build critical infrastructure than it was when we came into power". I could not have put it better myself.

Andrew Bowie: Our record on nuclear speaks for itself. We launched the small modular down-selection process and Great British Nuclear, and invested £200 million in new advanced nuclear fuels. We consulted on a new route to market for advanced modular reactors and new technologies, and granted a development consent order for Sizewell C. There is concern that there is a go-slow in the Government right now, so when can we expect a final investment decision on Sizewell C? Will it still be this year?

Michael Shanks: I was not aware when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State changed the titles of the ministerial portfolios that we had moved away from having a Minister for consultation, but it seems that all the hon. Gentleman was doing in his time in office was launching consultations. We are going to get on with delivering and we are moving at pace on the whole of the electricity system, including on nuclear, and delivering on the things that he failed to do.

Topical Questions

T1. [900561] **Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): As well as our measures on onshore wind, solar and renewables, this Government have begun legislating for Great British Energy and setting out our plan for proper standards for private and social renters to take 1 million families out of fuel poverty, and on Friday we announced deals to kick-start Britain's carbon capture industry. All of this will deliver our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower. It is right for bills, right for energy security, right for jobs and right for climate leadership.

Tracy Gilbert: I welcome the actions outlined by my right hon. Friend, particularly the recent announcement that GB Energy will be headquartered in Aberdeen, with satellite offices in Edinburgh and Glasgow. Can he outline the role that he expects the satellite offices to take? Given the investment already under way in the port of Leith for a number of renewable companies, as well as the prospects for the supply chain and manufacturing, will he consider Leith as the location for the Edinburgh site?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to our announcement on Aberdeen as the headquarters of Great British Energy and the important role that it will play, and also to the importance of the satellite offices. I know from my visit to her constituency of the huge potential of her area on these issues, and we want to drive jobs throughout the supply chain through Great British Energy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): The Secretary of State promised in the general election to cut everyone's bills by £300 by 2030—a pledge he will not repeat now that he is in office. In fact, one of his first acts has been to snatch the same amount away from millions of pensioners in poverty. The right hon. Gentleman likes to preach, to politicise and, dare I say it, to patronise, but I have one simple question for him. To the millions of pensioners who are worried about their heating bills this Christmas, will he apologise?

Ed Miliband: The people who should be apologising are the last Government, who left this country in a total mess—a £22 billion black hole. I have to say to the right hon. Lady that she does have a brass neck. She said of the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), whom she is backing in the leadership contest, that she “tells the truth”, and what did the right hon. Member for North West Essex say? She said:

“I have people in my constituency telling me that they don't need the winter fuel payments... Why do we not have a... mechanism for means-testing?”

That is her position.

Claire Coutinho: There we have it: no apology; no recognition that it is the right hon. Gentleman's Government's decisions that are going to leave pensioners in the cold this winter. He has to acknowledge this: from the trade unions to the CBI, from blue Labour to Blairites and from the left to the right of his party, people are sounding the alarm that his ideological approach will see jobs lost and bills go through the roof. Even his old pal Ed Balls does not think that GB Energy is going

to deliver the green transition, and I read this morning that the Prime Minister's brand-new chief of staff is a sceptic of the Secretary of State's approach. The Secretary of State is increasingly isolated in his party, so when will he do the decent thing and set out the full systems cost of his approach, so that the British public can see what he is going to do to their bills?

Ed Miliband: Oh dear, oh dear. The truth is that after three months of this Government, people have breathed a sigh of relief that there is finally a Government with a plan for the country. *[Interruption.]* I think the right hon. Lady should listen to what her own ministerial team has been saying about her. The former networks Minister has said that their infrastructure approach is hopeless. The former Energy Minister says that the onshore wind ban was “always mad”, and Lord Callanan said that the right hon. Lady had kicked the solar consents “into the long grass”. If I were her, I would be hoping for just one thing from the next Tory leader: a shadow Cabinet reshuffle.

T3. [900563] **Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab):** Grid capacity and the slow speed of new connections is a major issue in west London. It is holding back house building, and it is holding back businesses exciting new green businesses such as Allye Energy in my constituency. The Conservatives did absolutely nothing in 14 years to tackle the issue. What is my right hon. Friend's strategy, and will he meet me and local businesses to discuss how we can tackle this issue together and meet our missions around growth and good clean energy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that that issue is holding back projects across the country, which is why we have tackled it from day one. We are attempting to release network capacity, which can then be reallocated to accelerate the connection of viable projects. There is a lot of work to do, and we are building on what the previous Government did to prioritise the queue and to build the necessary infrastructure that should have been built over the past 14 years.

T2. [900562] **Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con):** Does the Secretary of State accept that the only way we will both meet our net zero targets and keep energy bills down is by pressing ahead with a new generation of nuclear power stations? Will he therefore accelerate existing projects such as Hinkley Point and Sizewell C, and press ahead with small modular reactor and advanced modular reactor technology?

Ed Miliband: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Nuclear is an essential part of the energy mix. We are mainly going to have a renewable system, but nuclear is an essential accompaniment. I fully support all the projects he mentions.

T4. [900564] **Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab):** The previous Minister of State for Energy Security and Net Zero has admitted that the last Government could have gone further and faster on insulating homes, but said that he would wait to see how the new Government tackle the issue. When it comes to insulating millions

more homes across the country and reducing bills for millions of families, will we simply take a “wait and see” approach?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): Whether it is our ending of the onshore wind ban, the CCUS funding we announced last week, our plans for Great British Energy or our warm homes plan, we are hitting the ground running to deliver our clean power mission. The Conservatives spent 14 years dithering and delaying, leaving ordinary people to pay the price, but we will get on with the job of delivering energy security so that we can secure financial security for families, good jobs and climate action.

T6. [900566] **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): To achieve net zero, we will need widespread micro-generation alongside large-scale projects. However, as a local farmer who wanted to install an anaerobic digester told me, grid connections are both costly and subject to long delays. What does the Secretary of State plan to do to address these issues, particularly in rural areas such as my Thornbury and Yate constituency?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady raises a question about the problems of grid connection that is familiar to many Members. We are building on work done by Nick Winser, the former electricity networks commissioner, and we want to go further to tackle the problem of grid connections once and for all.

T5. [900565] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): The great turbines of the Rampion wind farm are off my beautiful coastal constituency. Although the UK has done well on offshore generation, the jobs in this sector have not always been here in the UK. What plans do the Government have to expand offshore wind, and to ensure that UK workers and supply chains benefit from that expansion?

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones): My hon. Friend asks an important question. Of course, we and the Opposition have fundamentally different views. We believe in an industrial strategy that will help to deliver our supply chains. We believe in Great British Energy, and we believe in a sovereign wealth fund, which so many other countries have and the previous Government failed to deliver. We will make sure we have resilient supply chains that create jobs, deliver energy security and maximise the economic benefits of the transition.

T7. [900567] **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): What guarantees can the Secretary of State give to steelworkers in Scunthorpe that the grid connection required for a new electric arc furnace will be ready on time next year?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue that I am afraid was not solved by the last Government. We are working at pace with National Grid, and I am sure the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), will be happy to talk to him further about the work we are doing.

T9. [900569] **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s commitment to increasing renewable energy generation. An important component of that is the development of associated infrastructure, including battery storage facilities such as those proposed in Cullingworth in my constituency. How do the Government plan to ensure that the safety of residents is not put at risk by such developments, and that there is clear community benefit from any renewable energy plans and the associated infrastructure?

Michael Shanks: Batteries will play an important part in the short-duration storage required for the energy system we are building for the future. It is a question of balance. Communities will be engaged in the consultation process, and I will be convening a roundtable with providers of battery technology and other short-duration storage in the next few months to learn both from projects that have worked well and from projects on which we could do better in future. I will happily share any information from that with my hon. Friend.

T8. [900568] **Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that large energy suppliers work with community energy organisations to generate and sell electricity locally at discounted rates, and provide fair community benefits, as proposed by the Liberal Democrats?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady raises the important issue that, as a country, we are massively underpowered on community energy. As part of the GB Energy local power plan we will be trying to change that, learning from countries such as Germany and Denmark, which do much better than us. We will certainly look at the issues she raises.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): The clean power by 2030 mission shows the clear intention of this Government to get on with the just transition. Energy workers in Falkirk, Grangemouth and across the central belt are rightly concerned about jobs. Between 2013 and 2023, under the previous Government, jobs in the UK oil and gas sector halved. Unfortunately, some of the Opposition parties have opposed the stream of funding for clean infrastructure and jobs of the future that will come from an increase in the energy profits levy on the record profits of oil and gas giants. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is time Opposition parties started putting their own plans forward on how they would get on with the just transition and deliver clean energy jobs at a critical time for workers and the climate?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend raises the important issue that what will define the future for North sea workers is whether there is a plan for future jobs in offshore wind, carbon capture and hydrogen. There was no plan from the previous Government; this Government are absolutely determined to ensure a just transition for those workers, using the power of Government and a proper industrial policy to make it happen.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): On petrol prices, for the past 11 years the Government froze fuel duty; they cut it in 2002 and then froze it again. The Government instructed the Competition and Markets Authority to carry out a review, and we

came up with the pumpwatch scheme. A consultation was undertaken in January, but when I wrote to the Government in September to ask about its results, they said they were looking at it and would consider it in due course. Is the scheme a priority for the Government? If not, in what other ways will they ensure petrol prices are kept low at the pump? Are they going to freeze fuel duty?

Ed Miliband: I will not comment on the Budget, obviously. We are very sympathetic to pumpwatch—it is important that there is a fair deal for consumers at the pump.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Exeter city council has worked hard to install solar panels on council homes to ensure that social tenants can benefit from lower bills and participate in the green transition. Can the Minister set out what more we can do to ensure that all tenants benefit from new green technologies?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend raises such an important issue. Across the House, we can have different views on ground-mounted solar, but we need to do more on rooftops and to ensure that tenants, for example council tenants, benefit from such technologies. That is a huge priority for us and we are working on it with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Scottish Government regarding the major planning application for an offshore wind farm between Scotland and Northern Ireland, which may well have significant implications for the Giant's Causeway world heritage site?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman will understand that I have to be careful in what I say about planning issues, but he should rest assured that I have frequent conversations with my counterpart in the Scottish Government and, no doubt, that is one issue we will be discussing.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Warwick and Leamington must be one of the sunniest places in the United Kingdom given the flurry of applications we have had for solar farms. There is a “loss of amenity” caused by one application, but if that community were prepared to welcome onshore wind turbines, of which we have none in Warwickshire, rather than a solar farm, would the Secretary of State or the Minister agree to support that? Will they meet me to discuss the issue?

Ed Miliband: Every planning application and development consent order is assessed on its merits. Importantly, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed), is polishing a land use framework, which has long been needed in this country. It will set out the balance between food security, the use of renewable energy, the restoration of nature and the role of farming. I hope that will help with some of the issues that hon. Members are facing.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), have spoken passionately about the need to upgrade the national grid, but do they recognise the concerns of people across the east of England, including in the Witham constituency, about what that means for their local communities? The Under-Secretary has said that he will meet Members of Parliament, but I ask him very politely whether he and representatives and Ministers from the Department will also meet members of the communities that are affected by this matter.

Ed Miliband: I know from the questions that I have received from the Opposition that the right hon. Lady has been a tireless advocate on these issues. I do understand the concerns of local communities about clean energy infrastructure, which is why I am so keen on the idea of community benefit. It is important that communities receive benefit for hosting that infrastructure. We must have a discussion about this matter in the House and across the country. If we are to end our exposure to international fossil fuels and the kind of the cost of living crisis that we have seen over the past few years, which has devastated communities across Britain, this infrastructure does need to be built.

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): Last week's announcement on carbon capture and hydrogen in my constituency demonstrates that we now have a Government of substance, not of hollow slogans. What discussions have the Secretary of State and Ministers had with the trade unions to ensure that we build those facilities with unionised labour?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. After 14 years of failure and inaction, we now have a Government who believe in working with our trade unions, who have the backing of our trade unions, and who want to work to create good jobs in the industries of the future. Our announcement on carbon capture, which was groundbreaking and world beating, will deliver just that.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The Institution of Civil Engineers has called for a spatial energy plan to utilise new and emerging technologies to facilitate future net zero infrastructure planning. Will the Government look to bring forward a spatial energy plan and meet me to discuss that?

Ed Miliband: Yes, we will be bringing forward a spatial energy plan. That is one of the responsibilities of the National Energy System Operator. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point: we need a plan for the system. We can have a plan for the 2030 system done by the NESO and, indeed, a wider strategic spatial energy plan, which will be crucial for the country.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): The warm homes plan is excellent and much needed in towns such as mine, but on warm homes grants for insulation, during recess I met a large number of constituents who had been victims of failed insulation and cowboy workmanship under such Government schemes. Some are living in horrific conditions with useless warranties. Is the Minister

aware of their plight? Will she ensure that regulation is strong enough, and will she meet me and victims to make sure that this never happens again?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are aware of those cases of bad insulation and we are clear that we need to get a firmer grip on them. To persuade everyone that we should be insulating and upgrading all of our homes, we need the highest standard possible. I agree to meet him to discuss this matter further.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): In my constituency, a new solar farm at Barkham is being delivered that will provide clean energy for more than 4,000 homes and provide a funding boost for Wokingham borough council. It will be connected in 2026, but there were concerns

that connection to the grid could be delayed by 11 years. What steps will the Minister take to reduce similar delays, and does he think that the Government can meet their net zero targets if the new renewable energy infrastructure cannot be quickly connected to the grid?

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. A similar point has been raised by many hon. Members across the House. This issue affects areas right across the country. We are doing what we can at the moment to prioritise the connections queue, so that the most important projects, or those most able to be delivered, can move forward. There is much more that we can do on that, but, fundamentally, we need to build much more network infrastructure in the first place so that we can speed up and reduce the cost of these connections for schemes such as the one he mentions.

Point of Order

12.38 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am concerned that the Government have not always been consistent with the explanations that they have given of their policy in relation to arms exports to Israel. In particular, some of the explanations that Ministers have given in this House are inconsistent with accounts that have been given elsewhere, including in the other place. My noble friend Lord Howard is also pursuing this matter in the other place. This is a critical foreign policy matter involving a close ally. Mr Speaker, have you had any indication that the Foreign Secretary intends to come to the House to make a statement on this matter and to clear up any misunderstanding that might have arisen as a result of discrepancies between what we have been told and what Ministers have said elsewhere?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving notice of that point of order. As he well knows, the Chair is not responsible for the accuracy of ministerial remarks, either in this House or elsewhere; but I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted his comments, and I am sure they have been taken on board. I do not think we have heard the end of this yet, so I am sure, as I know the right hon. Member well, that the Opposition will not give up at this stage.

Opposition Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

VAT: Independent Schools

12.40 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House regrets that the Government has decided to impose VAT on independent school fees; believes that educational provision should not be taxed; regrets that the Government is rushing to implement this change part-way through an academic year; calls on the Government to exempt from the VAT charge fees paid in respect of children of military and diplomatic families, all children who have an Education, Health and Care Plan, or who are in the process of applying for one, all children on SEN support, Centres for Advanced Training and schools in the Music and Dance Scheme, all children at schools whose fees are lower than the average per capita funding for a state school place, and children at religious schools of denominations for whom there is no faith school provision in the state sector; further calls on the Government to postpone imposition of the VAT charge for schools in areas where state schools in the relevant key stage are already on average over 95% full; also calls on the Government to postpone imposition of the VAT charge for fees paid in respect of children who have started a public examination course, to September 2025 for pupils currently in Year 11 or Year 13, and to September 2026 for pupils currently in Year 10 or Year 12; and calls on the Government to publish a full impact assessment of the effects of this policy on independent schools and the state sector ahead of the Budget.

There are 85 days to go until the introduction of Labour's education tax, and we are still in the dark. Many questions remain for parents, for children and for schools—when I say “schools”, that is both independent schools and state schools—and also for the local authorities that are responsible for special educational needs provision and generally for ensuring that everyone can get a place at school.

This is a huge change, which is being made in a headlong rush. There are big worries about children with special educational needs or a disability, about military families, about the talented musicians and dancers of tomorrow, about small religious faiths and about the widest impact of all—that on state schools, because this means disruption, bigger classes, budget overstretch, and ultimately, parents being less likely to get their preferred choice of school. Even those who do not necessarily object to this in principle are saying it cannot be pushed through this fast, from the Chartered Institute of Taxation to the NASUWT.

It is a long-standing principle that you do not put tax on learning—a principle all but universally observed around the world. On the Conservative Benches we believe in that principle and we believe in the sanctity of parental choice. The vast majority of children, of course, go to state-funded schools, and we defend the right of parents to choose those schools and defend the diversity of those schools. A small number of parents choose home schooling; we defend that right too. And yes, some choose the independent sector.

Parents are the first educators of their children. The state sets an expectation of a suitable education for all children, and beyond that, parents should make the choice of what is best for their child. Parents might decide to opt out of state education for any one, or

[*Damian Hinds*]

many, of several reasons—quite often simply because they have found the school that they believe is right for their child, and where their child is most happy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con) *rose*—

Damian Hinds: I am spoilt for choice. I give way to my right hon. Friend.

Graham Stuart: During the election, in the Monks Walk pub, I met a constituent who has stayed in his small home and has one car for the family, because they decided their bullied daughter needed to go to another school. They have sacrificed, with the support of wider family, so that that child with special educational needs can go to a private school. It is children and families like that who will be the victims of this spiteful policy. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is right to identify that many parents make great personal financial sacrifices to do what they believe is best for their children. Some parents whose children go to independent school are rich, and some are definitely not. I include in that latter bracket most of the parents sending their children, for example, to small religious schools in Hackney, Salford or Birmingham. Very many more are in the middle, including many professionals working in our public services.

Jim Shannon: The shadow Minister has rightly underlined the issue for those who send their children to faith schools or independent schools. Many constituents in Strangford have told me that they have saved and persevered, have not been on holidays, have not bought a second car, or have even continued to use their old car longer than they should, so that those moneys can go into their children's education. Does he, like me, find it impossible to understand how it can be that it is the Labour party—the party of conscience, I would say—that has let us down on this issue and is going to penalise people who are hard-pressed to find education for their children?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is right about the financial sacrifices some make. Let us be clear: it is possible to tax wealthier people or people with a higher income more, but the Government should be honest about it. The way to do so is through the income tax system, not through a choice that people make to have their child in an independent school. The hon. Gentleman did not mention this, but I might add that because the situation in Northern Ireland is different from that in England—by the way, the situation in Scotland is different, too—the Government need to think carefully about how the policy is applied throughout the whole United Kingdom, because VAT is a reserved matter, and about what it means for the hon. Gentleman's constituents and others across these islands.

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): My late mother and dad used to run a pub, and they paid their taxes. It was a private business that made a profit. Why should these businesses not pay their taxes? Why should they not pay what is owed?

Damian Hinds: This is a completely different situation. Independent schools do pay tax.

Mike Amesbury *indicated dissent.*

Damian Hinds: No, independent schools do pay tax on supplies. No tax is charged on education, whether in an independent school or in other settings, and that is a very long-standing principle.

Let me clear up one very important definitional point, which I ask colleagues to reflect on. There is no tax break involved. It would be a tax break if a person who had a child at an independent school and was not taking a place at a state school were charged less tax as a result. That does not happen in the United Kingdom. Everybody contributes to state sector education, whether or not they take up a place.

The principle of no tax on learning is a fast one, and once we loosen it, we do not know where we will go. Where might the Treasury look next? Private nurseries, perhaps? Music lessons? Private tutoring? What is the philosophical difference between independent school education and private tutoring?

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Let me make a point to demonstrate how rushed and ill thought through this policy is. My understanding is that if a child in a nursery has turned five but the other children in the class have not, all the parents in that nursery year will have to pay VAT on their child's nursery fees. That is how badly this has been thought through.

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right. That comes from the rushed nature of the legislation. The sloppy drafting means that children who are not of school age get dragged into this tax if they happen to be in the same room as children who are, and there are concerns about what might follow in other borderline cases.

The Government claim that the policy is about revenue, not politics, but having read the Secretary of State's twitterings, I think hon. Members could be forgiven for mistaking the motivation. It is entirely spurious, for multiple reasons, to link this tax to 6,500 teachers, mental health support or anything else. The money will go into general Exchequer receipts, and anyway, 6,500 teachers is not that many in the scheme of things, given the 468,000 there are now. That is a compound growth rate of 0.3% over five years—and, by the way, a lot fewer teachers than we recruited in the last five years. Mental health support teams are already being rolled out, and they cover primary schools as well as secondary schools. It is not clear what the difference is in the new Government's policy on mental health support, other than that it will not include primary schools.

To the extent that the VAT revenue could be hypothecated, it looks a lot more like that revenue would reduce cuts to education resourcing, rather than increasing it. If the policy is about revenue, not politics, the Government could easily commit to one simple thing today. They are confident, they tell us, that the policy will raise a large sum of money and not create large costs. Will they commit to measuring and reporting back on that, and if it turns out, against expectations, that they were wrong, will they reverse it?

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend, who is giving an excellent introduction to the debate. Is it his understanding that our military personnel, and those serving in our diplomatic service, will also be hit by this tax?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As things stand, those who get the continuity of education allowance would be hit, in part, by the tax.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In the calculus that my right hon. Friend rightly asks the Government to publish, can we include the foreign receipts that the independent sector generates? The roll of a school in my constituency includes a very large number of children from overseas whose parents pay directly into the UK economy. That school is now under threat. The loss of that revenue will be substantial, and the local impact huge. May we have that factored in, given that, so far, we have not seen any figures on the loss of money and reputation that the closure of many such schools will entail?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is correct: substantial export earnings come from the sector, and from a globally mobile set of families. But I would go further; in addition to the direct export earnings effect, there is also an indirect effect. For companies deciding where to site their European headquarters, English education is a big factor. That is partly because of our brilliant state schools, which have improved so much over the past 14 years, but the availability of independent schools is also a factor.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State makes a strong point about the sanctity of zero-rating VAT for education. I am concerned that children's clothes, which are currently exempt from VAT, may be the next target. Notwithstanding the impact that the change to VAT will have on individual families, does he agree that private and prep schools—my constituency has five—are enormous employers of people involved in building maintenance, such as electricians and plumbers, and that the impact on the wider economy could well be profound?

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members to look towards the Chair when they are speaking, or what they say will not be picked up by the mics; I then struggle to hear them. I know that the Minister was struggling as well. If Members keep the chatter down, it will help us both.

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is of course correct about the economic contribution that schools make locally and the large numbers of people they employ. That point was also made by NASUWT, which is worried about teachers being inadvertently pushed out of the profession if redundancies are made mid-way through the school year.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): My youngsters have had a mix of excellent learning, including in nursery and in state education, as have youngsters in many families. I have a personal and constituency interest in wanting all education settings to thrive, so I agree with my right hon. Friend. The economic and employment impact of this new tax will be devastating for bus drivers and maintenance teams. It will impact on so many livelihoods and communities. The people picking up the unknown impact will be in the state sector. The policy will just deliver more of the unknown.

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con) *rose*—

Damian Hinds: I will take one more intervention before making progress, so as not to try your patience too much, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is not that my patience is being tested, but I do worry when shadow Secretaries of States cover a subject at length. I understand, but we need to get on, because lots of Back Benchers are desperate to get in. In fact, we have a very eager Opposition Whip coming in now.

Paul Holmes: You will find out, Mr Speaker, that I will not test your patience. I want to take my right hon. Friend back to the point he made about the Education Secretary's tweet, which I thought was disgraceful. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where is she?"] The divisive language behind that tweet was a disgrace, given the many independent schools that work hard and play by the rules. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the embossed notepaper that the Secretary of State focused on is sent to many children who are being sponsored through bursaries or scholarships, and whose parents work hard to give their children the best education? The Education Secretary should apologise for that disgraceful tweet.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who, as ever, makes important points. I too am disappointed that the Education Secretary is not with us for this important debate. I will make progress, Mr Speaker, because I do not want to go on longer than I should.

To be clear, we want to talk first and foremost not about revenue, but about education, schools and children—all children. [*Interruption.*] No, I have been talking about schools and children throughout. If the Government insist on ploughing on with this divisive policy, they must at least exempt certain groups of children for whom it would be especially unjust or counterproductive to impose this tax. Surely, schools that charge the same as, or even less than, the average cost of a school place were not in the Government's sights when they devised this scheme. There are small religious groups that have no state sector provision for their denomination. Why should they be disadvantaged? The continuity of education allowance exists expressly to support families who are serving our nation in the armed forces. Surely they should be protected.

The Government acknowledge the role of centres of advanced training and performing arts schools that come under the music and dance scheme, because, again, there is no equivalent specialist schooling available in the state sector. Then there are the many children who receive special educational needs support, including those with an education, health and care plan, whether or not they are at the school named in the plan, and those children who are applying for a plan.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con) *rose*—

Damian Hinds: I ask my hon. Friend to forgive me, as I must make progress.

[*Damian Hinds*]

As for children whose parents are priced out of a school, or face its closure, disruption to learning can be difficult at any time, but it is even more problematic when pupils have started a public examination course. Their next school might not even offer the subjects that they were taking, or the exams might not be marked by the same exam board. We need to think about those children. The tax levy should be postponed until pupils who are now in years 10 or 11, or in the lower and upper sixth form, have finished their exams—until 2025 or 2026.

The widest impact of all will be felt by state schools. Ministers have said repeatedly that there is no problem because there are plenty of spaces in state schools. We have repeatedly pointed out that that is of no help at all if those places are in the wrong places or the wrong year groups. They need to be where and for whom they are required.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): State schools in my constituency are bursting at the seams. There are no spare spaces to move into for the more than 1,000 children being educated in independent schools there. The fees charged by those independent schools are a quarter to half of the cost of state school provision per pupil.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Joy Morrissey: In Buckinghamshire, we do not have the places. We have a lot of children in special education needs and disabilities schools, faith schools and other private schools. We cannot cope with the capacity loss. We have parents who are sacrificing everything to send their child to a SEND school. There is no provision in the county for them. The policy will result in a crisis of transportation and places, and children will suffer as a result.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for their interventions. Indeed, there are many places, particularly at secondary school level, where there are insufficient spaces available to accommodate a significant minority being displaced from independent schools—places such as Bristol and Bedford, Salford and Richmond, Worcester and Wycombe, and Bury North and Bolton North East.

Let us be clear: local authorities have a duty to find spaces for children. They take that duty very seriously, and a number of them are considerably worried about what may happen. In-year admissions can be especially complicated in any case: they can involve not only governors but the fair access protocol panel and, ultimately, a Secretary of State direction, all of which can add up to months out of school. Creating additional physical space in schools obviously takes time, and building new schools takes longer still. Time is needed to adjust, which is why our motion further calls on the Government to

“postpone imposition of the VAT charge for schools in areas where state schools in the relevant key stage are already on average”

almost full.

This Government barely have their feet under the table, and already they are a Government in chaos. That chaos is exemplified by this destructive, disruptive and divisive education tax that will interrupt learning; create place demand where it cannot be accommodated; put further strain on the SEND system; hit specific groups that we ought to be trying to protect; likely generate much lower revenue than anticipated; and quite possibly even end up as a net cost to the public purse. In their headlong rush to make a political statement, the Government appear simply to not have thought through the consequences. We call on them now to announce immediately that they are abandoning the unrealistic January implementation date, to publish a proper impact assessment, and then to entirely rethink this entirely counterproductive tax.

1.1 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): This Government were elected to break down barriers to opportunity. We are determined to fulfil the aspiration of every parent in our country to get the best education for their children. We are committed to doing so by improving state schools and making sure that every child has access to a high-quality education. We will start to make this happen by expanding early years childcare for all by opening 3,000 new nurseries across England. We will recruit 6,500 new teachers, alongside improving teacher and headteacher training, and we will roll out further mental health support to schools and colleges in England. Those improvements to the state education system will begin our work to make sure every parent’s aspiration for their children can be fulfilled.

We want to get on with these important changes right away, and to do so, they must be paid for. That is why to help fund improvements to our state schools, we have made the tough but necessary decision to end tax breaks for private schools. In the July statement, the Government announced that as of 1 January 2025, all education services and vocational training provided for a charge by a private school in the UK will be subject to VAT at the standard rate of 20%.

Graham Stuart: I know the Minister to be an honourable man, so will he take this opportunity to apologise to the House in the absence of the Secretary of State for Education for the malicious and spiteful tweet that she put out this weekend? That tweet was ill-advised, even if one believes that this policy is the right thing to do.

James Murray: Neither I nor any of my colleagues will make any apology for wanting to improve state education across this country to make sure that the aspiration of every parent in our country to get the best possible education for their children can be fulfilled. That is why we have announced that any fees paid from the date of the July statement, 29 July, relating to the term starting in January 2025 onward will be subject to VAT.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): This package of support will put thousands of teachers back into school classrooms in Telford and across the country. Has my hon. Friend received any representation to say that if this change did not take place, those plans by this Government—who were elected by the people of this country—would go ahead by any other means?

James Murray: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the reason why we have taken the tough decision to end tax breaks for private schools. It is to fund our education priorities, because we know that the way to improve opportunities for people right across this country is to make sure that our state schools can provide the best-quality education for all children.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Minister was in a similar debate this morning, in which he heard a range of views. He is a Treasury Minister, not an Education Minister or the Education Secretary; will he commit to publishing an impact assessment on the overall cost of this policy? There were parents in the Gallery listening to the debate this morning, and it is clear that there will be a legal challenge to this policy. Will the Treasury also publish the potential cost of that legal challenge and the bill that his Department will be footing in order to meet it?

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Member for her contribution. First, in terms of an impact assessment, while developing these policies, the Government have carefully considered the impact they will have on pupils and their families across the state and private sectors, as well as the impact they will have on state and private schools. In addition to having reviewed analysis published by third parties such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Government have conducted their own analysis of the likely impacts of these policies, which draws on a range of sources.

Graham Stuart: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

James Murray: I am not going to give way, because I am responding to the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel).

Mr Speaker: Order. It is a point of order, so you do give way, unfortunately.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. Could you give any advice to me on how we can ensure that the impact assessment that must have been conducted on this policy is shared with the House? It is a fundamental—

Mr Speaker: Order. As you know, that is not a point of order—do not waste my time. Carry on, Minister.

James Murray: As I was saying to the right hon. Member for Witham, the Government will publish a tax information and impact note on the VAT policy change at the Budget, once the independent Office for Budget Responsibility has scrutinised and certified the costing of the final policy.

Mims Davies: Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I am still replying to the hon. Member's right hon. Friend. *[Interruption.]* Maybe Conservative Members could sort this out on their side of the House before they come into the Chamber, but I will continue replying to the right hon. Member for Witham.

Turning to the legal cases, the Government have considered the policy's interaction with human rights law and are confident that it is compatible with the UK's obligations under the Human Rights Act. I hope that addresses the right hon. Member's concerns.

Mims Davies: Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I will.

Mims Davies: I thank the Minister for kindly giving way. This policy will have an economic impact in each and every constituency: on librarians, on maintenance people and on those who work in labs, in catering and as minibus drivers—everything that is predicated on schools such as the ones we are discussing. Will the impact assessment and the Treasury look at the wider implications for employment?

James Murray: As the hon. Member knows, there are established processes for developing tax information and impact notes. This one will be developed in line with the OBR costing in the normal way and published alongside the Budget, so she will see all the information.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Murray: I have given way quite a lot, so I am going to make a bit of progress.

Alongside the announcements about VAT, the Government announced in July that private schools in England with charitable status would lose their eligibility for business rates charitable relief from April 2025, subject to parliamentary passage of the legislation. Those changes were set out in a technical note that was published online alongside draft VAT legislation, which together formed a technical consultation. As part of that consultation, the Government—both at official and ministerial level—have engaged with a broad range of stakeholders, including the devolved Governments.

We have listened carefully to the points that people have raised with us. We recognise that while this policy will raise revenue to help support improvements in the state education sector, it may lead to increased costs for some parents and carers whose children are in the private education system. However, let me be clear: while private schools will now be required to charge VAT on the education services and vocational training they provide, we expect that most private schools will be able to absorb a significant portion of this new VAT charge and keep fee increases affordable for most parents. They will be able to make efficiencies and recover the VAT they incur on the things they buy. Those recovered costs can be used to offset increases for fee payers. We are already seeing that some schools have committed to absorbing the VAT liability entirely, while others are choosing to cap fee increases at 5% or 10% to keep fees as low as possible for parents.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I had a pop at getting the Minister to give way during the debate this morning, and I appreciate his doing so now. I love the irony of what he is saying, which is, "We need to do this to raise all this money, yet it isn't actually going to raise all that much money because it can be reclaimed." On the impact assessment, it is really interesting that one line in the consultation document that went out this summer says:

"The government understands that moving schools can be challenging."

How many of his own constituents have contacted him to say they will have to move schools as a result of this policy, and how do we measure the damage that moving schools is going to cause for so many children in our constituencies?

James Murray: I have been clear: the Government recognise that some pupils may subsequently move into the state education sector as a result of these policies. However, as is set out in a technical note—and I take it from the hon. Gentleman’s comment that he has read it—the

“number of pupils who may switch schools as a result of these changes represent a very small proportion of overall pupil numbers in the state sector. The government is therefore confident that the state sector will be able to accommodate any additional pupils”

whom this policy will cause to move.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Murray: I will make a bit of progress, because I have been quite generous in giving way so far.

I want to address some of the questions that the shadow Secretary of State asked in his speech, particularly about why we are introducing this policy from 1 January 2025. The reason we are doing so is simple: we want to raise the funding we need as soon as possible to deliver our education priorities for state schools across the country. Importantly, a January 2025 start date means that schools and parents will have had five months to prepare for the VAT change, and His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs stands ready to make sure schools are supported in delivering it.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I am going to make some progress.

HMRC will put in place a number of measures to ensure that all private schools can be registered ahead of 1 January, including publishing bespoke guidance on gov.uk ahead of 30 October, updating registration systems and putting additional resource in place to help process applications.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Murray: I am going to make some progress, because I have given way quite a lot so far.

Ahead of this policy being implemented, the Government have carefully considered the impact that these changes will have on pupils and their families across both the state and private sectors, as well as the impact they will have on state and private schools. The Government’s costing of these policies is currently being scrutinised by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility. The Chancellor will confirm our approach to these measures at the Budget, when we will set out our assessment of the expected impacts of this change in the normal way.

We recognise that, as hon. Members have said, these changes may lead to some pupils moving into the state education sector. While the impact of this policy is being fully considered, we know that projections by the Institute for Fiscal Studies indicate that the number of pupils who may switch schools as a result of these changes is likely to represent a very small proportion of overall pupil numbers in the state sector—less than 0.5%—with any displacement expected to take place over several years.

Dr Evans: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. This is about children—and even the Prime Minister made a choice to better the education of his children—so putting this in place in January, halfway through a year, is going to have a significant emotional impact on families and children. That is why it should be delayed. If it is good enough for the Prime Minister to make such choices for himself, why cannot this Government make choices for the rest of the nation, and support the most impacted families and children?

James Murray: I have made clear the reason why we are proceeding with this policy to a January 2025 date, which is that we want to raise the money as soon as possible to invest in our improvements to state education. There will have been five months for parents and schools to prepare for the change.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the Minister give way on that point?

James Murray: I am still responding to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), so please let me come back to that point. HMRC is putting in place bespoke guidance, and it is standing by to make sure that schools are properly registered for the change. All the evidence we have seen from the IFS and so on suggests that the impact on the state sector will be very small, which means that it will not have a material effect on children’s education.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Murray: I am going to make some progress.

To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth, I am not denying that some pupils may have to move into the state sector, but we expect much of this to take place at natural transition points, such as when a child moves from primary to secondary school, or at the beginning of their GCSE or A-level years. As I have said, the IFS expects any displacement to take place over several years. We are confident that the state sector will be able to accommodate any additional pupils, and that these policies will not have a significant impact on the state education system as a whole.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Murray: I am going to make some progress. I am sorry, but I have taken a lot of interventions.

I would like to address the issue of special educational needs. It is a point that many hon. Members have raised, and I know that some parents are concerned about the impact of this policy on pupils in private schools with special educational needs. Let me start by saying that we have considered this element of the policy very carefully. Our proposed policy makes sure that pupils will not be impacted where they have acute additional needs and an education, health and care plan in England, or its equivalent in other nations, specifies that these can be met only in a private school.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way on that specific point, because he is relying on those schools still being open because other

parents have not left. How will he address the situation in which parents of children needing that extra support rely on such schools for their special educational needs, yet those schools have closed because they cannot afford to stay open any longer?

James Murray: We will take a community-wide approach that sees improved SEND provision in mainstream state schools, as well as ensuring that state special schools cater for those with the most complex needs.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): As a parent of a disabled child, the issue of SEND education in this country is very important to me, as it is to a number of my friends and acquaintances. Let us be clear that the SEND system in this country is broken, and it was the actions of the previous Government that left us with parents being desperate and having to search for alternatives to mainstream education for their children. The vast majority of my constituents who find themselves without suitable education placements for their children, for reasons of disability or educational needs, are unable to afford to send their children to a private school. Does the Minister agree with me that perpetuating a system of inequality is not the solution for our broken SEND system?

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. She is absolutely right to say that we need to improve SEND provision for all children in this country in a financially sustainable way, and she speaks with great experience.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Murray: Let me make a bit of progress.

We want to improve state schools across this country so that when people have children with special educational needs, they never need to send them to a private school because the provision in state schools is better. That is the crucial point behind our approach, which my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) was right to highlight.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Murray: I am going to make a bit of progress, because I have been quite generous in giving way so far.

I was talking about when EHCPs in England, or their equivalents in other nations, specify that a child's education can be met only in a private school. In cases where pupils' needs can be met only in a specified private school, local authorities will fund their places and be able to reclaim the VAT. Similarly on business rates, the Government are developing an approach to address the potential impact of these changes when private school provision has been specified through an EHCP. More widely, as we have just been addressing, we as a Government are committed to transforming the system for supporting children and young people with SEND in all schools. We need to deliver better outcomes in a financially sustainable way.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I am going to make a bit of progress.

To address some other points raised in this debate, we know that a small number of diplomatic officials and service personnel are posted abroad for extended periods. In such circumstances, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence provide the continuity of education allowance to ensure that this does not interfere with their children's education. I can give the reassurance today that the Government will monitor closely the impact of these policy changes on affected diplomatic and military families, with any changes to the scheme being considered as—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure the Lib Dems do not need coaching.

James Murray: I am not quite sure what happened there, but I will carry on. I was making an important point, which is that the Government will monitor closely the impact of our policy changes on affected diplomatic and military families, with any changes to the scheme being considered as part of the ongoing spending review.

Alicia Kearns: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

James Murray: I will make a bit of progress. In our consultation on the technical detail of this policy, we have been engaging widely and in depth, and the views of MPs are an important part of that. As I said earlier, it has been a tough but necessary decision to end tax breaks for private schools. We believe it is the right decision, and one we need to implement as soon as possible to help raise the funding that we need to deliver our priorities for state education in this country. We are determined to make sure that education, which is available for all, is of the highest possible quality, because that is how we ensure that we meet the aspiration of every parent to get the best possible education for their children.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

1.20 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and I am grateful for the Health Secretary's advice—*[Interruption.]* I did not need coaching—you will hear that soon enough.

When I heard that today's debate would be about schools, I thought, thank goodness, we are finally going to give the crisis in our classrooms the attention it deserves and have a long, overdue serious debate about the squeeze on school budgets, the shortage of specialist teachers, the dangerous state of many school buildings, the crisis in special educational needs provision, or the mental health of children, but no. In fairness, expecting the Conservative party suddenly to start prioritising those issues in opposition, after it spent years neglecting them in government, would be foolishly optimistic. Nevertheless, I hope that we will have the chance to debate them properly soon.

A priority for the Liberal Democrats is ensuring that every child, no matter their background, gets the support and attention that they need at school, so that they leave with the skills, confidence and resilience to be happy and successful. That means the Government investing in education as we invest in other vital infrastructure. In fact, Liberal Democrats believe that education is the

[Munira Wilson]

single best investment we can make in our children's potential and our country's future. That is why in our manifesto we set out a number of ways to make that investment. We argued that putting a dedicated qualified mental health professional in every primary and secondary school was important. We argued for an increase in school and college funding per pupil, above the rate of inflation every year. We argued for school meals to be extended to all children in poverty, and for a tutoring guarantee for every disadvantaged pupil who needs extra support.

That package of investment in our state schools would improve and boost the performance and opportunities for every child, as well as closing the attainment gap that limits the life chances of too many children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Crucially, we set out in detail how it could all be paid for, including by increasing the tax on social media firms who have done so much to worsen the mental health crisis in our schools. That is a much bolder package of investment than the one this Government have set out so far, and it is paid for fairly, not by taxing parents' own investment in their children's education. I think the shadow Education Secretary was advocating raising income tax to invest in education—[*Interruption.*]

Damian Hinds: Even for a Lib Dem that is pushing it.

Munira Wilson: The shadow Education Secretary was suggesting to the Minister that that is where he could find some money—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members wish to intervene, they should do it properly. Let us not have side banter, as the rest of the Chamber needs to get in as well.

Munira Wilson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As we have a Treasury Minister rather than an Education Minister opening the debate for the Government, I say gently that he should look at what the Liberal Democrats proposed on reforming capital gains tax as a way to fund some of the important investment that we need in education, rather than looking at taxing parents' choices to invest in their children's education.

The Government's policy would undermine two important principles. First, education should simply not be taxed. As we have heard, all education provided by an eligible body, including university education, music lessons, and tutoring are exempt from VAT, and VAT should not be imposed on any of those things because education is fundamentally a public good. Secondly, parents have the right to choose what education setting is best for their child. As Liberals we have always championed choice, and believe that nothing should get in the way of those important choices. Of course we want to get to a point where every parent can choose a local state school that meets their child's needs and gives them the best possible start in life, and opportunities to flourish. But let us be honest with ourselves: that is not the reality facing many parents today, especially when their children have special educational needs.

Liberal Democrats have many times raised the crisis in SEND provision. Conservative cuts to school and council budgets mean that many parents and carers

simply cannot get their children the support they deserve. The Minister talked a moment ago about sorting out state-school SEND provision, so that no parent with a child with SEND would need to send their child to a private school, but does he recognise that in order to sort out and fix our broken SEND system we will need not millions but billions of pounds? I am not entirely sure that the Chancellor will be giving that kind of money to the Department for Education.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): In my constituency there are three independent schools, one of which is a choir school. In one of those independent schools there are 29 children with diagnosed SEND, and only one with an EHCP with that as the named school. Does my hon. Friend agree that given the crisis in attaining EHCPs, especially in West Sussex county council, which is ranked fifth worst in the country and where only 3.6% of EHCPs are given within the statutory framework of 20 weeks, there needs to be more support in dealing with the deluge that this policy will cause county councils—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I suggest that interventions are meant to be short and not a speech, especially if you are on the list? People are going to go down to a six-minute time limit shortly. Please, think of others.

Munira Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is absolutely right to say that because only children with EHCPs will be exempt from the VAT charge, there will be the unintended consequence of adding yet further pressure to what is already a broken system. Indeed, a parent in my constituency has written to me along those lines to say that they now feel that they will have to go through the application process. So many parents and carers are forced to navigate a postcode lottery and wait months, as my hon. Friend said, to get the support that their children are entitled to.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Lady is a London MP like me, and part of the problem is that the term "private schools" covers such a wide category and such a multitude of sins. Does she agree that this is also quite a London issue? I have an unusually large number of these schools, with 14 in my boundary—there were 15 a year ago but one has since closed. I know my hon. Friends on the Front Bench would be happy to meet me so I can feed in the comments that I hear at the advice surgery and when door knocking, which would take too long to recount right now.

Munira Wilson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention but I would gently say two things. First, I would not describe private schools as covering a "multitude of sins". This is also not just a London problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) who represents an Edinburgh constituency says that she has the highest number of private schools in the country. It is a nationwide problem, and the consequences have simply not been thought through.

Let me return to my point about special educational needs and disability. For many families, local state schools simply are not equipped to give those children the support they deserve. That is why, as we have heard, there are almost 100,000 children in independent schools who have special educational needs and disabilities but

not an EHCP. That is tens of thousands of parents, not the super-wealthy, but carers, who are working hard and making tough choices so that their children can have the nurturing education they need.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): For 14 years—the first five under coalition Government—state schools in Telford and across the country were told to be efficient, more creative and innovative to save money as budgets were frozen and then cut. Why can private schools not also be as efficient and creative to cut costs in their operations? It seems it is one rule for one set of parents' children, and another rule for the vast majority of children.

Munira Wilson: I point out for a start that when the Liberal Democrats were in government, school budgets increased in real terms, and we introduced the pupil premium to help the most disadvantaged children. When the Tories were left to their own devices, they slashed budgets, and the pupil premium has been devalued over the years.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I just want to return briefly to the topic of EHCPs. We all know that there is a crisis in special educational needs. In my own constituency, a quarter of pupils attend an independent school. At least 700 or more students do not have an EHCP. Those parents who are paying for places at private schools desperately want to get support for their children. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is crucial, if the Government insist on pursuing an ill thought-through policy that impacts on children with special educational needs, that all children with diagnosed educational needs—with or without an EHCP—and those eligible for disability allowance should be exempt from that VAT?

Munira Wilson: I would rather the Government do not go through with this policy at all and drop it, but if they insist on pressing ahead with it, all children with special educational needs, whether or not they are on the SEND register—they can be identified in other ways—should be exempted.

I will share a story from a constituent who contacted me recently. They have two children, both of whom have complex learning needs and have struggled to thrive in their local state school. After moving to a private school that was better able to support them, they are finally making progress and most importantly, to quote the parent, they

“don't feel like they are failing”.

The children's family has made huge financial sacrifices to give them this education, including remortgaging their home and cashing in pension plans. As this policy is set to be introduced in the middle of the school year, this family and thousands of others have little time to prepare or save. It will be disruptive for children who have already suffered enough disruption to their education in recent years. This parent who contacted me told me:

“We are terrified of the prospect of having to uproot our children for a second time because we can't see a way to afford this rise.”

Labour's rushed-through and ill thought-through plans will snatch opportunities away from thousands of children just like my constituents.

Jen Craft: You reflect on there being an exemption only for children who have EHCPs, and you mentioned that there should be an exemption for children who do not have an EHCP based on SEN or disability. My question is: how do you define that? There is huge scope for private schools to say that they are SEND specialists. There is not a measure of whether that is the case. How do you define those who have SEND or those with additional needs, beyond the scope of an EHCP?

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently say to the hon. Member that when you say “you”, it is as though I have said it? I want to reassure you that I am not involved in any of this.

Munira Wilson: Mr Speaker, I would not dare to second-guess your position on this issue. The best way to deal with this issue is to drop the policy entirely, but if we are to exempt children with special educational needs, a good place to start is the SEND register. Just yesterday, I was discussing with one of the headteachers in my constituency the number of children on their SEND register and how they go about identifying them. Schools already do that in the state sector to support children. We could apply those same rules and regulations in the private sector, and those children should be exempted. However, I would rather this policy was just dropped altogether.

For all these reasons, the Liberal Democrats do not support ending the VAT exemption for independent schools. Instead, we want to see a better partnership between independent schools and local state schools. Many already do that, and I am not just talking about a few bursaries here and free use of a pool there; I am talking about genuine partnership working and the sort of brilliant collaboration that I have seen in schools in my constituency, where Hampton school and Lady Eleanor Holles school share staff time with Reach academy in Feltham. They have also been mentoring and coaching pupils for medical school and other university places, and the results have been phenomenal in a disadvantaged part of west London, where typically students were not going on to further or higher education. That partnership has borne immense fruit for those young disadvantaged people.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Stripping the politics out of this, it is abundantly clear that substance aside, the breakneck implementation is completely wrong and will throw families, children and communities into chaos. It will also compromise the work of schools such as Eastbourne college, which does great stuff giving back to the community as part of the coastal schools partnership. Does my hon. Friend agree that if this Government are to insist on this policy going ahead, they should at the very least delay it to ensure that our schools, our staff and our communities are not thrown unnecessarily into chaos?

Munira Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend for his important intervention. As I have said before, it is best that the policy is dropped altogether, but if the Government insist on going ahead, it should be delayed. We need further provision to exempt all special educational needs children, and not just those with EHCPs. Those are two critical factors in trying to mitigate the damage this policy will do.

Mr Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Does my hon. Friend recognise that thousands of children do not have EHCPs? My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) referred to the deluge that would surely come to local authorities in the form of applications for EHCPs. That will be just when, because of the legacy of the Conservative Government, local authorities are on their knees and cannot cope with the level of demand. That will further disadvantage the already most disadvantaged children.

Munira Wilson: I think many of us—certainly on this side of the House—would recognise the point my hon. Friend makes, and many have already made it. I suspect that quite a few people on the Government Benches would also recognise that this policy will be a real challenge, because Members from all parts of this House have been turning out in vast numbers at any debate on special educational needs to discuss the major crisis in our state school provision for SEND pupils. The system is broken, and it will have further pressures still.

I come back to the point I was making on partnership working. The sort of exemplary work I was talking about benefits children in the state and independent sectors, and we want to see it become the norm in every part of the country. I fear that it will be one of the first things to suffer when schools are forced to make cutbacks under the Government's policy. Let us remember that most independent schools are no Eton or Winchester; 40% of them have fewer than 100 pupils. Those small schools, often in rural places, will struggle to absorb this extra cost.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Does the Member agree that the policy threatens the viability of many independent schools that have charitable status and serve deprived communities, including many independent schools in Blackburn, such as faith schools and those schools serving children with special educational needs? This policy will put those schools on their knees and vastly increase the number of spaces that will be required in public schools. In Blackburn, we do not have those spaces.

Mr Speaker: I gently say to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson that you have now been going 18 minutes. [*Interruption.*] No, let me finish before you make a judgment call. I do not want you to speak for longer than the Government Minister, and we are shortly in danger of doing that. I am sure you will be coming to the end of your speech.

Munira Wilson: I apologise, Mr Speaker. I was just coming on to the last paragraph of my speech, but I wanted to take some interventions from those on the Liberal Democrat Benches.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the answer should be that you cut the speech if you want to take more interventions.

Munira Wilson: May I just finish by urging Ministers to look, instead of a damaging and counterproductive tax on education, at ways to get independent schools to do more of that great partnership work with state schools and their communities and to ensure they are investing in that local community? Let us ensure that every child, no matter their background or circumstances,

is given the support and opportunities they need to thrive. Let us support investment in our education, not penalise it.

Mr Speaker: We come to a maiden speech, and we are now on a six-minute limit.

1.39 pm

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to make my first contribution in the House. It is a great honour to be here. I am so proud to be part of a Government who are putting state education at the heart of our mission. I have not been an MP for long, but I have already spent a lot of my time visiting schools in my constituency, and I have seen and heard for myself the very real challenges that they are facing because of the effects of austerity on their budgets. Opportunities for young people are shrinking in front of our eyes. I am glad that we are making these decisions so that we can invest more in the state education that 93% of our children need.

I would like to talk about the service of my predecessor as MP for North East Derbyshire, Lee Rowley. A constant refrain for me when I was campaigning during the election was how well regarded he was as a constituency MP, which is not always what you want to hear when campaigning for the other side, but it is a clear sign of how well regarded he was by his constituents. I also pay tribute to his service in the House, where he served in various ministerial positions with distinction. I particularly recognise his important work campaigning on behalf of those with ovarian cancer. I am sure that everybody in the Chamber will join me in thanking him for his service.

It is a huge honour to represent my home, North East Derbyshire. I will take a few moments to talk about what that place means to me, and indeed what home means to me. For many of my colleagues, home is where they were born or where they grew up. It is very much the origin of their journey, but for me and many others like me, it is the destination. As many of my fellow military veterans will know, I lived in over 11 different places over the past 10 years as a result of my military service. Whether that was a small officer cadets' bedroom in the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, kept to the ruthless standards of tidiness that that place demands—standards that may have lapsed since—my first posting to Normandy barracks in the beautiful city of Paderborn in Germany, or indeed the compound in Kabul where I served on operations, my accommodation has been varied, transient, occasionally used as target practice, and rarely felt like home. So when I say that I have found my home in North East Derbyshire, that is because I have come home.

When I turn off junction 29 of the M1 and see in the distance the latticework of green fields of Holy Moor, I know that I am home. When I am walking up Market Street to have a cuppa at the café Host, or something stronger at The Three Horseshoes, I know that I am home. After a busy day's canvassing, when I am getting a superlative chippy tea at New Tupton Fish Bar or a bacon cobb at Woodheads in Eckington, I know that I am home. When I am crossing the bridge over the River Rother into Killamarsh and I see the sign for that village, called by its original name—please forgive my Anglo-Saxon here—of Chinewoldemaresc, I know that

I am home, When I crest the hill at Coal Aston and see before me across the valley the town of Dronfield, with the purple hills of the Peak district in the distance, I know that I am home.

I want to say thank you to the people of North East Derbyshire for seeing in me the service and the values that they want to represent them in this place. I repeat the pledge that I made during my campaign that I will use each and every day here to serve you and deliver the future that I know we can have: a better future based not just on promises, but on real progress.

The work of this Government has already begun, and there is so much that I know will make a huge positive transformation for people in my constituency, whether that is renationalising railways so that we can be proud of the service they provide again, huge reforms to workers' rights and renters' rights so that we can end no fault-evictions, or the establishment of the child poverty taskforce so that we can drive down child poverty, just as Labour Governments have done before, and I know we will do again. There is much to do, and much that I am looking forward to being a part of.

Delivery matters. I want to speak briefly about why that is and about the effect that it has on our democracy. This is a subject close to my heart. As I have mentioned, I served in the military, and nobody is so much affected by the decisions of this House as my former colleagues. The decisions that colleagues sat in the Chamber have made and will make will have a direct impact on their lives. Those decisions could send them to dangerous places to do dangerous things. Indeed, some of my former colleagues in the armed forces have not come back. I would like us all to take a moment now to remember Corporal Liam Riley, who grew up in Killamarsh in my constituency and lost his life in Afghanistan. Let us not forget. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

It is of deep concern to me when I see that the number of people voting has diminished over the past few years; that so many people up and down the country see politics no longer as the mechanism by which we govern ourselves and bring the change that we want for our communities but as something done by some other people in some other place for the benefit of some other people. It is our duty to ensure that we leave this precious democracy that we have inherited in a better place than where we found it and that we show everybody that a vote for an MP matters, that a vote for a Government matters, and that a vote for democracy matters. That is how we can make the difference in the small towns and villages that make up places such as my constituency of North East Derbyshire.

Finally, there is a piece of advice that I would like to commend to the House. Over the summer, I had the privilege of meeting Clay Cross air cadets. As I take my place in the House, I commend their motto, "Acta non verba"—deeds, not words. We can all agree that that is a good motto to have as a Member of Parliament, and indeed for the Government.

Mr Speaker: Excellent.

1.46 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I welcome the hon. and gallant Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) to her place. We need more people in

Parliament who have service in their hearts. I also thank her for her good comments about her predecessor and in particular for her comments about Corporal Riley, which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) felt deeply. I thank her for taking the time to do that.

Sadly, I turn to a decision by the Government that does not have service to the country at its heart. This is a cruel, vindictive policy that will damage the prospects of children in both state and independent schooling. It is particularly damaging also for rural economies, which seem to have been entirely overlooked. In Rutland and Stamford, we have 10 independent schools that cater for a vast number of pupils—particularly those from military families and those with SEND—and what is common to all those families is how hard they work for their children to have the right education for them.

I have received heartbreaking emails from parents who have had to sacrifice the education they have worked so hard for. One was from a mother of twins who are midway through their GCSE year. There is no space in the state sector for them—twins who now question whether they will be able to sit their GCSEs because of this policy.

The entire county of Rutland has zero available state school spaces in years 10 and 11, and only three SEND spaces.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab) *rose*—

Alicia Kearns: Is the hon. Gentleman just going to stand, or will he ask to intervene?

Ben Coleman: Will the hon. Member give way?

Alicia Kearns: There we go.

Ben Coleman: I am most grateful to the hon. Member. Does she not think that a little bit of an apology from her and her colleagues for the disgraceful SEND system that they left as a legacy is merited? As people cannot get EHCPs or support in the state sector, and councils and cash-strapped families are turning to the private sector, should she not apologise for the legacy that she and her colleagues have left the country?

Alicia Kearns: I am so pleased that the hon. Gentleman is repeating the lines that the Whips gave him for this morning's Westminster Hall debate. I was not talking about SEND. It is deeply discourteous to the House to intervene on a Member with a point that is completely separate from the point that they are making; he will come to learn that in time.

As I said, the entire county of Rutland has zero available state school places for years 10 and 11. That means children will now not be able to get their education. I ask the Minister directly: what would he say to 16-year-olds who are to be forced out of their school in January with no alternative place to go and nowhere to do their studies? This is a vindictive policy, and it is absolutely wrong.

I want to touch on the contribution to local rural economies. In Rutland, education is the biggest single employer. As I said, we have 10 schools across 11 sites. In 2022-23, one secondary school in Rutland and Stamford contributed £50 million to UK GDP. It contributed

[Alicia Kearns]

£30 million to local GDP, £14 million was paid in tax to HMRC, and savings of £5.5 million were made to local schools through school places that were not taken. Some 70% of this school's expenditure is on staffing and, with the imposition of VAT, it is forecast to make a loss for the first time ever. Jobs are being lost. When 70% of the budget is staffing, what does a school do? Cuts have to be made in people's jobs. More than 2,000 people locally are employed directly by independent schools, and that is not to mention those working in the supply chain, whether driving buses, providing food or flowers, or working in cafés and shops. Rural economies do not have many options at the moment, and independent schools are a bedrock for them. The economic impact of these jobs on rural communities should be considered in an impact assessment, but I very much doubt one has been carried out.

Looking at the national economic picture, the Adam Smith Institute concluded that every child in independent schooling contributes £28,000 to the public finances. The average £2,700 saved on VAT makes a return to the taxpayer of 1,040%. If 5% of independent school pupils leave, the Government will generate £1 billion through this policy. If 10% to 15% of pupils leave, the Government will generate no revenue. If 25% of pupils leave, the Government will lose £1.58 billion, because they are doing something vindictive and wrong.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that people putting their children through independent school are paying twice? They pay once through their fees and once through income tax. If they are removed from the system, that will mean less money for education.

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. These parents have already paid into the state school system as if their child were going to state school, and they are net contributors to the local education system and the tax system, because they have chosen to ease the pressures on state schools by taking their child out. This is basic economics, and that is why the Government do not understand it.

Independent schools make a huge and optional contribution to the national teachers' pension scheme. Some could choose to mitigate their increased costs from the imposition of VAT by opting out of the TPS. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact that this would have on the financial viability of the TPS?

Additionally, a number of independent schools in my constituency provide homes for children in foster care who would otherwise have no stability. These are the kind of schemes they will have to stop. That will again result in increased costs and impact on the state sector, which will have to pick these things up.

It is a long-standing international norm to exempt education from sales taxes. Nurseries, universities, tutors and other education providers are not included in Labour's proposed VAT increase, although as per my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), there is a toddler tax, which any parent with a five-year-old child in nursery school will suddenly find themselves paying. It is ironic that the

Labour party says that it believes in free university education for all, yet many who take up apprenticeships or go into work will not go to university. Why does Labour think that all of us who do not go to university should pay for other people to go to university, but somehow, when it comes to this issue, we should pay for others?

There is also a question about the legality. Senior lawyers, including Lord Pannick, have argued that this proposal will breach European convention on human rights rules on educational choice and access. What assessment have the Government made of the legality of this policy?

I am already seeing the damage of this policy in the heartbreaking dilemmas facing families who have contacted me for help. For some pupils halfway through their exam years, there are no places in the state system. The requests are clear: the Government must delay the implementation until at least the end of this school year, so that children are not disrupted in their education. We need to exempt those pupils in years 10 to 13, so they can take their exams without the added pressure of a school move. We need to help local authorities to boost EHCP assessments rapidly, and we need to undertake a regional assessment of available state school places to exempt pupils who live in areas with no availability, such as Rutland.

I understand that the Labour party wants to make an ideological attack on education and choice, but I urge Ministers to sit down and think this through. The richest will continue to attend private schools and absorb the increased costs, while families who sacrifice day after day will suffer. For those who are interested, I did go to my local comprehensive, and my children go to their local comprehensive, but I think it is right that we support choice for all. Tony Blair once said, "Education, education, education." I urge the Minister to listen to the ghosts of Labour past and to do what is right for all children at both state and private schools, not what is right for reasons of ideological dogma, which is what the Labour party is currently doing day after day.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Many Back Benchers wish to contribute, and I want to make sure that that happens. Back-Bench speeches will be limited to four minutes, and maiden speeches to six minutes. We all love a debate, but every intervention eats into the contribution of another Back Bencher, so I ask Members please to be mindful of that.

1.54 pm

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am pleased to speak in this debate. I am proud to do so for the first time since being put back in my place by the people of Bury North. Returners do not get to be maidens again, so I will just send my best to my predecessor and his family, as is customary. There was not much on which we saw eye to eye, but I respect his work and time in office. I know how losing feels, so I sincerely send him my very best.

It will not surprise you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I speak in favour of this Government's laser focus on tackling inequality in our education system. I support Labour's plans to end the state subsidy of private schools,

and it is right that they pay VAT, as businesses expect to pay. I understand the aspirations of parents who work hard and save to provide for their children. I can introduce any Member to thousands of them in Bury North. Many live in some of the poorest wards in the country. Few could ever afford to pay for private education for their children, so I do not expect them to pay for the private education of someone else's children with a state subsidy and their own hard-earned money.

Forty-three per cent. of children in Bury North live in poverty, and that is concentrated in just three of our nine wards. That is an abject failure of the Conservative party's 14 years in government—a spike of 10% in as many years. We cannot ignore growing inequalities.

Under this Government's plans, private schools will become subject to VAT. Although that presents new financial considerations for those schools, I would gently push back on the notion that the costs will automatically mean the same in terms of fee rises. Private schools have a range of financial capabilities to absorb some of these costs: reclaiming VAT on supplies and services; drawing on interest from trust funds or assets; considering how the fees for the use of school assets by the wider community can contribute to the overall budget; introducing fee structures or fees for additional specialist support; and joining with schools in neighbouring areas or nationwide to pay for centralised services. They will remain free to determine what to do, but that is necessary in considering business costs.

None of this is new to schools. I have met some of the brilliant leaders in our private school sector. They are not exclusively innovative, but on a personal and character level, I have loved meeting them and those they teach. Bury Grammar in Bury North is one example. However, as someone who served as a state school governor until recently, I have seen at first hand the budgetary pressures enforced on the schools that teach 93% of our children.

Let us take a moment to consider the Conservative party's time in office and what has brought us to this point. Under its leadership, we saw an atomisation of our school system, zero accountability for multi-academy trusts, the narrowing of the school system, the off-rolling of children with different abilities, and many young people left without the support they need. It presided over a catastrophic financial crisis for local schools and authorities trying to support children with special educational needs, while SEN families have faced immense frustration, misery and often obnoxious bureaucratic barriers. These parents are forced to navigate labyrinthine systems in pursuit of services that they are legally entitled to access but that remain hidden from view under lock and key.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): SEND services are really important to people in my constituency as well. Does my hon. Friend agree that we are not anti independent schools or private schools or the work that they do? He is right when he talks about the whole state sector. Does he agree that this is important?

Mr Frith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are not anti. We are for the many and the few. Conservative Members want to remain in their comfort zone following their election defeat. We have all been there, but it is the wrong place to be. It is right that people pay VAT on school fees.

I was at a termly governors' meeting—Opposition Members will like this—when news of the last Government's bare-minimum teachers' pay rise came through. There was some welcome surprise that the then Government had done even the bare minimum. That was quickly replaced by the hard-headed financial reality from the business manager. They confirmed to the same meeting that, even with the 3.5% that had been kept in reserve to meet the contribution they were expecting in Bury to make the pay rise, they would face a budget deficit because the teachers would no longer be on strike. That is right—the Tories designed a system where the leaderships of our state schools have to rely on the unfair treatment of our teachers in order to come in under budget. That is the reality that we face, and it is their everyday experience. There have been no maths teachers for year 11s, and the leadership have been weighing up whether to buy in multiple teaching assistants for cover rather than a science teacher for science—if they could find one. There is a huge amount to do, and this measure will only touch on a fraction of the legacy that Labour must clear up from the last Government and their 10 Education Secretaries.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Joe Robertson to make his maiden speech.

2 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) on her maiden speech, and thank her for her military service before entering this place.

It is an enormous honour and privilege to represent Isle of Wight East. It is one half of the former Isle of Wight constituency and, if I may say, the better half of the island, only because its wise residents chose to elect a Conservative MP unlike our neighbours in the west. I pay tribute to my predecessor Bob Seely, who served here with dedication, passion and commitment and made a genuinely significant contribution to our shared understanding of Russia and Ukraine, and of international relations more widely. I am sure that whatever the future holds for Bob, he will continue to contribute in that sphere. I also pay tribute to his predecessor Andrew Turner, who served for 16 years and first got me involved in local activism while I was still at school.

The Isle of Wight is known for many things and is much loved, not least of all for sailing. This week is genuinely significant for sailing, as Sir Ben Ainslie and his team have qualified for the America's cup. The America's cup was first sailed for around the Isle of Wight in 1851. Unfortunately, the British boats did not win then, and we have never won it, so this is very significant. I send Sir Ben, Sir Jim and the whole team my sincere best wishes to bring back the cup to the Isle of Wight, where it belongs.

The island is well known for its dinosaur fossil records and rock festivals, and as a holiday destination for many happy families from across the UK and internationally. Our biggest town is Ryde, which, together with Sandown and Shanklin, has some of the best beaches in the United Kingdom. Sandown is the home of the Wildheart Animal Sanctuary, which is soon to welcome two new residents—two European brown bears are coming to the sanctuary very soon. In the south we

[Joe Robertson]

have Ventnor, known for its microclimate and bohemian atmosphere. We have ye olde Kynges towne of Brading, which dates back to Roman times. Brading Roman Villa is a popular visitor destination today, as is Havenstreet steam railway.

However, it is not just the fantastic places on the island and the wonderful scenery that make it special—it is the people. It is warm, generous people like Sally Grylls, a tireless campaigner for better dementia care and better support for those looking after their relatives with long-term frailties, and generous people like Kirsty Chapman at Better Days Café, who help provide food and warmth to those who struggle.

However long I have on these green Benches, I hope to make my own significant contribution, particularly to the most pressing issue of our day: dealing with the pressures in health and, particularly, social care. The biggest reform the NHS needs is to deal with the pressure in social care, to relieve pressure on our hospitals. This Government have said some good things about what they would like to achieve, and I urge them to act quickly. Putting off every reform to a future commission that will report some months or years down the line is not dealing with the issue sufficiently quickly. There are things the Government can already do, and I know from my time working for a national nursing charity immediately before entering this place that we can redirect existing funding better to community services, to help people live at home longer and avoid hospital admissions.

I also hope to contribute to the debate on integrated UK transport. The Secretary of State for Transport has spoken much of buses and rail and improving passenger experience. But we are a collection of islands, and she has said nothing of ferry services. If the Government fail to intervene on ferry services, my residents on the Isle of Wight risk becoming the only community in the United Kingdom entirely reliant on foreign-owned, private, unregulated, debt-laden companies for essential travel—for health, to see their relatives and to access work and other essential services not available on the island. That cannot be allowed to happen, and I urge the Government to intervene.

Finally, on the debate today on taxing children's education, I remind the Government that not every independent school is a wealthy, famous boarding school. There are good community independent schools such as Ryde School on the Isle of Wight, which make a genuine contribution to the community in which they exist. The Secretary of State put out an unfortunate tweet in which she said that she would prefer to see careers advice in state schools than astroturf for private schools. The private school on the Isle of Wight provides the only competitive astroturf on the entire island, and makes it available to the local hockey teams and football teams. The Government must recognise that contribution.

For however long I have in this place, I look forward sincerely to working with all Members across the Chamber, including my neighbour, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley), to help improve the lives of our constituents, the British people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call John Grady to make his maiden speech.

2.6 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to have the opportunity to give my maiden speech today. I start by paying tribute to my two immediate predecessors, David Linden and Alison Thewliss. They were thoughtful and conscientious Members of Parliament. David's diligent work included chairing the all-party parliamentary group on premature and sick babies, a topic that is close to my family's heart. I greatly respect Alison and David, and thank them for their service to Glasgow. I should mention two other predecessors, Margaret Curran and Anas Sarwar, who, after leaving this House, have continued their public service in Africa and Scotland with great effectiveness.

It is a tough act to follow two great maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) mentioned bears, and I believe that Bear Grylls lived on the Isle of Wight for some time. A good friend of mine used to suggest that I name my son, and then my daughter, after Bear Grylls, but no good comes of naming a child "Bear" in Glasgow.

The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) covers Clay Cross, I believe. The former Labour leader, Arthur Henderson, served as an MP there and Dennis Skinner served as a councillor—quite a combination.

This debate is about schools. State education has been a huge part of my family's life. My mum and my two aunts were state school teachers. Dad was a rebel, who trained teachers and taught English in a prison to immigrants. They all had a great passion for state education, and I see that passion every day in the teachers who teach my children and who teach in the state schools across Glasgow East. Many parents in Glasgow East struggle to pay for the bare essentials—the cost of the school day. Without being controversial—this is a maiden speech—those parents have great aspirations for their children. The duty of any Government is to focus their finite and limited resources on those families across our nation.

I must say something of Glasgow East, the greatest of the Glasgow constituencies. Next year, Glasgow will celebrate its 850th birthday. My seat is at the heart of it, with some of the greatest medieval architecture. Glasgow green hosts the Templeton building, which is better than anything in Venice. George Square is the heart of Glasgow. My seat has an incredible cultural and artistic life. The young children I have listened to at the Big Noise project in Govanhill, the Glasgow schools CREATE project and the East Glasgow Music School give me great comfort that the next 850 years have a bright artistic future.

We also have some of Scotland's finest venues, including the Barrowlands ballroom where David Bowie, among others, has played. Gil Scott-Heron was one of the most significant North American musicians of the last century. I have no idea if he played in Glasgow East, but his dad did: he was the first black player for Glasgow Celtic. The world's first black international footballer also played in Glasgow East. Andrew Watson captained Scotland against England in 1881, and I am delighted to say that Scotland beat England 6-1. Both, as black players, were pioneers. Another football pioneer was Baron Ouseley, who passed away earlier this month. He

was the founder of Kick It Out. I think everyone in this House would pay tribute to Baron Ouseley's immense contribution to our public life. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Like the footballer Andrew Watson, Baron Ouseley came to Britain from Guyana. One of Glasgow East's greatest strengths comes from centuries of immigration. We have one of the oldest Muslim communities in Scotland, of which I am incredibly proud. People from across the world—Roma people, Nigerians, Irish people and Italians—contribute greatly to our city. Immigration has been a source of joy, strength and energy in Glasgow over its 850 years.

Returning to football, I must emphasise that I am entirely neutral about Glasgow football—no good comes of taking a view—but I congratulate Vale of Clyde, the third-oldest Scottish junior club, which has just celebrated its 150th birthday, and Garrowhill Thistle, who made it to the Scottish junior cup final at Hampden this year. I leave football by noting that Kenny Dalglish was born in my seat. King Kenny was one of the best players of the beautiful game, but that is not the profoundest beauty of Kenny Dalglish's life. It is his devotion to the victims of the Hillsborough disaster and their families. He has lived the famous Liverpool saying, "You'll never walk alone". It is that saying that encapsulates the people of Glasgow East.

Many people in Glasgow East face profound challenges with poverty and poor housing, but Glaswegians are determined, hard-working and tenacious, and no more so than when it comes to looking after each other. If I may, I would like to give some examples. John Ferguson MBE, a Parkhead man, was the driving force behind the Parkhead Housing Association. Jimmy Mutter fought hard to transform the Gorbals. He succeeded. The volunteers at the Glasgow south-east food bank, founded by Audrey Flannagan, have provided help to families in Govanhill for many years. Audrey, John and Jimmy made sure that their constituents did not walk alone.

The same can be said about many others in Glasgow. Their values are shared across our family of nations, from the Isle of Wight to the north of Scotland, where my mother came from. The work of these great constituents I have mentioned points to our most urgent task: to fight against poverty. In Glasgow's 850th year, my duty is simply to play my part in ensuring that no one in Glasgow East, or anywhere in this family of nations, walks alone.

2.13 pm

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I rise to speak on what I clearly see as an aspiration tax. I want to make it clear that all of my five wonderful children are in, or have gone through, state schools. One is in a school that requires improvement because of the catchment area we are in. My education was exceptionally poor. I went to the worst school in the area. I did not get any GCSEs, and when I was handed my results, the teacher said, "There you go, Anderson. I told you you'd never make anything of your life." My experience of education was not good, but I am a Conservative because I believe in opportunity. I did not have those opportunities as a child, but I believe that everybody should have them.

There are about 1,000 children in my constituency who go to Moor Park school, Bedstone college or Concord college; I have visited all three. Bringing in

VAT for independent schools will create huge pressure. I believe that the measure is rushed. It has not been thought through, and it will have a massive impact on all those schools. Some parents will be able to afford it and will not feel the pinch, but many parents I have spoken to in my constituency work two jobs, have one car and do not go on holiday. They do everything they can to give their children the best opportunity in life. That should be championed. We should not remove these opportunities. We should have great state schools across our country, but if somebody wants to work hard and strive, and aspires to give their children the best opportunities they can, we should not remove that. We do that at our own cost.

Growing up, my dad was a soldier, and my mum also served in the military. Many of my friends at school moved around every two years or so. I, too, was a soldier and had children while I served in the military. I know the Minister is a supporter of the armed forces, and even the Secretary of State for Defence has said how serious this measure is for military families. In this debate, there will be a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, but I urge the Government to take seriously the impact that this policy will have on military families. To bring it in as a blanket measure will be detrimental. We will see people leave the armed forces; that will be the cost. That would not be a good way to do this. I am asking for time. Can we push this back? We have talked about what to do to fill the gap. Recruiting more people and raising the standard of state schools will not have happened by January, so we need to look for a time to bring in this measure; mid-term does not work.

The measure will have an impact on special educational needs and disabilities, and people who aspire to send their children to private school, but what is important to me and many of my constituents are military families. I urge the Government to think about that, and come to a decision very quickly about military families, because people are deciding whether to stay in the forces or sign off. Our great men and women in the armed forces need certainty that their children's education will not be disrupted.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Antonia Bance to make her maiden speech.

2.17 pm

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am honoured to speak for the first time in this House as the Member of Parliament for Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley. I represent the village of Coseley in Dudley, as well as the towns of Tipton, Wednesbury and Hateley Heath in Sandwell. In the last Parliament, Shaun Bailey was a tireless advocate for this special corner of the Black Country, and I wish him well as he resumes his legal studies.

Let me tell you about Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley. We are an industrial constituency, shaped by factories, foundries, mines and canals. We have beautiful parks, laid out for the leisure of working people, and civic buildings of grace and gravitas, such as the grade II listed Tipton central library and the 16th-century St Bart's in Wednesbury. But more than anything, we have the people of the Black Country—creative, ingenious, hard-working and down to earth people like Thomas

[*Antonia Bance*]

Barratt. Born in Coseley, he stopped the enemy advance and saved his patrol at Ypres. He was a boilermaker, awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously at just 22.

The workers of Tube Town, the metal finishing capital of the world, went out on strike for two long months in 1913 for a decent wage. They were backed all the way by their wives, heroes in their own right, who somehow kept 25,000 families fed amid near destitution. They won. I am proud to say that their union became my union, Unite. Workers have come to the constituency from Ireland, the Caribbean, Bangladesh, Kashmir and Punjab; they left their homes to provide for their families, facing racism but prevailing, building churches, temples, mosques and gurdwaras, and seeing their children succeed. We are a proud, working-class community. Too often, people have stood in this place and talked our area down. I will never.

Of course, the name “Black Country” is for the smoke of heavy industry; there has been coalmining, steel fabrication, metal finishing, and nail, brick and chain making. We are where the industrial revolution started. James Watt’s first steam engine hauled coal in Tipton, at the Bloomfield colliery. Today, despite everything, a quarter of all workers in our area are still in manufacturing. We may be the Black Country, but modern manufacturing is clean, high-skill and high-wage. In Sandwell, 1,000 firms—with 21,000 jobs—make everything, from street furniture to hinges to locks to the precision metal forming for aeroplanes and power plants. I am proud to wear the “Made in Britain” badge, and to back our new deal for working people.

If we are to have a new industrial revolution here in the UK as we meet the challenge of climate change, let us make it with our hands and our brains, in the place that was the crucible of the first industrial revolution, the Black Country. I stand for no more and no less than this: prosperity for every family. My friends at the TUC worked out that if wages had risen in the last decade by the amount by which they rose between 1997 and 2010, the average worker in my constituency would be £93 a week better off. That is nearly five grand a year more in people’s pockets. In the Black Country, we work hard, but forces bigger than any individual—deindustrialisation, Thatcherism, and the cruel austerity of these last 14 years—mean that good folk there earn less and have fewer chances and fewer choices than people elsewhere.

Fully half of our kids grow up below the poverty line, in infested B&Bs, in homes with damp dripping down the walls, or in flats made for two, but home to three times that. For many, most weeks, the money stretches, just about—until the week when it does not. I want to turn the thoughts of those in this House to the young people in my constituency, almost none of whom go to fee-paying schools. Four in 10 kids in my constituency did not get grade 4 GCSE in maths and English last year. That has to change, and we will change it.

As I stand here today, the obstacles to delivering prosperity, and more than that—comfort, security, leisure—to every worker and every family seem almost insurmountable, but we take heart from our history: from Ernie Bevin, who forged the working-class women and men of the UK into an industrial machine that, from a standing start, equipped our country for victory. In my area, those in saucepan factories made grenades,

and car makers built the machines to defeat fascism. That is a reminder that once we turn our minds to something, the ingenuity and drive of the British working class can rarely be equalled. It is for us, here, to set it free.

I will always stand against decline and for progress. After all, I grew up in a world where people like me could not get married, but now our beloved daughter has both her mothers’ names on her birth certificate. To believe in progress is to believe that once again this country can work for working people. It is time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so my final words are to the people of our towns. Tipton, Coseley, Wednesbury, Hateley Heath: I am here to serve you always.

2.23 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) for her passionate speech. I think I am correct in saying that she was an Oxford University Student Union officer when I arrived at the university. I remember her passionate defence of socialism then, and I have seen it again today. Her daughter, sitting in the Gallery, will be very proud of her, following her speech.

Unfortunately, however, that defence of socialist principles runs like a thread through the Labour party today. It should not come as any surprise that this new Labour party, which is willing to tax some of the poorest pensioners in the country, has no compunction about taxing some of the most needy children in the country—a shameful act. I am not talking only about the more than 3,000 pupils in my constituency who receive an independent education; I also speak for the many thousands in the state sector on whom this policy will have an impact. Labour Members seem to forget completely about the impact on the state sector.

As I walked along Firgrove Hill in Farnham during the election campaign, I met a father who had just heard that the independent school to which he was going to send his two children had closed. That was in July, and there was no place at the local state school, Weydon—a fabulous school. Even if it had spaces, however, that father would not have been able to send his children there, because he had not sent his children to a feeder school, so even if there are places, not all children can get in.

This measure will have a massive impact on education for those with special educational needs and disabilities. There are independent SEND schools in my constituency, including More House, a fabulous boys’ school. Jonathan Hetherington, the headmaster, has spoken passionately about what this policy will do to his school: 60% of his pupils are on an education, health and care plan, which means that 40% will be affected by the tax. What will happen to those pupils? For one thing, they are likely to drop out immediately because their parents cannot afford it. Perhaps they will then apply for an EHCP, but it will take many months, if not years, for them to get it, and they will be out of education during that time. It is a total disgrace. Equally importantly, when they get the EHCP, it will add a massive cost to the local authorities, which are already overstretched. The simple fact is that independent SEND schools are saving those authorities money.

We also have to realise that independent schools are huge employers, certainly in my constituency. In June, during the election campaign, I knocked on a door in an area that was not affluent—in fact, it is the most deprived part of my constituency. The gentleman who opened the door informed me that he would be voting Conservative because of Labour's potential policy on this matter. When I asked him why, he said that he was a groundsman at one of the local independent schools, and feared for his job because the school was likely to close; so this policy affects the economy as well.

If education is not a charitable purpose, and if educating our children is not a fundamental principle that we in this House should support, I do not know what we are here for. Labour needs to review this policy, and scrap it as soon as possible.

2.27 pm

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): You might imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker, that members of the Conservative party would understand how out of touch they are on these matters, given that they were so roundly rejected by the electorate in July. However, unsurprisingly, they have demonstrated perfectly that nothing has changed, and it is business as usual as they leap to the defence of tax breaks for private education. This Government believe in equality of education for all our children, and this policy is designed for the betterment of 93% of the UK school population. Only 7% of children in the UK go to a private school—a far smaller proportion than in the most recent Conservative Cabinet, 65% of which, it is believed, were privately educated. Perhaps that tells us something about why we are debating this matter today.

Conservative Members campaigning against the Government's policy couch it as an attack on the aspiration of hard-working parents. Perhaps they need to be reminded that the warehouse workers, cleaners, shop workers, carers, nurses and teachers in my constituency are also aspirational for their children. They work just as hard to provide the best opportunities for their children. It is offensive in the extreme for the Conservatives to suggest otherwise, and to suggest that they are less deserving of support from this Government.

I accept that a consequence of this decision may be that some people will no longer be able to send their children to private school, as schools might choose to recoup the cost of VAT through increases to fees. However, we should acknowledge the fact that private schools have implemented above-inflation increases to their fees year on year in recent times—over 20% in real terms since 2010—and this has had a minimal impact on children moving into the state sector. I say directly to parents: should our ambition not be that they could send their child to a fantastic state school that has the teachers and resources it needs to deliver the education their child deserves, and where they can excel both academically and culturally by mixing with children from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences that reflect the society in which we live?

The Conservative party was quite keen to promote and exacerbate a two-tier approach to the education of our children during its term in government—a system in which it is only state-educated children who have to accept tough choices and shoestring budgets. We have

schools where the ceilings are propped up by scaffolding, schools where teachers are forced to buy basic school supplies out of their own pay packets, and schools where the workload and conditions have become so dire that teachers are leaving in droves.

I am delighted that we now have a Government who do not believe that state schools alone should be asked to make difficult choices—a Government who will end the tax break for private schools and invest the £1.3 billion that that choice will generate into our state schools, which educate 93% of our children. That is why I will be voting against the Opposition motion and in favour of state education.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call John Milne to make his maiden speech.

2.31 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

First, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Sir Jeremy Quin, who represented Horsham for the last 10 years. He was a dedicated MP, and in my first couple of months I have heard praise from many constituents for his past help. An MP's best work is often unsung and behind the scenes, and I intend to continue his campaigns on issues such as child trust funds.

I would have to go back very much further to find a fellow Liberal MP to celebrate—144 years, to be precise. Being a rock-solid safe seat in a first-past-the-post system is not great for democracy. So many people have come up to me since the election and said it is the first time their vote has ever counted. Horsham's turnout was over 70%, and if we had proportional representation, we would see that level of engagement everywhere.

For most of my life, I worked as a creative director in advertising, before becoming a local councillor five years ago. I would especially like to thank my family, who are up in the Gallery today, for supporting me in this unexpected career change, because this is a huge journey for all of us, not just me.

Most of Horsham is open farmland, with patches of ancient woodland and villages that retain a strong sense of community. Horsham town itself is pretty enough to be charming, but not so temptingly chocolate-boxy that it gets overwhelmed by tourists. As the name suggests, Horsham was once a home for horse trading, and to this day it is a centre of excellence in the equestrian industry. Horsham is also where our great national poet Percy Bysshe Shelley grew up. With luck, we will see him around town again soon if fundraising for a statue in his honour is successful. We have high-achieving schools, both state and private, and we want to keep it that way. Many of them have approached me with concern over the VAT imposition.

Although Horsham has never been the site of a major battle, it is where the Dalek invasion of Earth started through the work of Ray Cusick, the BBC theatrical designer and long-term Horsham resident. But perhaps the jewel in the crown of the constituency is the Knepp estate, the UK's leading rewilding enterprise, which now has international fame. This is no frozen museum of conservation; it is a living, breathing experiment in flora and fauna, where nature herself is the key architect.

[John Milne]

Of course, Horsham is not immune to national challenges, from a creaking health service to cuts in public transport and crumbling roads, but today I want to focus on the positives. Horsham is a great place to do business. It is hard to believe it now, but Horsham was once a centre of England's iron industry. Later we became a leading brewery town, and today that tradition is carried on by energetic start-ups like Hepworth, Weltons, Kissingate and Brolly Brewing, which rather enterprisingly came up with a Lib Dem-branded beer during my campaign. We are home to Creative Assembly, one of Europe's largest video game designers; Schroders, a world-class investment company; and innovative tech businesses like Metricell, which might one day help us solve our pothole problem—that would surely be worth a Nobel prize.

Whereas many high streets have struggled, Horsham's is bustling—a shopping destination for not just local residents, but visitors alike. I urge Members to join us at the Carfax bandstand on a Friday evening in the summer, where the district council has pumped new energy into the town with a series of free events themed on everything from ska, ABBA, Pride and Bollywood to German oompah music. After a quietish first 1,000 years, Horsham is learning how to party. Whereas other communities have been losing their local theatres, ours is getting a multimillion-pound investment to help the council reach its net zero targets. After the last revamp, under the Tories, the theatre reopened with that surefire box office attraction, "An Evening With Ann Widdecombe". I wonder if she is still available.

As a constituency that is now half town, half rural, Horsham plays a lead role in striking a balance between competing needs. We have large areas of productive farmland, making a valuable contribution to food security, but the same land is under pressure to provide housing and renewable energy installations. All of these are positive things, but the same land cannot do them all at once.

If there is one thing I would like to focus on during my term, it is housing. I strongly support the new Government's house building ambitions, but I am surprised and disappointed to see that they are using the same flawed system to fix local targets as before, except with a bigger stick. The standard method, as used since 2018, has been shown to be a hopelessly inaccurate way of assessing local need, nor will it ever make housing more affordable. In Horsham, the average price of a new house is higher than that of the existing stock, so the more we build, the higher our target goes—the exact reverse of what is supposed to happen. Horsham already has 13,500 unbuilt permissions. We will be forced to continue building houses that people cannot afford to satisfy a local need that does not exist, while heaping further stress on to already overloaded local services—and then we are surprised when people say they do not like it.

Just to make things more complicated, Horsham has its own unique challenge, known as water neutrality, which restricts water use for environmental reasons. We are caught between two Government directives that completely contradict each other. One rule says we have to build a fixed number of houses per year, but the other rule says we are not allowed to build any houses at

all because we cannot use any more water without damaging the environment. We are being punished for failing to build the houses we are not allowed to build. This is a planning system devised by Kafka, not Beveridge.

For all the challenges, I would like people to see Horsham as a place of opportunity. For everything that is going wrong, something else is going right. It is a huge honour to represent the people of Horsham—one that I never expected to have. As someone who campaigned on a promise to serve as a constituency MP, I could not ask for a better constituency to work for.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To make sure that we get in as many valuable contributions as possible, Back-Bench speeches will now be limited to three minutes. Please be mindful.

2.38 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on giving such a passionate speech about his constituency. He spoke so eloquently about opportunity, but I need to speak about the shocking reality in our state-funded schools. The gap in outcomes between disadvantaged students and their peers is at a record high, and school absence rates are at a record high. We have a SEND crisis, a children's mental health crisis, and a teacher recruitment and retention crisis.

With 25 years' experience of teaching and working as a deputy headteacher in state secondary schools, I have had to manage the struggles that schools face day in, day out. Children have seen more non-specialists in key subject areas, a reliance on cover teachers, class sizes increasing and school staff burdened with excessive workloads. All this has had a negative impact on learning and on children simply enjoying school, despite the heroic efforts of dedicated teachers and support staff. But the damage is not limited to schools; it spills out beyond the school gates into the wider community.

There can be no denying the need for greater investment in the state education system, and it will be this new Government's priority to fix the damage caused by years of Conservative neglect.

2.40 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is important to start by saying that this entire policy is dogmatic and rooted in the politics of envy—that really is self-evident. It comes from a self-serving socialist Government that are ignorant and blind to the harm that it will lead to for families up and down the country. In the time that I have, I would like to pose a series of questions directly to the Government. This is not only a bad policy; there has been no information on its implementation and what it means for private schools and state schools. That has been raised by shadow Front Benchers and I think we should get some transparency. I would like a response later on.

When the Minister responds, I would also like to hear the details of the costs caused by adding VAT to school fees and the cost of the removal of the business rates exemption. The House has a right to hear where the impact assessment is, what the fiscal projections will be and what the costs will be across every Government Department that is affected. That will be the Department

for Education but also the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, because it is local councils that will continue to pick up the costs.

I put a question about this next matter directly to the Exchequer Secretary, who was also in the Westminster Hall debate this morning. We know that legal action is coming, and I think that the Government should fess up and tell us what percentage of the DFE budget will be put aside to fund the legal challenge. There are parents out there who are so unhappy about this—we met some of them this morning—and they are adamant that they will pursue legal action.

There are many other questions, such as about justification and the implications for local authorities, but I think the point about SEND is important. The House of Commons has published a note that says that for 2024-25, the previous Government had been increasing SEND funding to over £10.4 billion in real cash terms. Is that funding going to go up under this Government, in anticipation of the implications of this policy for children with special educational needs? That could include a growing demand for education, health and care plans. Local authorities are failing, and many of them are Labour authorities. Some of them have gone bankrupt as well in recent years.

There will be an impact on state schools, as they will have to accommodate additional pupils. We need some honesty and transparency around this. Class sizes are going to increase in state schools. How is that going to increase the educational outcomes of children attending state schools? How is that going to raise the bar and increase standards in state schools? We all believe in good educational outcomes for all children across the entire country and we want our education system to be first class and to serve all children, but fundamentally this is just an ill-thought-out policy that will have more costs associated with it and devastating impacts for children attending independent schools.

I ask the Minister in his summing up to show a little bit of humility—[*Interruption*—and recognise the implications for these children. Labour Members are giggling, but actually this is about children and about the impact of this policy on children whose education will be affected.

2.43 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow so many excellent maiden speeches today. I am glad to have this opportunity to talk about schools and education because there is no doubt that schools face very real funding constraints. In my constituency, there are state schools that have been forced to let staff go because the funding just is not there. The Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates that, after school-specific inflation has been deducted, per-pupil funding rose by 0.7% in primary schools over the last 14 years and that spending shrank by 0.5% in secondaries. That compares to real increases of between 5% and 6% over the preceding 13 years.

Figures released in response to a written parliamentary question show that over the last five years, per-pupil funding in Birmingham grew less fast than in the west midlands and across England as a whole. In fact, while per-pupil spending will have risen by just under 21% between 2020-21 and 2024-25, CPI inflation will have

increased by about 24.5%. In other words, this is a real-terms cut of around 3%, or a loss of around £179 for each child. Some of the schools in my constituency have some of the highest pupil premium rates in the country. These are not just statistics; they represent a loss of opportunity, a loss of skilled and dedicated staff, and the overcrowded classrooms that flow from that.

At this point I draw the House's attention to my declarations in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my background as an officer of the GMB, one of the unions that represents school support staff.

There is much for schools and parents to welcome in this Government's approach, including ending single-word inspection judgments, funding free breakfast clubs, reusing space from falling pupil numbers to create new early-years provision, committing to a new child poverty reduction strategy—the first since the Child Poverty Act 2010 was repealed—and reinstating the school support staff negotiating body. It has been welcome in this debate to hear the concern for school support staff roles in the independent sector. I am sure that will extend to the state sector and I hope that we will see cross-party support for that measure.

I want to make a point around SEND. The motion would exempt all children on SEND support from the VAT policy, but SEND support status is determined within schools, and schools in the independent sector do not have the same budgetary restrictions as state schools, which are obliged to set aside nominal SEND budgets. There is a real risk of creating false incentives, as the "Today" programme's 2017 investigation demonstrated. Ours is the right policy, and this is the wrong motion. I look forward to voting against it later today.

2.46 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): One in four pupils in Surrey go to an independent school, including more than 4,000 pupils in my constituency, and many of those pupils have a special educational need. We have had an increasing rise in the diagnosis of conditions such as autism. The proposal is being pitched as a fundraising measure, but I do not think anybody on the Labour Benches came into Parliament to raise funds from pensioners in poverty and families of children with special educational needs. I will come on later in my speech to whether this will raise any money at all.

In his wind-up, I hope the Minister will address this point: what justification can there be to an immediate exemption of specialist schools from the tax? On 11 September, Opposition Members representing Surrey constituencies wrote to the Chancellor to make that point. In response to a survey in my constituency—1,200 parents responded nationally—87% of parents with children at independent schools said that they would have to consider sending their child to a state school. Some spoke specifically of the anguish they faced, having spent years trying to find the right placement for a child who might have ADHD or autism and having finally got them settled, now having to consider moving them again.

Some Labour Members have asked why those children could not be served by the state sector. We increased funding for the SEND sector by 70% over the last few years, but you cannot magic up 99,000 places overnight.

[Claire Coutinho]

A teacher at Moon Hall in Reigate said that 70% of their pupils were on EHCPs and 30% were not, and that all those children would suffer. The other point is that the state sector will have larger class sizes, so rather than improving the state sector, all children in the state sector will suffer. They will all have worse outcomes. The Secretary of State for Education should care about outcomes, not ideology, but it is clear that she does not because we have seen teachers' unions warning about the impact on the state sector. The Government have not published an impact assessment.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies' report that Members have been quoting, we do not know how much money will be raised due to the uncertainties over children with special educational needs. I appeal to all Labour Members to ask themselves and their consciences why we cannot exempt children with special educational needs from this tax? It will not raise any funds. It will increase class sizes in the state sector and affect the outcomes of all children. It must be reversed.

2.49 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Fourteen years of Conservative chaos have left behind a trail of destruction in our state education system, which is used by 94% of our children. Is it not time that we put our effort into improving the state education system?

When I knocked on doors before the election, one of the main questions I was asked was, "Where will we get the money to put right everything that has been put wrong by the last Government?" Leaving aside the £22 billion shortfall, we now need to find extra money to recruit extra teachers, to provide extra nurseries, breakfast clubs and mental health support in our schools, and to make all the other positive changes that this Government intend to make to create opportunities for all. My hon. Friends have already highlighted the things we need to address in the state education system.

Ultimately, private schools are businesses that have enjoyed an exemption from VAT being charged on their fees, and it is now time to end that exemption. I have three private schools in my constituency, and I have had meetings with the two that wanted to meet me. I have had discussions with parents from those schools. It is a fallacy to suggest that lots of students will leave their private school to go into the state education system. I have been asked whether this Government have considered the timing of the policy's implementation: to reassure parents, I believe the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray), confirmed that he has given due consideration to that point.

2.52 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): There appear to be two parts to this debate: ideology and practicality. Fair play to the Labour Government—when they came in, they said that they intended to introduce this proposal. They told the public and put it in their manifesto, for which I respect them. That is important, especially when compared with their policy on winter fuel payments. But it is hard to see how it is not ideological, when the Secretary of State for Education has tweeted:

"Our state schools need teachers more than private schools need embossed stationery. Our children need mental health support more than private schools need new pools. Our students need careers advice more than private schools need AstroTurf pitches."

This reeks of prejudice and propagates a class war, and I am sorry to say that the Secretary of State is not here to defend her tweet. She is a decent woman, and I would like to think that she would apologise.

As I said, this is a manifesto commitment, and the Labour Government have a mandate to deliver it, but they also have a mandate to deliver it in a way that takes the impact into account. In response both to today's debate and my questions to the Leader of the House, we have heard that Ministers have seen an impact assessment. If they want to champion this plan, why not share the information with everyone? One private school in my constituency that will be affected, Dixie grammar school, has simply asked, "Why can we not see what the impact will be?" That is not an unreasonable question.

As I said to the Minister earlier, children are at the heart of this. I do not see the rush to implement this policy in January. The Prime Minister put his child in an apartment because he was worried about the impact on his child's education. I respect that decision, but does he not see the problem with implementing a policy that will have exactly the same kind of impact by tearing kids out of their schools? Mark my words: it will happen. That is what the two private schools in my constituency have said. Where is the report addressing the impact on their education?

In my constituency, the biggest problem will be that we do not have the school places for pupils who move out of private schools. What will happen then? We have not heard how this Government will deal with that, and that is the fundamental issue. How will children and families cope? The Prime Minister insulated his child, but how will the Government insulate the nation's children?

2.55 pm

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): I am delighted to take part in this debate, as I am always grateful for the opportunity to praise and defend our public services, particularly our state schools, and the millions of people, including the vast majority of my constituents, who rely on them.

The Opposition motion

"regrets that the Government has decided to impose VAT on independent school fees".

Well, I regret that the last Tory Government did all they could to deliberately and carefully dismantle, defund and destroy our public services, including state schools, for 14 years—[*Interruption.*] There is a huge amount that I could say, but we are pushed for time and many Members want to speak, including lots of Government Members. I know there are more of us here—[*Interruption.*] Every day, indeed. There is a lot that deserves to be said about our schools. We have heard many Conservative Members ask about the impact. They suddenly care about the impact of decisions made in this place, but where was their talk of impacts over the past 14 years? In St Helens North, 81% of schools have had real-terms funding cuts since 2010—over £3 million in real terms, or £239 for every pupil. Where was the consideration of impacts when the last Government cancelled Labour's

Building Schools for the Future programme and watched our state schools crumble? Where was the talk of impacts when the last Government presided over a SEND system that is failing over 1 million children and that their own Education Secretary described as a “lose-lose-lose”? Where was the concern for impacts when standards fell, which they did?

Damian Hinds: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Baines: No, I am pushed for time.

Where was the consideration of impacts when the inspection system did not and does not work for parents, schools or pupils? Where was the consideration of impacts when child poverty increased? Where was the consideration of impacts when the lack of investment in school support staff and basic resources meant that teachers were buying resources for their pupils? Where was the consideration of impacts when we had a recruitment and retention crisis among teachers?

We could talk about all these issues if the Conservatives truly wanted a debate on schools, but they do not. They could have used today’s Opposition day debate to talk about these things, but instead they have used their time to talk about our decision to end a tax exemption that benefits only the wealthiest. They showed no concern whatsoever for state schools over the past 14 years, and now they are apparently concerned about impacts.

I make it crystal clear that the parents of state school pupils are every bit as ambitious, loving and hard-working as those who can afford to send their children to private schools. I stand with them, and I stand with our state schools.

2.57 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Others have talked about the effect on children of military families and on children with special educational needs, as well as the impact on friendships, mental wellbeing, jobs in both state and private schools, and the bursaries, but I will focus on students in exam years. I declare an interest as I have three children in private school, one of whom is in her final year.

This measure is wrong, but it is especially reckless for those in exam years. We have heard a lot about the steps the Prime Minister took to ensure that his son could study peacefully, to give him the best chance in his GCSEs. Why does he not want the same for all the other children in this country?

The measure is not only disruptive but potentially impossible. Local to my constituency, Stamford school offers A-level Russian, Lincoln Minster school offers A-level Chinese and Oakham school offers the international baccalaureate. How could those children move into a state school that does not offer their course? Even if their course is offered, the timetable might not work. And even if the timetable works, the school might not teach the same periods and texts. For example, a student at Nottingham girls’ high school studying the Russian revolution as part of the AQA history curriculum might have to move partway through the year to Branston academy, which is teaching the Tudors under the OCR curriculum. What should children taking such

courses do? Should they change course, merely months or even weeks before their exams? Should they try to learn the material themselves? Should they resit a whole year of school? Will the Government provide state schools with the extra resources to help those children complete their courses? If they intend to do so, will those resources be ready and available to the state schools those children will be forced into for January 2025?

I want to talk briefly about bursaries. I went to a state primary and a state secondary school. When I was a teenager hiking with my parents in the North York moors, I met a young lad who told me all about the cool, exciting school he went to, where they did a lot of outdoor stuff. I said, “I would like to go there. That would be really cool.” My parents said, “That’s far too expensive, Caroline. We can’t do that.” Then I read about the scholarships they offered. I was very proud and pleased that Gordonstoun School offered me the opportunity to study at the sixth form there—I will always be intensely grateful for that.

The measures proposed by this Government will reduce the amount of bursary support available to students like me, and those currently receiving bursaries, which enables them to get the education they wish for. Schools will have to cut back. The most obvious areas in which to do that will be in their charity work, the extra teaching staff they offer to pupils in state schools and the facilities they make freely available to state schools. This is a short-sighted measure focused entirely on the politics of envy and division.

2.58 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Last week I had a meeting with a group of incredibly dedicated and determined women in my constituency, all of whom have children with special educational needs. We discussed the broken SEND system and what it will take to fix it. I would like to share their top three points.

First, the women said that when they chase for an assessment, diagnosis or school place, they are made to feel as if they and their children are a problem, when all they are doing is trying to ensure that their children get the same support and acceptance as any other child. One lady said she was treated like a criminal. This mentality towards SEND children and their parents has to change.

Secondly, these parents want their children to be able to go to their local state schools, in their community, but they feel that schools have a very limited understanding of their children’s complex needs, let alone an ability to manage them. One mum told me about her child being excluded from school because their complex needs were treated like a behavioural problem. However, I know, for their part, that schools do not have enough staff or training to cope.

Thirdly, these mums are sick and tired of the lack of accountability in the system. Schools are not being held to account for the way they manage and incorporate SEND children into school; local authorities are not being held to account for their services; and home-to-school transport providers are not being held to account for how they look after the children. The fact is that the support system for children with special educational needs and disabilities is broken.

[*Laura Kyrke-Smith*]

The answer lies in both funding and reform of the system. We have to make tough choices on where to find that funding—tough choices that the previous Government ducked. Rather than political point scoring, we owe it to all the SEND children and their parents, carers and teachers to work together and do everything in our power to fix this system as quickly as possible.

3.2 pm

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): From listening to contributions made by Members from across the House, it is clear that these measures represent ideology over reality. The policy is economically illiterate, new consequences and implications are being discovered by the minute, and it will make worse every problem that Government Members say they perceive in the state system. They keep saying that they need to find more money to fill the black holes that they have magically found, yet the headlines show that they keep finding billions for pet projects every week.

I was recently asked to go to a public meeting with over 100 concerned parents in my constituency. I listened to their stories and heard about their circumstances. From that evening alone, before we even got to this debate, it was clear that this policy was an ill-conceived disaster waiting to happen.

Some 1,800 children in Fylde attend independent schools, hundreds of whom receive provision for SEND. Schools, including AKS Lytham and Kirkham Grammar, as well as smaller, specialist independent schools, are major employers and have been at the heart of local communities for generations. The parents of the children at those schools are often not rich. They scrimp and scrape, take on extra jobs, miss holidays and do not buy new cars because they have made personal decisions about their children's education. Every parent should have that right and should not face a tax on the education of their children. The idea that such parents are all just rich and can take the hit, or that the schools spend 20% of their income on embossed stationery and swimming pools, is simply nonsense.

This policy is fighting the class wars of the past with the future of the children of today. Lancashire county council has already said it cannot get close to meeting the forecast increase in places that will be needed, even before we get to the most acute SEND provision. This tax on education will not just hit independent schools, some of which are already facing closure; it will hurt the state sector more—I say this as someone who was proudly educated at a state school. The policy is clearly the politics of envy done badly—so much for the supposed “grown-ups” being back in charge.

3.5 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): For the record, my wife is a special educational needs co-ordinator in a local authority school and one of our children is in receipt of an EHCP.

I have heard accounts from parents and seen at first hand the decisions local state schools have had to make to cut their budgets. Teachers and staff have to subsidise classroom equipment, make cuts to the curriculum and

mix year groups to reduce teacher numbers, which has an impact on children educated in the state sector in my constituency. Conservative Members would do better to spend their time understanding the real issues on the frontline and the impact that their decisions, made over the past 14 years, have had on my constituents in Bexleyheath and Crayford.

The Ofsted area SEND inspection of the Bexley local area partnership last December found

“widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)”.

The report concluded:

“Overall, the voices of children and young people are not heard well in Bexley.”

The task of fixing that lies with the Bexley local area SEND inspection partnership and a range of partners, including our schools.

At the same time, because of the pressures in our schools, Bexley's Conservative-controlled council found that the only way to stave off bankruptcy, due to its significant high needs block overspend, was to agree a safety valve agreement with the previous Government. A report to Bexley schools forum last week outlined that “it will undoubtedly be very challenging to succeed in both delivering the mitigations already envisaged in the Safety Valve agreement (the impact of which is assumed to accelerate in 2025/26) and also in identifying further realistic cost reductions to deal with the current level of overspend.”

It said that the deficit at the end of this financial year is “expected to exceed the safety valve assumptions by £1.798m.”

While this unholy mess has been unravelling, impacting the most vulnerable children in my constituency, I was shocked to see a return published in the Electoral Commission register. An independent school in my neighbouring constituency, but within my local authority area, made a financial donation to a local Conservative association. I am afraid that that sums up the sorry state of where we are. While Conservative Members presided over 14 years in government, delivering a position where teachers and parent teacher associations are funding basic provision in our state schools, an independent school clearly does not find itself in that position, as it is able to donate part of its profits to the local Conservative association.

I was clear in my election campaign three months ago that I would support the policy to introduce VAT on private schools. That is the mandate given to me across Bexleyheath and Crayford. For the reasons outlined, I will be opposing the motion today and supporting the Government.

3.8 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): My children have been educated in both the state and independent sectors. I spoke earlier in the Westminster Hall debate about how Labour's plan to impose VAT on independent schools is a tax on aspiration, but it is also something else: a lack of understanding of how to govern. The Government's education tax is not just a lousy decision; it is a lousy plan.

As has already been said, imposing the VAT in January—the middle of the school year—risks disrupting children's education and forcing mainstream schools to

accept mid-year students. It denies parents time to prepare and does not allow independent schools time to register for VAT. Families of more than 5,000 pupils studying at independent schools in the London borough of Bromley and my constituency must find up to £4,345 more per year to protect their children's education, or take the gruesome decision to remove their child from their friends and the school they enjoy, even at crucial moments such as GCSE and A-level years. Is that really what the Government want? One concerned parent told me that, with their children just two terms away from their GCSEs and A-levels, finding a local state school with the capacity to take them on and that is studying exactly the same exam boards would be impossible.

In truth, the Government have no idea how many pupils might leave. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, which the Government rely on, estimated that up to 40,000 people would leave independent schools, but it admits that there is too little evidence to be sure and that the situation is uncertain. In 2018, the Independent Schools Council estimated that, if this change were imposed, pupil numbers would drop by more than 134,000 over five years. Whatever the number, it is a safe bet that this will be a slow burner, with some pupils forced out immediately, others leaving after exams, and those who will never enrol, resulting in years of uncertainty for schools, their staff, students and teachers, as many smaller schools will simply wither away.

Even a moderate number of exits threatens to close small independent schools. The likely result will be fewer pupils, fewer schools and more significant pressure on mainstream schools. This is a reckless recipe that will disrupt the education of pupils with special educational needs, pitch parents against councils and burden mainstream schools. When the Labour party said that it would not tax working people, we had no idea that its targets were children and pensioners. This is ideological, not practical, and it will impact far more pupils than the Government will admit to or recognise. Let us be clear: in a few short weeks, when children up and down the country will be saying goodbye to their friends, when they will be struggling with the anxiety of being forced to go to a strange new school, and when, through no fault of their own, they will be suffering academic pressure in an exam year, it will be the result of Government policy. As one headteacher said to me, this policy is nothing short of cruel.

3.11 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I am new to this place. Indeed, until 4 July, I was teaching at an independent school. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Indeed. To all those Opposition Members who repeatedly say that this is a policy of spite, that this is an ideological attack, that this is envy and that this is cruel and vindictive, I say that it is nothing of the sort. This is about fairness. I have friends and former colleagues who are right now teaching in the independent sector—in fact, they are 10 minutes into period six as I speak. When someone runs a private business, they pay VAT. We believe in paying our taxes. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) makes the point about charities. I will say the same thing to him that I said to my former boss: charging somebody £15,000 a year for an education is not a charitable act.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Education is a charitable endeavour.

Mr Brash: The hon. Gentleman was briefly the candidate in my constituency. Given the result, it is rather a shame that he did not continue to be so.

As I understand it, the Opposition could have tabled a motion about anything for today. They could have tabled a motion about the crisis facing children in social care, slowly bankrupting local authorities such as mine. They could have tabled a motion about child poverty which results in 1,500 Hartlepool children not having a bed to sleep in tonight. They could have talked about the scandal of children arriving at school hungry, the 10% cut to our further education sector, the drop of a third in our apprenticeships, and the school cuts that have cost Hartlepool schools £1.7 million in real terms since 2010. But no, they chose to talk about this—the removal of a subsidy that the 93% pay for the 7% who want to send their children to private school. It is wrong and the myths attached to it are ridiculous.

I do not have the time to go into the many things that I would like to say, but I want to finish on one simple point: I am sick and tired of hearing people talk as if the parents of aspiration and the parents who work hard are only those who want to send their children to private school. All parents aspire for their children, all parents work hard for their children, and we stand up for all parents and all children in this country.

3.14 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash). I would just mention that I am the child of aspirational parents from a working-class background. There were three little words uttered by Tony Blair that gave a lot of my family faith that an incoming Labour Government would be a good Government. Those words were, "Education, education, education." Now those same people tell me that they are disappointed in a Labour Government who are going to tax education. Let me be clear about this. Charitable education is not about the children in the school; it is about the children who are not at the school. It is about opening up the facilities to the community, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, and it is about serving the community. That is where the charitable status comes from. I know that because my child was one of the 7% who went to an independent school.

The hon. Gentleman talks about allegations of vindictiveness and ideologically driven policies. They are coming not from those on the Opposition Benches, but from the hundreds of emails that we are getting from our constituents. Our constituents are worried about how they will get their child into a state school, and the parents of children at state schools are worried about what is going to happen to the resources at their school when it has to cope with the influx of children from the independent sector.

Every year, 20% to 30% of children in Edinburgh go into the independent sector. Figures produced by the Labour-led council just before the general election showed that, by the end of this decade, 16 schools will be over capacity, without any influx from the independent sector.

[Christine Jardine]

We have problems in education, but this is not the solution to it. It is especially not the solution in Scotland—I am not going to preach to Members about English education. We have had 17 years of damage and mismanagement of our state sector in Scotland from the Scottish National party. To parents in Scotland now, it just feels like the Labour party is joining in.

There is one big flaw in this: the Minister said earlier that the money will go back into education, but parents in Scotland would like to ask how. There is no mechanism. It is a reserved tax, and education is devolved. Even if the Government could come to some agreement with the SNP, how will they ensure that places for the 9,000 children in Edinburgh in independent schools are available in their catchment area? How will they make sure that they will be studying the right subjects, and how will they do it by January? It is just five months before they disrupt children's education. I have listened to lots of people here today say that every child's education is important—yes, it is. Every parent has aspirations for their child—yes, they do. And every child deserves not to have their education disrupted with just five months to find a solution. That is not fair.

3.17 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate.

I find it incredible that, after 14 years and an abysmal record on education, Conservative Members want a debate on education, but somehow I am not surprised. I often joked that, if they had the opportunity, they would blame teachers for the sinking of the Titanic—although I was told that they had actually done so recently.

As a former teacher, I saw the Conservative Government's abysmal record on education at first hand. In fact, I am standing here in this House because of it. When the former Member for Surrey Heath declared that the majority of teachers were letting down the children that they teach, I saw red. I knew that only those people who donned the red rosette could fix the mess created by 14 years of ideological cuts. Between 2010 and 2020, spending per pupil in England fell by 9% in real terms. One in eight schools were in deficit by the end of 2023, and two out of three local authorities are struggling to find funding for SEND provision in their schools.

In 2022, 40% of trainee teachers failed to qualify and left because of the unmanageably high workload. Having recently spoken to several teachers in Essex, I know the profound impact that 14 years of Tory mismanagement has had on their mental health. But it is worse than that. In 2012, Essex county council first raised with the Government the issue of RAAC in our schools, and the Government said that there was no money to fix it. Now, in 2024, the failure to properly tackle this issue has been borne out. Last week I visited Jerounds primary school, one of the many brilliant primary schools in Harlow, which is currently unable to provide hot food to its children because its kitchen is still closed due to RAAC. Sir Frederick Gibberd school in Harlow cost £29 million to build, and because of the failure of the last Government is having to be pulled down.

The education system is broken, and it is broken by Tory design. Labour has a plan to fix the education system, but it requires difficult decisions. Removing the tax exemption on private schools is not the politics of envy, but it is a necessary action, which will generate between £1.3 billion and £1.5 billion for the UK Government—to invest in our schools, to invest in our teachers, and to provide the people of Harlow, of Essex and across our country with the best possible education. I will take no lectures from the Conservative party about education.

3.20 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Let me reiterate to the Minister the asks that the Opposition have. In an ideal world we would prefer this policy not to go ahead, but the mathematics of this place indicate that whatever the Government wish to do, they will secure.

This change should be delayed until September 2025; that would allow for sensible planning. Clearly, those with SEND and the children of serving military people or those in our diplomatic service should also be exempt. I would also like, on behalf of many of the schools in my constituency that have raised this, to know whether VAT will be applicable to summer schools and other events that are put on.

Bryanston school in my constituency has a fantastic relationship with Blandford high school. Unlike the Treasury Minister who opened the debate, I have no skin in this game; I was not privately educated, nor are my three children. But North Dorset is not a particularly wealthy constituency. Seven hundred and ninety-two jobs are linked to Bryanston school. The soft power that the schools provide in the international environment also need to be taken into account. Bryanston school alone makes a contribution of £24 million a year to the local North Dorset economy.

My asks are quite small in comparison to the ask that my Labour opponent would have been making of the Government had he won in July. Because when Richard Jones, the head teacher of Bryanston, at a church hustings, set out all the good work that Bryanston does in the community, its contribution to the economy and the jobs that it creates, my opponent said he was fantastically interested, and would table an amendment to the legislation to secure an exemption for Bryanston school. So if the Labour Front Benchers could not even convince their own parliamentary candidate in North Dorset of the merits of this policy, they have signally failed to convince the many parents and others who work very hard to send their children to school in the independent sector.

My final words are for the Secretary of State for Education, after the terrible tweet that she put out a couple of days ago. She is the Secretary of State for the education of all children, irrespective of which sector they are educated in. She used divisive words, referring to “our children” versus theirs. That is them and us. She has aided the Government's case and argument not a jot. She is the Secretary of State for the education of all children; I wish she would take her responsibilities a wee bit more seriously.

3.23 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak about what it means to have a Government who will not just talk about opportunity,

but take action to bring opportunity, aspiration and ambition to not just 7% of the population but 100% of our children and young people.

Like my hon. Friends, I note that the Opposition motion expresses the Conservatives' "regret" over this policy. Do they not regret 14 years of underfunding our state schools? Do they not regret slashing opportunity by shutting Sure Start centres lock, stock and barrel? Do they not regret growing child poverty on their watch? Do they not regret that more Members on their Benches have turned out today to defend tax exemptions than did to defend their record on the NHS last night?

I am proud to stand here today because this is a Government who are putting ambition and opportunity front and centre in our missions. Our principle—that everyone growing up in my constituency of Southampton Itchen should have the opportunity to get the best start in life, to do well, to be ambitious and to be supported to fulfil their dreams—should not simply be the preserve of children in independent schools. Every parent wants the best for their children, whichever school they choose.

I have had parents who have taken the decision to pay for private education for their children get in touch with very real concerns, which I acknowledge—that they are not all the super-rich, and that not all independent schools are like the Etons and Harrows of the world. But claims of an exodus from private schools to state schools are, I am afraid, completely unfounded. Opposition Members should be listening to the chief executive of the Independent Schools Association, representing less prestigious, less expensive schools, who has talked about how many might benefit from a "trading down", which means more students and more income to their schools.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith) noted, there have been above-inflation price increases for those schools year on year, and there has been no diminishing of student numbers. One small independent school that many children in my constituency attend said it has already made plans. It has planned for business and they will pass just 4% on to school fees. So this is not about restricting parents' choice; it is not anti-private school. It is about fairness, and it is a question of priorities. Improving all our state schools to benefit everyone costs money, and that is why we cannot justify these tax breaks any more.

I wonder, reading this tone-deaf motion from the Opposition, what they would say to constituents in Southampton, where many schools have had to ask for donations, and where the teachers they do not think deserved a pay rise have been struggling. We make this choice with no apology.

3.26 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I want to say from the outset that this is clearly an attack on aspiration, an attack on opportunity. I say to the constituents of the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) that he voted for winter fuel payments to be slashed and now he is voting for an attack on hard-working families who will be struggling to make ends meet. I went to a state school and an independent school and I was grateful for both those journeys and the education that I received in both. Plenty of hard-working families will be struggling to make ends meet.

The first point I want to make is about tone. I will come back to the Education Secretary's tweet, which was deeply offensive. Surely Labour Members must acknowledge—it is a simple case of maths—that people who are rich enough to afford VAT increases, whether it is 4%, 16%, which is the average, or the whole 20%, will continue to send their kids to independent schools and pay the fees. It is the people who are struggling to make ends meet, or the really hard-up families, or—God forbid—parents of children who are on scholarships and bursaries who will no longer be able to send their kids to those schools, because those schools will have to withdraw those scholarships and bursaries as they will be less affordable. So the tone of this debate is really important. I would caution the Government to be more reticent on this. They refer to tax breaks; these are not tax breaks. Education should not be, and is not, taxed, and they are about to open that Pandora's box.

There have been a lot of comments from Government Members about state schools. I agree: standards in state schools should be improved. They talk about the last 14 years. We delivered a real-terms increase per pupil. We have delivered record funding—about £60 billion. They may challenge that, but it is pure fact. I am happy to share those facts. We did that, and the result of that, especially with our focus on things like phonics, which Labour challenged when in opposition, is that we now have some of the highest reading standards in the world—independently and internationally rated. We also have some of the highest ratings in mathematics. So the Government may try to frame this debate as anything other than ideological, but those arguments are severely undermined by the Education Secretary's tweet, which put it out there that this is really a class war.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My hon. Friend is making a great point about how this change is ideologically motivated. Can he see why there is a difference between private school fees, which the Government have chosen to tax, and something like Kip McGrath tuition, which is also a paid-for form of education, which they have chosen not to tax—at least yet?

Saqib Bhatti: My hon. Friend made an excellent speech about the practicalities of introducing this change in January, and she makes an excellent point now about the slippery slope involved. The Government say that the money will be focused on educational improvements, but there is no guarantee of that, as it will go into the general pot. They promised 6,500 new teachers, which is fewer than we delivered; it is a drop in the ocean, which will barely make a difference to the hundreds of thousands of schools that, of course, need extra teachers. I concede that point; we should have better educational standards.

SEND will affect every Member of Parliament. It affects me. I was with a north Solihull parents group just a few weeks ago. Those parents will no longer be able to afford to give their children a private education for SEND purposes, and they will now have to rely on the state. Surely Government Members can see that that will further increase the burden on state provision, particularly if they are right that there is a lack of teachers. The Minister might address this point: how does this policy improve state school provision? How does it improve the standard and quality of delivery for SEND parents? It was all right for the Prime Minister

[Saqib Bhatti]

to make special provision for his kids, and for the Education Secretary to have a benefactor, but what are these parents going to do?

3.31 pm

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I am proud to have gone to Calder high school in my constituency—the first purpose-built comprehensive school in the north of England. The history of that school and its teachers are fantastic, but the building is not. After years of under-investment in the capital programme and the shameful cancelling of Building Schools for the Future, the building is crumbling. The same can be said for Brooksbank school and Todmorden high school, which are also in Calder Valley. All of them would have been scheduled for a rebuild sooner, had the Government not cancelled Building Schools for the Future.

In the state sector, the problem is not just that the buildings are on their knees; there is also the issue of everything inside the buildings. At the start of the previous Government's austerity programme, we heard about teachers going without items, or buying them with their own money—glue sticks, books and so on. Now when I talk to headteachers, they talk about going without teachers and support assistants, who are so vital for children's needs.

We can judge a Government, or indeed an Opposition, by their priorities. Frankly, the fact that the first Opposition day debate on education focuses on the 7% of students who go to private schools shows where this Opposition's priorities are. If they had held a debate on SEND, I would have welcomed it, because SEND provision has been left in crisis. In Calder Valley, I can point to multiple examples of parents for whom advocating for their child has become a second job—and that is just those who have the resources to do so.

Ahead of this debate, I asked headteachers what their priorities for education would be. One, who did not want to be named, said:

"Any therapeutic service is no longer easily accessible. No educational psychologists, no speech and language therapist access for the increasing number of pupils who can't access the curriculum."

We need to focus on the next generation in state schools—in all schools. That should be our priority. If I asked my constituents in Calder Valley what they think £1.5 billion should be spent on—that is the value of this tax break—it would not be the 7% of children who go to private schools.

3.33 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I have a child at a private school. Government Members say that is not a problem. They say, "This is not a criticism of private education; this is merely a revenue-generation exercise, not social engineering or socialist class war." It must be a coincidence, then, that this policy punishes aspiration, pulls children down rather than lifting them up, and is being rushed through, as we have heard time and again. It is a socialist, red-meat policy to placate the Labour Back Benchers who are having the gradual and terrifying realisation that they may well be single-term Members of this place.

The Government need to think again. We have heard serious objections to this policy—not to its implementation, because the mathematics of this place mean that the Government have sufficient support behind them to force

anything through, however ill-advised, but we have heard serious recommendations for review, improvement and tweaking to undo some of the significant damage that this policy, unamended, will cause.

Introducing the policy on 1 January, halfway through the academic year, will damage children and children's education. These are real people. Some 10,000 children have already left the independent sector. Their education, and that of thousands of others like them, needs to be considered by this Government. On children who are sitting public examinations this year, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) made a brilliant and serious point, which should be not cast aside but considered: if children studying under one exam board are transferred, in the exam year, to another system, what do they do? What is the Government's answer?

On the subject of pupils who are applying for education, health and care plans, 34% of pupils at Langley school in my constituency are treated for SEND, and only nine of them have EHCPs. What do those other students do? Surely there should be a delay for pupils who are applying for EHCPs. We have also heard from gallant Members that military families are taking decisions now about their future in the armed services. There are also specialist schools for music and dance, which are important for the fabric of our community and the quality of life in this country; those things are not offered in the state system.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does this not further make the case for the Government publishing in full their assessment of the impact that the measure will have on schools and children right across the country?

Jerome Mayhew: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government have published no evidence to support their stated objective. There has been no impact assessment. This measure is rushed, and vulnerable children are paying the price for internal Labour politics. Shame on you.

3.37 pm

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Fourteen years of Tory neglect have left many of our schools on their knees. The situation is no better in Scotland. After 17 years of the SNP, Scotland's once world-beating reputation for education has been tarnished. I regularly meet and hear from teachers whose passion and dedication is palpable, including Mrs Boyd and Miss McKay, the primary 6 teachers at Struthers primary school in Troon. Some 21 of their pupils have sent me individual letters asking me to join the fair trade campaign to "Be the Change". However, over a quarter of children in north Ayrshire now live in poverty. That means that 6,234 children are held back, even before the school day begins. Conservative Members have forgotten about the effects of austerity on constituencies such as mine. They and the SNP are living in their own fantasies.

Having squandered reserves through financial incompetence, SNP-run North Ayrshire council faces £12.6 million of cuts in its upcoming budget. The situation has only been worsened by the council tax freeze imposed by the SNP in Holyrood. The council now proposes cutting 90 teaching posts between 2025

and 2027, and removing a total of 230 hours of pupil support assistance, equivalent to eight full-time staff; all school crossing patrols; one full-time post from the music service; and one full-time educational psychologist. That will be a travesty for children in north Ayrshire, and casts further shame on the SNP's education record in Scotland.

The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that this VAT policy will raise more than £1 billion, and will see significant additional education spend in England, which means significant Barnett consequential for Scotland, and for the young people in my constituency. Today's generation of young people deserve no less, after suffering year after year of excuses. This Government are not prepared to settle for more of the same.

3.39 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Families and schools in my constituency are deeply concerned about this policy. They have contacted me to underline the pressure that it will put on them. Many have already started applying for state school places. Our independent schools reckon that about 5% to 10% of their students will move into the state sector. As we have heard, the measure will have a disproportionate impact on kids with SEND.

In my constituency, roughly 8,000 children are educated in the independent sector. That means a lot of pressure on local state schools. A lot of kids who have their special educational needs met by independent schools are now applying for EHCPs, which means extra pressure on assessments and provision. I support all my schools; I am aspirational for all the children in my constituency. This policy, if enacted—as I expect it will be—will cause great harm.

I would like the Minister to be able to quote back data, analyses and stats to me, and to say, "Ben, you're wrong. Don't worry your silly little head—it's all going to be fine, and here is the data to back it up." But he cannot; the data is not there because the Government have not done the analysis. This debate has, sadly, been driven by ideology. About one in five children are educated at independent schools in my patch. I must declare that I have chosen independent education for my children.

We will really suffer from this policy. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), is a good man. I know that Members across the House, especially new Members who are finding their feet in this place, are starting to think about policies and decisions going forward. I say to them, as I said to the Minister: "If you cannot see the data and analysis for this policy, please ask why." Please ask for it.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Listening to the Conservatives and the amount of fearmongering they do, one might think that a previous Government had totally trashed the state sector; I think that is quite obvious.

Dr Spencer: As I said, schools in both the independent and state sectors are concerned about the policy and the sudden movement of children, in the middle of the year, into the state sector, which will struggle to find them

places. Those children may be studying for exams and have already experienced covid disruption, and the state schools that they move to might not have the right courses. I plead with the Minister to look at the data and do the analysis to see if the policy will make money or lose it, and to consider the impact on children.

I go back to the brutal, bitter words of the consultation document that went out this summer:

"The government understands that moving schools can be challenging."

If I were a child going through my GCSEs or A-levels, and was forced to move into the state sector because of this policy—the analysis of which I cannot see, because the Government have not done it or will not publish it—and I read those words, I would say, "Please delay this policy. Think again. Look at it, and try to mitigate the impact on children with special educational needs, on armed forces families, and of disruption during the school year. Please, if you are not going to stop it, at least delay it and do the working out."

3.43 pm

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Conservative party on calling this debate today, for the simple reason that it confirms what many of us already know: that the Tories are much more focused on the 7% of pupils in private school than they are on the 93% in state education. Given that the Tory leadership contest is approaching its exciting climax, it is worth pointing out that state education has got barely a mention in that contest so far—I know it is a minority sport, but we expect better. In the last Tory leadership contest, Liz Truss spent her time either criticising her own state school or criticising the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) for his time at the £45,000-a-year Winchester college. At one point, one of her team said that

"she will take no lectures in educational standards from an LA-based, Goldman Sachs banker who went to a school for the uber-elite."

Meow, as my immediate predecessor in Rochdale might say.

David Cameron famously went to Eton; indeed, it was Michael Gove who attacked the "preposterous" number of his fellow Cabinet Ministers who had been to Eton. I am delighted to say that there are more Labour MPs who went to my own state school, Oulder Hill community school in Rochdale, than went to Eton—my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) and I are both proud of that school tie. Sadly, recent Prime Ministers and even Education Secretaries decided that the state sector for which they were responsible was not good enough for them. During partygate, we got used to the Tory party thinking the covid rules were for other people.

Claire Coutinho: Will the hon. Member give way?

Paul Waugh: I am sorry, but I will not give way. I do not have much time.

"One rule for them, another for the rest of us," was the Tory party's approach back then. Now, their approach is, "One school for them, another for the rest of us"—that is just as toxic a charge. The real problem is money. There was a 9% fall in spending per pupil between 2010

[Paul Waugh]

and 2020. Worst of all, we have had 14 years of no overall growth in spending per pupil in our schools, a squeeze that the IFS said was

“without precedent in post-war UK history”.

Turning back to the Tory leadership contest, most of the contenders for that poisoned chalice have claimed that if elected, they will restore private school tax breaks. The fact that the Tories plan to make another £1.3 billion-worth of cuts to state schools on top of their own record of austerity proves that they have not learned a thing from their catastrophic defeat at the last election. If they all put into state schools an ounce of the passion, the emotion and—yes—the hard cash they put into private schools, the public might start to listen to them again.

3.46 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The tragedy of this debate is the vitriolic negativity, when all of us could surely unite in our desire to improve the education of all. The Government could have done something so different. They could have said to the independent sector, “You’re doing well, chaps. Can you give us a bit of help? Can you work with us? Can you share more of your expertise, your wisdom, your success and your facilities? In particular, can you help with regard to special educational needs, where the independent sector is doing so well at no cost to the taxpayer?” I think that would have gained universal enthusiasm and support.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Richard Tice: No, we are short of time.

As a former governor of an independent school, I know that that approach would have been welcomed by the independent sector. Instead, the choice that the Government have made will do the opposite of what they intend. It is not going to raise anything like the funding they think it will: almost 100,000 children will leave the independent sector, many of whom have special educational needs, so it will earn almost nothing.

I spoke earlier about the unintended consequences of this policy. A parent in my constituency has written to me. She has two children with special educational needs at private school, and she cannot afford the VAT, so they are going to go into the state system. The nearest place is an hour away, so now the local authority is going to pick up the cost of the taxi service of over £20,000 per child. Those are the unintended real-world consequences of this choice by this Government. Most shamefully of all, because there is such a lack of capacity in so many areas and so many local authorities, that choice is going to result in bigger class sizes. That means more pressure on hard-pressed teachers in the state system, at a time when we are trying to ease that pressure. This choice is going to damage the education of many hundreds of thousands of children—exactly the opposite of what is intended.

I say to the Minister and his Government that they could choose differently. They could pause this policy, work with the independent sector and gain much more

universal support. Instead, we have legal challenges going ahead. As I finish, I ask the Minister to answer this simple question: if those legal challenges end up in the European Court of Human Rights and it rules that the policy is unlawful, will his Government comply with that ruling?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Baggy Shanker.

3.49 pm

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Mayor—[*Interruption.*] I have done it again, haven’t I? I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but that is my local government background.

Education is the foundation upon which we build the future of our country. It opens doors, breaks down barriers and creates opportunity. Yet today so many of our young people are being left behind by an education system that is struggling to meet their needs. Labour is committed to changing that by driving high and rising standards in all areas in our state schools, ensuring that every child, no matter where they come from, has the same access to excellent education.

When the Tories left office—let us use the word “left”—they also left behind a trail of devastation across our education system. Schools were left crumbling, standards were left falling and they had the audacity to claim that they had “maxed out” on support for our children. We know that that could not be further from the truth. Our state schools are in desperate need of investment, and that is why Labour is making the tough political and fiscal choices necessary to prioritise our children’s future.

One of the toughest yet most significant steps we will take is to levy VAT on private schools and end their business rates exemptions. By doing so, we will generate over £1.3 billion. That money will be reinvested directly into the state education system, benefiting the 93% of children who attend state schools. It is time to put an end to a system that allows a privileged few to enjoy tax breaks while the majority of our children are left with lesser funded schools, and we know that is true.

What will this investment achieve? It will be used to recruit and retain thousands more teachers, ensuring that every child has access to the quality education that they deserve. We will reform Ofsted, improve our schools, and provide early speech and language intervention for our youngest children. Mental health counsellors will be placed in every secondary school, because we understand that a child’s wellbeing is as important as their academic success. We will expand careers advice and work experience, giving students the skills and confidence to shape their own futures.

We know that this works. We need look no further than my own constituency where, as leader of the council, I was proud to introduce the Derby promise. The city of Derby has made—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am going to call the Front-Bench speakers at 3.59 pm. That means that the remaining Members are not all going to be called, unless they choose to make one-minute contributions, which I cannot recommend to anyone. This is just to alert you that there will be some disappointment.

3.52 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I have come here today to speak on behalf of the children and young people in my Bishop Auckland constituency. I recently spent half a day at an independent school in my constituency, where I spoke with the students, and I have also hosted them here in Parliament. I found them thoughtful and polite, and a credit to their parents and the school. I recognise the role that the school plays in my community. I think it is right that the school retains charitable status, which allows it to claim gift aid on donations and to reinvest surplus revenue without paying tax. I am fully committed to the school and to its fundraising efforts. That is because I want all children in my constituency, whether they attend state schools or fee-paying schools, to have the best opportunities to develop their talents and intellect, no matter their background.

I wish I could say the same of Conservative Members, but their actions in government tell a different story. At a recent roundtable with primary school headteachers in my constituency, I heard stories of school dinner debts of £1,000 per school because they are having to feed hungry children. I heard of children coming into school with wet uniforms because there is no glass in their windows. One teacher talked about having to support children who had experienced horrific abuse but were not getting support through CAMHS. I also heard about children who arrive at school behind where they should be because of the closure of Sure Start.

On social mobility, is it not the truth that the Conservatives scrapped child trust funds? Under them, Sure Start centres were closed down, school playing fields were sold off and the education maintenance allowance was abolished. Apprenticeships are down, youth services have been cut by 73% since 2010 and there is a five-year waiting list for CAMHS. A decade has been lost because every school budget has less funding per pupil today than it had in 2010. Is that not the truth?

Here is another truth—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members do not like hearing it, but in the past 20 years, private school fees have increased by 55%. I checked *Hansard* to see whether we had a debate with them all expressing their concern for the state education sector and about the impact of that increase, but it turns out that when the increase is to make elite education even more elite, they are silent. I see no reason why private schools cannot absorb the cost.

Gregory Stafford: The hon. Gentleman talks about the elite, but does he understand the impact of the policy he is advocating, which is essentially that the elite, the rich, will still be able to afford independent education, while those who are making sacrifices to be there will be the ones who fall out, especially those with special educational needs?

Sam Rushworth: I was coming on to that, and if anybody in an independent school is struggling to cut their cloth accordingly as the state sector has done, I could introduce them to headteachers in my constituency who have had to do that because of cuts imposed by the previous Government.

I also suggest that independent schools look at social tariffs and other ways to raise revenue. Nobody wants to be doing this; this is not about the politics of envy. Conservative Members have so far opposed every measure that we are taking to increase revenue or cut spending, and perhaps they need to realise that that is why they are on the Opposition Benches and we are on the Government Benches, as we try to fix state education, which is essential for our children.

3.56 pm

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I join this debate as the son of educators—my mum, aunts, uncle, and grandad were all teachers in both the state and the private fee-earning sectors, and it definitely makes for interesting conversations round the dinner table. I also join the debate representing both state and fee-paying schools in my constituency, particularly the fantastic Northampton high school, which is part of the Girls' Day School Trust network and whose students I met in Parliament recently. As a parliamentary candidate for nearly two years and since my election as the Member of Parliament for Northampton South, I have spoken to countless constituents about our long-standing, well documented and consulted on plans to drive up standards in state education. Do you want to know how many of those parents are actually going to move their kids into state schools once I have spoken to them, Madam Deputy Speaker? The answer is zero.

It is right that the Government focus on improving educational standards for those children left behind by the Conservatives, who left a trail of devastation across education, from crumbling schools to a SEND sector in crisis. Their legacy in education should see them hang their heads in shame. When hard-working teachers, teaching assistants and staff reached out, crying out for help, they did not listen. When the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies said that this proposal will raise £1.3 billion for UK taxpayers, they did not listen. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) said, when fee-paying schools raised their fees above inflation through the cost of living crisis over recent years, leaving families struggling, the Conservatives did not listen. Only now, when there are political points to score and when embossed stationery is at risk, finally they wake up.

Mr Holden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Reader: I will not—sorry.

No one in this House wants to see the state education sector fail. I am sure no Opposition Member wants to deprive millions of students in the primary state education sector of the healthy nutritious breakfast that they will receive every morning, paid for through this policy. I am certain that all Members on the Opposition Benches want dedicated mental health support in every school, paid for through this policy. I am almost certain that there are those on the Opposition Benches who want to vote with their conscience rather than the Whip, so I urge Members from all parties to vote against this political statement and to support the Government that the country chose to break down barriers to opportunity. It is what our constituents want.

3.59 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): It is an honour to follow Citizen Smith over there.

In the large number of contributions today, we have seen the importance of this issue and the alarm felt by many Members and their constituents about the Government's proposal. I am sorry to say that we have also had a lot of 1970s politics of envy today. We believe in evidence-based decision making, and as many Members have pointed out, it is becoming increasingly clear that Labour's planned education taxes—removing VAT and business rate exemptions from independent schools—will not do what is claimed.

I will move on to the details in a moment, but may I first congratulate those who have delivered their maiden speeches today? I thank them all for making gracious comments about their predecessors. I learned something about each of them today. The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) spoke eloquently and lovingly about her beautiful constituency, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), who brought back many holiday memories for me. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) gave us all good advice on naming children in Glasgow. The hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) may or may not be aware that we share something in common, as we were both student union sabbatical officers, although in my case a few years earlier. The hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) gave perhaps the most eclectic speech today, mentioning Daleks, potholes and Ann Widdecombe all in one speech.

I am afraid that I will not be so gracious about some other comments we have heard today from Government Members, who still do not seem to realise that they are now in government and their job is to talk the country up. They have constantly talked down not only the country, but the education system. Let me remind them that when we left office, education standards were going up and per pupil funding was at record levels. In contrast, when Labour was in office, we were falling in the league tables. What a brass neck Labour Members have, when we look at Labour's record in Wales. We have been backing our brilliant teachers, and I would hope that they would do the same.

The motivations behind this policy are clearly questionable. The impact assessment is non-existent and the savings illusory. There are so many potential unintended consequences and uncertainties around these policies that, at the very least, the Government need to postpone implementation, although it would be better to scrap the plans altogether. They are also moving away from a long-held principle that we used to agree on across the House that educational services are not taxed at all. It is a terrible thing that they are now bringing in.

We have five key categories of concern: the impact on state schools; the impact on Government finances; the timing of the proposals; the consideration of exemptions; and the impact on SEND and EHCPs. I will not repeat all my comments from the debate we had earlier, but it is so clear that this policy will not only have a detrimental impact on the independent schools sector, but negatively impact the state sector, because the imposition of a 20% VAT hike overnight will mean that some families will no longer be able to afford the fees. Inevitably that

will mean children leaving the private sector and moving to the state system, putting an additional burden on many local state schools, some of which do not have the capacity. As I said this morning, it is not fearmongering or scaremongering; it is happening already and we are already seeing it in schools. According to some forecasts, instead of the predicted £1.5 billion saving, this policy could cost the taxpayer money.

How extraordinary to choose this policy area to try to eke out some cash when so many other options are available, if the Government were brave enough. Out of total Government spending of more than £1.2 trillion, is this really the policy that they want to prioritise?

On the topic of overall Government finances, we have not yet heard clearly whether the Department for Education will get more funding from the Treasury if the number of state school pupils exceeds expectations. Will they be expected to pay it out of existing budgets? Have the Government set aside capital for additional school spaces if it is needed?

Regarding the timing of the proposals, many Members have mentioned that it is beyond belief that the Government are bringing in this policy in the middle of the school year, when schools are simply not ready for it. It is not fair on the independent sector to expect schools to get their heads around new legislation, register for VAT and implement new systems and processes in literally a matter of weeks and before Christmas. That will not happen. We have also not heard whether the Government will create exemptions or special considerations for all these areas: military families, students on music and dance schemes, children attending small schools, language schools or religious schools, those paying low fees or on bursaries, and children in exam years who may have to move to another school that does not offer their curriculum.

What are the Government doing about pupils with special educational needs and those with an EHCP or in the process of gaining one? If, as many predict, there is a displacement of children with SEND and EHCPs into the state sector, is there the capacity for that? Is there adequate additional funding support planned for local authorities to deal with that predicted increase in demand?

I wish to make a couple of other brief points before concluding. As a Conservative, I believe in choice, and I will not criticise choices made by parents about their children's education. I have no qualms, however, about criticising hypocrisy. The irony that I stand here as a proud product of a state comprehensive education defending independent schools while the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury who spoke earlier, a product of a private education, is pursuing a policy that could undermine independent schools is not lost on me or others. Many Government Members attended independent schools or sent or are sending their own children to them, and yet they are determined to increase the costs on others, depriving many families of the choice they themselves had.

I am glad to see the Secretary of State for Education now in her place after being conspicuously absent. Perhaps she will take the opportunity to apologise for the tweet. Parents who send their children to independent schools pay twice for their children's education and deserve better than to be treated with contempt by their Government's Education Secretary. The divisive tweet that she put out last weekend was shockingly ill-judged

and ill-informed, sneering and smirking about embossed paper and swimming pools. Does she really not understand or recognise that not every independent school is like Eton or Harrow? It betrays an incredible lack of awareness and poor knowledge of the facilities and financial status of many independent schools. It demonstrated that the policy is being promoted not on evidence but on envy and spite—ill-informed and misplaced envy at that.

Simon Hoare: I agree entirely with what my hon. Friend has said. Will he add to the indictment of the Secretary of State the fact that she failed signally to realise that she is the Secretary of State for all pupils, whether they are in the independent or the state sector? The divisive language that she used was a very rude signal of two digits to those families who take a decision that she does not like.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend puts it well. I do not have to add to his comments.

This is a rushed and ill-judged policy that will not raise the money the Government assumed it would, undermine the viability of many independent schools, put immense pressure on the state school system and put in jeopardy the education prospects of thousands of students, including many with special needs. We implore Ministers to reconsider.

4.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I thank the Opposition for bringing forward the debate. While the focus has been on private schools and the implications of the planned tax changes, it has allowed us to consider what is important in education. It is important to support the aspirations of all young people and their parents, and it is essential that all young people receive a good education in a safe and supportive environment.

It is certainly true that many parents choose to seek that provision in the private sector. The Government will always support their right to choose where to educate their children, but most parents do not have that choice, and all parents have high aspirations for their children. We therefore need to prioritise our efforts and consider how we can better serve the 94% of children in our state-funded schools.

Ending the tax breaks on VAT and business rates for private schools is a necessary decision to drive high and rising standards across our state schools and give every young person the best start in life. It will generate additional funding to help improve public services, including the Government's commitments relating to children and young people.

This money will allow the Government to expand early years childcare for all by opening 3,000 new nurseries, thus helping parents back to work. The Government will recruit 6,500 new teachers and improve teacher and headteacher training as part of restoring teaching to the career of choice for the very best graduates. The Treasury is of course responsible for tax policy and has led on the publication of the draft legislation and technical consultation since July. As the Exchequer Secretary set out, VAT will apply to tuition and boarding fees charged by private schools for terms starting on or after 1 January 2025. It is right that we end tax breaks

as soon as possible to raise the funding needed to deliver those educational priorities. The Treasury is assessing the impact of these changes in advance of the Budget. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility will certify the Government's costings for these measures at the Budget and that will also include the interaction with other VAT receipts.

Kit Malthouse: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Morgan: I am going to make some progress. The right hon. Gentleman spoke earlier. I know that many Members are concerned about children with SEND. *[Interruption.]* Members can shout as much as they like, but I have some really important points to make about SEND. I know I speak for the country—the right hon. Gentleman certainly does not. I assure Members that the Treasury has sought to ensure that these changes do not disadvantage pupils who need provision that is unavailable in the state sector.

Let me be clear: pupils who need a local authority-funded place in a private school, including those with a local authority-funded EHCP, will not be affected by the changes. That is because local authorities are able to reclaim VAT when they are charged. For other pupils, this change should not mean that they will automatically face 20% higher fees. The Government expect private schools to take steps to minimise fee increases, including through reclaiming VAT incurred in supplying education and boarding. I also note that IFS analysis shows that the number of children in private schools has remained steady despite a 20% real-terms increase in average private school fees since 2020 and a 55% rise since 2003.

Members from both sides of the House mentioned transfers to the state-funded sector. There are always some pupils moving between the private and state-funded school sectors. Approximately 50 maintained private schools close every year, for a range of reasons. Where schools do close, pupils may transfer to another private school or move into the state sector. We simply do not accept, in the case of recent closures, that this has had any connection to our policy on VAT. Quite simply, the evidence does not bear that out. The number of pupils who might switch following these changes represents a very small proportion of overall pupil numbers in the state sector. Any displacement is likely to take place over several years, and will mostly come from parents choosing not to place their children in the private sector to begin with, rather than children leaving the private sector. All children of compulsory school age are entitled to a state-funded school place if they need one. I understand that moving schools can be a challenging experience, and local authorities and schools already have processes to support pupils moving between schools.

A number of Members also raised concerns about capacity. There are always a range of pressures on state-funded school places, and the Department for Education works to support local authorities to ensure that every local area has sufficient places for children who need them. That is business as usual and local authorities and schools already have a range of options to increase capacity where it is needed. We are confident that the state sector will be able to accommodate any additional pupils and that there will not be a significant impact on state education as a whole.

[Stephen Morgan]

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) on her maiden speech. I know she will be a real champion for children and young people in her community. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) back to this place and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on his maiden speech—he spoke eloquently and with passion about his constituency and the needs of his constituents. It was also a real pleasure to hear the maiden speech from the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), who described so well his beautiful constituency, a place I enjoyed holidaying in as a child. I look forward to working with him on issues affecting the Solent region. My hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) gave an excellent maiden speech. It was evident that she will be a strong voice in this place, nationally and for her community. I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on his maiden speech, and I wish him well on his unexpected new role in this place and on delivering opportunity for all.

The hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) and others mentioned military families; I know that colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will closely monitor the impact on affected military families, considering support via the continuity of education allowance scheme. Small faith schools were raised by a few Members; those schools meet the needs of dedicated faith communities, often at low cost. I know that Treasury colleagues have met representatives from those schools to ensure fairness. A number of right hon. and hon. Members spoke about the impact assessment. As my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury set out, we are considering the impact of the policies and will publish a tax information and impact note at the Budget in the usual way.

In conclusion, this Government were elected to deliver change across our country, not least in our schools. Our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity is exactly what our country needs. This party is showing that education is once again at the forefront of national life. I urge Members across the House to demonstrate that by voting against the motion.

Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Will the Serjeant at Arms investigate the delay in the No Lobby?

The House having divided: Ayes 190, Noes 363.

Division No. 16]

[4.15 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Allister, Jim	Barclay, rh Steve
Amos, Mr Gideon	Bedford, Mr Peter
Anderson, Lee	Bennett, Alison
Anderson, Stuart	Bhatti, Saqib
Andrew, rh Stuart	Blackman, Bob
Argar, rh Edward	Bool, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria	Bowie, Andrew
Babarinde, Josh	Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Bacon, Gareth	Brandreth, Aphra
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Braverman, rh Suella

Brown-Fuller, Jess	Jenrick, rh Robert
Burghart, Alex	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Jones, Clive
Cane, Charlotte	Jopp, Lincoln
Cartlidge, James	Kearns, Alicia
Chadwick, David	Khan, Ayoub
Chamberlain, Wendy	Kohler, Mr Paul
Chambers, Dr Danny	Kruger, Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher	Lam, Katie
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Lamont, John
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Cocking, Lewis	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Coghlan, Chris	Lopez, Julia
Collins, Victoria	Lowe, Rupert
Cooper, Daisy	MacCleary, James
Cooper, John	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Costa, Alberto	Maguire, Ben
Coutinho, rh Claire	Maguire, Helen
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Mak, Alan
Cross, Harriet	Malthouse, rh Kit
Dance, Adam	Martin, Mike
Darling, Steve	Mayhew, Jerome
Davey, rh Ed	Maynard, Charlie
Davies, Mims	McMurdock, James
Davis, rh Sir David	van Mierlo, Freddie
Dewhurst, Charlie	Miller, Calum
Dillon, Mr Lee	Milne, John
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Downen, rh Sir Oliver	Mohamed, Iqbal
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Easton, Alex	Moore, Robbie
Evans, Dr Luke	Moran, Layla
Farage, Nigel	Morello, Edward
Farron, Tim	Morgan, Helen
Foord, Richard	Morrison, Mr Tom
Forster, Mr Will	Morrissey, Joy
Fortune, Peter	Morton, rh Wendy
Fox, Sir Ashley	Murray, Susan
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Franklin, Zöe	Norman, rh Jesse
Freeman, George	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Fuller, Richard	O'Brien, Neil
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Olney, Sarah
Garnier, Mark	Patel, rh Priti
George, Andrew	Paul, Rebecca
Gibson, Sarah	Perteghella, Manuela
Gilmour, Rachel	Philp, rh Chris
Glen, rh John	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Glover, Olly	Pritchard, rh Mark
Goldman, Marie	Raja, Shivani
Gordon, Tom	Rankin, Jack
Grant, Helen	Reed, David
Green, Sarah	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Griffith, Andrew	Robertson, Joe
Griffiths, Alison	Robinson, rh Gavin
Harding, Monica	Roome, Ian
Harris, Rebecca	Rosindell, Andrew
Hayes, rh Sir John	Sabine, Anna
Heylings, Pippa	Savage, Dr Roz
Hinds, rh Damian	Shannon, Jim
Hoare, Simon	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Hobhouse, Wera	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Simmonds, David
Hollinrake, Kevin	Slade, Vikki
Holmes, Paul	Smart, Lisa
Huddleston, Nigel	Smith, Greg
Hudson, Dr Neil	Smith, Rebecca
Hunt, rh Jeremy	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Hussain, Mr Adnan	Sollom, Ian
Jardine, Christine	Spencer, Dr Ben
Jarvis, Liz	Spencer, Patrick
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Stafford, Gregory

Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline

Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Louie French and
Mike Wood

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus

Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Falconer, Hamish

Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben

Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisman
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew

Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sowards, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will

Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Gen Kitchen and
Keir Mather

Question accordingly negated.

Farming and Food Security

4.34 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the real and immediate challenges faced by British farmers as a result of wet weather and rising costs; notes the importance of food security as an essential component of national security in an increasingly uncertain world; regrets that the £50 million extension of the Farming Recovery Fund is yet to be paid out; is concerned that reports suggest the farming budget is to be cut by £100 million; calls on the Government to confirm that the full £50 million of additional Farming Recovery Fund support for those flooded, £75 million for Internal Drainage Boards to protect agricultural land from floods and storms, and £220 million allocated to technology and productivity schemes announced earlier this year will be used in full and without delay, that no reduction to the farming budget will be made and that any underspends will be rolled forward as in previous years, and to keep farming and food production high on the agenda by committing to continue to host the annual Farm to Fork Summit in Downing Street, continuing to publish the annual food security index, and appointing a Tenant Farming Commissioner; and further calls on the Government to secure the long-term future of domestic food production by ensuring the best agricultural land is protected from inappropriate development, including large solar developments, by tackling rural crime, and by ensuring that the next generation can get into farming by protecting Agricultural Property Relief.

Given the increasing uncertainty in the world, with covid, Ukraine and now the middle east, food security is more important than ever and should be seen as a key part of our national security. Britain's farmers face real and immediate challenges, which means that the Government must take action now. That is why we have called this debate. Between October 2022 and March 2024, England experienced the most rain in any 18-month period since records began in 1836. In particular, Storm Babet and Storm Henk caused significant damage, leaving thousands of acres under water, and land saturated for prolonged periods. This has prevented many farmers from getting crops into the ground, and where they have been able to do so, their crops have been compromised.

Of course, farmers have done their best to respond, but recent research from the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board has suggested that England is heading for one of its worst harvests on record. The wheat harvest in England alone is estimated to be down more than 2.2 million tonnes, which represents an 18% reduction since last year, and the total harvest for the five key crops—wheat, winter barley, spring barley, oats and oilseed rape—is set to be down by over 13%, or 3 million tonnes, on the five-year average. We risk being increasingly reliant on imports, and unfortunately there seems to be no relief in sight; 10 English counties experienced the wettest September on record, and input costs remain high. If we do not support our farmers now, many farm businesses say that they are unlikely to survive.

As Secretary of State, I prioritised food production. At the Oxford farming conference, I announced more money, choice and trust for farmers. I increased rates paid under the sustainable farming incentive, and I announced in January that I was introducing new options to better reflect the range of farms.

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): In the shadow Secretary of State's time in office, why did he and the Government of the day fail to get £300 million out of the door and into farms in constituencies such as mine?

Steve Barclay: I will come on to the underspends, because that is one of the key dividing lines between the two sides of the House. After we came out of the EU, I secured an agreement with the Treasury that all the underspends from the new schemes would remain in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs budget, for farmers and for DEFRA. At the end of this month, in the Budget, we will see whether the Secretary of State has secured the same terms for any underspends.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): We know that the previous Government made a whole raft of commitments that there was no way of paying for, so there is no credibility to the suggestion that the right hon. Gentleman secured something from the discredited Treasury that he was under. The key question is: if that money was so desperately needed, why was it not being spent?

Steve Barclay: As we came out of the European Union, new schemes were set up, including the SFI, to support nature and farming. They represented a shift from the EU scheme, under which 50% of the money went to 10% of landowners. We were able to design new schemes. We listened to farmers, and that is why I announced at the farming conference an average increase of 10% in payments, and 50 more choices to better reflect the variety of farms, including upland farms. We responded, but the point is that underspends all remained within the DEFRA budget. The key question, which I am sure the Secretary of State will come to, is whether he will give a similar commitment to the House that any underspends will remain in DEFRA, given that we have just faced the wettest winter in 150 years, and given that in September, 10 counties had the worst rain on record.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I would add one thing to what the shadow Secretary of State is brilliantly saying: this is a matter for farmers in Herefordshire as much as for those elsewhere. Ross-on-Wye, a rural town, was under water as a result of the floods. Does he share my view that the whole ecosystem ultimately feeds into the river, and into river pollution, on which he took such a lead with the action plan? Does he share my hope that the plan will be supported by the new Government, as well as by the river champion that he put in place?

Steve Barclay: I very much agree. My right hon. Friend alludes to one of the key questions being asked by many farmers around the River Wye: what has happened to the £35 million that was announced for farming support around the River Wye? Again, there has been so little detail from this Government, so I hope the Secretary of State is able to give some reassurance to my right hon. Friend.

We also gave farmers other support. In February, we introduced the biggest package of productivity grants, in order to boost the deployment of the latest technology and enhance yields on farms. We improved protections to prevent the best land from being taken out of food production, including through the announcement in May on strengthening the guidance on solar farms. We responded positively to the National Farmers Union's request through the annual food security index, and we hosted the farm to fork summit in Downing Street.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) *rose*—

Steve Barclay: I know that the clustering of solar farms on some of the best food production land in Lincolnshire is a live issue; I suspect that might be what my right hon. Friend wants to address.

Sir Edward Leigh: I do not want to get into the debate for and against solar farms, but even those in favour of them should surely agree that we should not have a concentration of them—10,000 acres of them—around one town, namely Gainsborough. Should the Secretary of State not consider such matters in the round, and take all the applications together?

Steve Barclay: The Secretary of State should be doing that, but there is a marked difference between us. I persuaded the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to strengthen the guidance against solar farms, but the Secretary of State is being pushed around by his Cabinet colleagues. The Energy Secretary has already walked all over him, granting permission for a whole load of solar farms, and allowing the clustering that is causing such an issue.

I will give the House an example of how the Secretary of State is not championing farming. Baroness Rock was a true voice in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for tenant farmers, and she wrote the review of tenant farming that I commissioned in a previous role in No. 10, but it seems that she has been sacked or asked to leave the DEFRA board. It would be helpful if the Secretary of State said why such a respected and talented figure had to leave her role.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Steve Barclay: I will, and then I will make some progress.

Dr Johnson: My right hon. Friend is talking about the clustering of solar farms, but that is not the only problem. They are being built on high-quality agricultural land, which is nonsensical.

Steve Barclay: It is, and a further concern in my constituency is that the consultants who do soil sampling for the developers are often felt to be interpreting and grading the quality of soil in a way that is not consistent with local knowledge.

Back in May, the previous Government allocated £50 million of additional support to farmers hit by the wet weather. They extended the farming recovery fund to 1,000 more farmers, so that it covered all those affected in England. On top of that, in March, we announced the allocation of an additional £75 million to internal drainage boards, which are essential to protecting agricultural land from floods and storms.

We now have a Labour Government who neither understand nor care for rural communities. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish!"] They were not so vocal when they launched their manifesto, which devoted just 87 words to farming. There was not a single mention of farming in the King's Speech, because the Government have made the active choice to de-prioritise British farming and food production.

[Steve Barclay]

On the immediate challenge, the answer to a recent parliamentary question backs up what the sector is telling me. The £50 million of additional farming recovery fund support is yet to be paid out. We have just established that we have had the wettest weather for 150 years and that 10 counties have had particularly challenging weather, yet despite having a known scheme, with an extra £50 million, they have not allocated that much-needed, time-critical support. The Secretary of State needs to explain why. The NFU says its members simply cannot wait any longer for the support, yet Labour seems to want to keep them waiting. Reports suggest that the £75 million for the internal drainage boards is also on a go-slow, and we need to know why.

For the longer term, Labour Ministers have overruled officials to cover some of the country's best farmland in solar panels. They have rejected the plans for binding food security targets. It has even been suggested in media reports that they plan to cut the farming budget by £100 million. Indeed, it was reported that the NFU president has said that his members are being "kept up at night" by the "cliff edge" that Labour's lack of commitment on the agriculture budget is causing.

The Government need to change course. They need to give immediate confidence to the sector and show that they care about food security. To do so, they need to commit to five things: first, that the full £50 million of additional wet weather support we announced in May will be paid out in full.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): As the first ever female director of the National Farmers Union in 100 years, I think I can speak with some credibility here. I represent Tiverton and Minehead, which includes the Quantocks and Exmoor. I have to say, you have some chutzpah—my farmers tell me that you sold them down the river. I say to Government Members that we need to work together on this, because our lot on the Liberal Democrat Benches know more about farming than they do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind hon. Members that if they use the word "you", it means me.

Steve Barclay: I would never suggest such things of you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I could not quite spot the hon. Lady's question—it seemed to be more of a statement. I am sure that farmers in Tiverton, as well as those around the country, want to know why the £50 million that was allocated in May has not been given out. The Lib Dems may not care about that money, but Conservative Members want that support for farmers.

Secondly, the £75 million of support for internal drainage boards needs to be deployed in full and without delay. Thirdly, the £220 million allocated for technology and productivity schemes needs to be honoured in full. Fourthly, the Government need to confirm there will be no cuts to the farming budget—an issue that is causing so much concern—so that we do not lose the £2.6 million that has been allocated for this year. Fifthly, we need a commitment from the Government that they will keep the farm to fork summit in Downing Street, they will have the food security index and they will appoint a tenant farming commissioner.

Looking further ahead, the Government must do more to give farmers confidence. That means ruling out the removal or reduction of the agricultural property relief, better protecting farmland from schemes for solar and pylons, and ensuring that food production is central to the land use framework. Only by doing those things can they show that they are backing our farmers and protecting food security, but sadly I fear an urbancentric Government simply will not do that, not least with a Labour Secretary of State who is currently getting pushed around by his Cabinet colleagues. It is only this Conservative team who are, and will be, a voice for rural businesses, rural communities and our rural way of life, with improved farming production at its very heart.

4.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I welcome the opportunity to restate this Government's support for farmers, who produce the food that feeds the nation and protect our beautiful countryside. Farmers are the beating heart of rural communities across the country, promoting economic growth and stewarding our land. Food security is national security in our increasingly unstable world. I am a little surprised that the Conservatives called this debate, after they completely failed our farmers and undermined Britain's food security. After 14 years of Tory chaos, confidence among farmers is at a record low. More than 12,000 farmers and agri-businesses have been forced out of business since 2010. The Conservatives left a lack of infrastructure to protect farmers from extreme weather and no action at all to reduce soaring energy costs. This Government will correct the mistakes of the past.

Jesse Norman: Can the Secretary of State give me some comfort that the money that was allocated for the action plan for the River Wye will be retained, even if not necessarily for the purposes that it was created for? Will he also reappoint the current champion for the river who has so far done excellent work?

Steve Reed: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his intervention and for the representations that he has made to me personally on this issue. I know that he feels passionately about it and, indeed, it is a very important issue. I am afraid that we will need to wait until the conclusion of the spending review, which is normal practice in government, but his words have been heard and his concerns recognised.

Farming and food security are the foundations of our economy, our communities and, indeed, our environment. Farmers were badly let down by the previous Government who offered only sticking plasters to deal with the great challenges faced by British farming. This Government will work with farmers to help them transition to new farming methods that are more sustainable both financially and environmentally. We will reduce the soaring energy prices that have hit so many food producers so hard. There will be no more dodgy trade deals that undermine British farmers. This will be a Government on the side of Britain's farmers.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to say that farmers are a very important part of the community. His leader, the Prime Minister, said to the NFU last year that solar farms

should not be created by taking advantage of tenant farmers. This is a live issue in my constituency and many others where tenant farmers will be deprived of their livelihood by new solar farms. Will he stand by that commitment and say quite clearly to his Cabinet colleagues that tenant farmers must not lose their livelihood by the creation of a solar farm?

Steve Reed: I recognise the point the hon. Gentleman is making and thank him for his intervention. I will comment later in my speech on further support that we would wish to offer tenant farmers. I do recognise the situation that they are in.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): On 13 September, I met representatives from my local NFU and a whole group of farmers who are desperate to see both the recovery fund moneys dispersed and the support for the internal drainage board. Will the Secretary of State please put their minds at rest in this crisis situation in which they find themselves and commit to making sure that that money does flow? Talking about the Budget, we need action now to support those people if what he says about energy security and the centrality of farming to this country is to be more than just words.

Steve Reed: It is regrettable that this Government inherited from the previous Government flood defences in the worst condition ever recorded. Of course I recognise that farmers need support, but they need long-term support, not just the sticking plaster approach that we had from the previous Government. We will be looking at how we can do that. The Environment Agency has already made £37 million available, so support will be available to farmers that are facing flooding in the here and now. However, it is in the spending review that we will look at how we can provide that longer-term support so that we can give farmers and, indeed, other businesses and homeowners protection from the kind of severe weather events that we are seeing much more frequently due to climate change.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): While the Secretary of State explains to the House what he is doing and what he will do, will he spare a thought for the farmers of Northern Ireland? Our agrifood industry is shaped and controlled not by the laws that this House makes, not by the laws that the devolved Parliament makes, but by the laws made by a foreign Parliament, namely the European Parliament. In more than 300 areas of law, 120 of which affect our agrifood industry, that is how our laws are made. How is that even approaching being democratic and how is agrifood in Northern Ireland meant to be shaped to meet its needs if its own representatives cannot even make or change the laws that govern it?

Steve Reed: I am very pleased to say that I have already had two meetings with the Northern Ireland Environment Minister to talk about how we can co-operate better to support farmers in Northern Ireland. I have also been speaking with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who shares that interest.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Farmers and families across my constituency were again hit by devastating flooding recently. Does the Secretary of State agree that

the continual recurrence of these issues highlights the previous Government's failure for far too long to take flooding seriously? Can he reassure farmers and families right across my rural community that he will take all the action needed not only to mount a co-ordinated, multi-agency response in the aftermath of flooding, but to ensure proper mitigation in the long term?

Steve Reed: I had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency and a farm there during the election campaign, and I thoroughly recognise the point that he raises. It is a little hypocritical, is it not, for the Conservative party to complain that not enough is being done on flooding, when their Government left flood defences in the worst condition ever recorded?

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) *rose*—

Steve Reed: I will now make a little progress. I have taken quite a few interventions, and other Members want to speak.

Our new deal for farmers will boost Britain's food security, protect our environment and drive rural economic growth by tackling the root causes of the long-term issues they face—climate change, rising prices for energy, feed and fertiliser, unfair supply chains, and access to labour. We will ensure that environmental land management schemes work for farmers, and where funding is allocated for farmers we will make sure it reaches farmers, ending the Tory underspends that saw hundreds of millions of pounds held back. We will improve these schemes by working with farmers to boost food security and promote nature's recovery, including upland, lowland, grass and tenant farmers.

Upland farmers have been left behind. Farmers in the uplands have been losing their basic payments each year, but have not been able to access new schemes. We have arrived in office to find no credible plan to address that, leaving thousands of the most remote and isolated farmers without a clear path for their families, businesses or communities. We need a fair approach for all farmers.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): We all understand that my right hon. Friend has inherited in his Department a panoply of different crises, from the crisis facing our farmers to flooding. He is absolutely right that trying to get the environmental land management scheme to achieve what was originally intended for it is one of the biggest issues facing Britain's farmers. I appreciate it is very early days, but what is his sense of what the major failures are right now, and what might we look forward to in his plan to sort them out?

Steve Reed: The environmental land management schemes are taking the right approach, but they need to work better for all farmers. Too many farmers feel that they cannot access them or do not get the support that they need. My proposal is not that the Government will dictate to farmers how those changes should happen, but that we should work with farmers, in a partnership, to hear their voices and allow them to influence changes to those schemes that will make them more effective in achieving the many outcomes that we seek to get from that Government funding.

We will not tell farmers how to farm. We will achieve this by working together with them in that new partnership. I recently met the Tenant Farmers Association to hear

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its views about improving support for tenant farmers. I agree that the proposal for a tenant farming commissioner has merit, and we will make an announcement shortly.

Our new deal will protect farmers from being undercut in trade deals. The Conservative Government's trade deal with Australia and New Zealand is a disaster for our British farmers. They were sold down the river, as the Conservative party allowed the import of food produced to standards so low that they would be unacceptable in this country. Instead of backing British farmers, the Conservatives undermined British farmers. We want to see more support for British farmers—more opportunities for British farmers, not fewer.

We have already delivered early first steps for British farmers, securing access to the US market for UK beetroot growers and to the South African market for poultry producers. Instead of the botched Tory Brexit deal that threw up barriers to trade and blocked Great British food exports, we will seek a new veterinary agreement with the EU, to tear those barriers down and get our food exports moving again, putting money straight into the pockets of British farmers.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way a second time. He talks about the importance to communities of farmers, particularly intergenerational farmers. We understand that consideration is being given to withdrawing agricultural property relief in the Budget at the end of October. Will he confirm that that will not happen? If it did, it would be the end of intergenerational farming in this country.

Steve Reed: I understand the hon. Member's point and the importance of intergenerational farming, but he will understand that I cannot anticipate the outcome of the Budget process.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State agree with me about the urgency of a sanitary and phytosanitary deal and, probably, of rejoining the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention, because of the damage being done to British farmers by Brexit border taxes? The National Farmers Union tried to warn the shadow Secretary of State that farmers were facing an "existential threat" because they cannot import the seeds they need—tomato seeds, pepper seeds and oil seed rape. We now hear from ports that very few checks are being done, making a mockery of the idea of any food security. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when the shadow Secretary of State makes lists of what could happen, apologising for the mess they made at the border should be at the top?

Steve Reed: As always, my hon. Friend makes an important point very eloquently. During the election campaign, I spoke to farmers up and down the country—as I did before that and have done since—who were absolutely furious that, having been promised continued access to the European markets where they were selling their great, high-quality British produce, they were instead taking a financial hit as trade barriers were thrown up and they could no longer sell into those markets. We want to correct that by seeking a new veterinary deal with the European Union to get exports moving across the borders again.

We will not allow food producers to continue to bear the brunt of unfair supply chains. Farmers deserve a fair price for the food they produce, and we will bring forward proposals to make sure that happens. One of the biggest cost rises affecting British farmers has been energy bills. We will prevent future price shocks by switching on GB Energy, so we can harness the power of wind, wave, solar and nuclear energy to keep bills down and take back control of our own energy supplies from foreign fossil-fuel dictators like Vladimir Putin.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The Secretary of State talks about the importance of cheap energy, solar and food security. Clearly, land needs a balance. What representations has he made to the Energy Secretary to be clear that the best farmland should not be used for ground-mounted solar?

Steve Reed: The hon. Lady has made that point to me before, and I reassure her that, even at their most ambitious extent, solar farms would not cover more than 1% of agricultural land. For farmers, climate change is also a significant concern. The reason we are seeing such heavy rainfall is climate change: that is what is leading to the flooding and droughts that are damaging farmers. If we do not take action to transition to a clean energy economy, farmers will continue to suffer from things that none of us wish them to have to deal with.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): As a dairy farmer and a tenant farmer, I perhaps have unique experience in this matter. Obviously I am Welsh as well, and I realise that agricultural policy is devolved to Wales. This issue involves the aftermath of Brexit. Under the EU common agricultural policy, Wales received around 9.5% of the total UK CAP budget, which was based on our rural lifestyle in Wales and farming criteria such as the size, number and nature of farms. If allocations are calculated using the Barnett formula and population figures instead, we would have only 5.6% of the total agricultural budget.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Can I remind the hon. Lady that interventions need to be short?

Ann Davies: Sorry—I am very new and I apologise. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that Wales will not miss out on any increases in the UK funding settlement for agriculture and rural development due to the reduced allocation?

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and can reassure her that I have had multiple conversations with the Welsh Deputy First Minister, who is also the Environment Minister in Wales, to ensure that those concerns are heard as we go through the spending review process. It is always difficult in the couple of weeks running up to the Budget, because I cannot give definitive answers, as she will understand, but that will become clear once the Chancellor has made her statement towards the end of the month. We will use the Government's purchasing power to buy more British produce for our hospitals and prisons—again, putting money directly into the pockets of British farmers.

Crime was another issue that was running out of control under the Conservatives—and no wonder, after they took so many police off our streets. Crime in rural

areas has skyrocketed by almost a third since 2011. Our new deal for farmers will see the first ever cross-Government rural crime strategy to crack down on antisocial behaviour, fly-tipping and GPS theft—issues that have repeatedly been raised with me by farmers and people living in rural communities.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Steve Reed: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will make a little progress. I have taken up an awful lot of time and am only about halfway through, and I want to leave time for others to speak.

It should be of huge concern to every one of us that the suicide rate among male farmers is three times the national average, and the highest among any sector in the economy. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to mental health charity the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution for its excellent work in tackling that alarming and unacceptable situation. We will tackle the mental health crisis in our rural communities by recruiting 8,500 more mental health professionals across the NHS and setting up a Young Futures mental health hub for under-25s in every rural community.

After fewer than 100 days in office, I chaired the first meeting of the new flood resilience taskforce. Funding allocated to flood defences had been left unspent for years, but we will speed up the construction of flood defences, drainage systems and natural flood schemes so that we can offer farmers and rural communities better protection from extreme weather in the long term.

Members are aware that the Government are currently conducting a spending review to fix the foundations of our economy after the previous Government crashed it and left behind a staggering £22 billion black hole in the public finances—[*Interruption.*] What they did is not funny; the problems that it has caused British farmers, and people living in our rural communities, are not funny. I think the Conservatives should show a little more humility after what they did.

While that process is live, there is little that I can say on individual spending areas. I can say, however, that we recognise the challenges caused by the wet weather earlier in the year and in recent years. That is just one challenge among many for farmers right now. A few weeks ago, I met a farmer in Essex who has a case of bluetongue in his herd. I am grateful to farmers for complying with movement restrictions intended to stop the spread of that disease. We will confirm plans for the farming recovery fund, investment in internal drainage boards and other grants as we complete the Budget process. We will also work with farmers to reduce agricultural water pollution from run-off, and to look at ways of improving their nutrient management and the effectiveness of regulations.

Boosting productivity in farming is hugely important. Grants and direct investment are part of achieving that, but we need to think bigger and look for more enduring solutions.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): The Conservatives sold farmers out, undercutting them with dodgy trade deals with New Zealand and Australia. To return to my right hon. Friend's previous

point, this Government have secured for UK beetroot growers access to the US market worth approximately £100,000 per year in increased exports. Does he agree that the contrast in trade agreements could not be starker? In trade deals, Labour protects farmers; the Conservatives sell them down the river.

Steve Reed: I happily agree with the points that my hon. Friend has made. The Labour party is on the side of farmers.

The UK has world-class science and innovation capabilities. Developing new technologies and techniques for use by farmers and growers will be critical for our food security, for business resilience to climate change, and for promoting economic growth. We have set up a new British infrastructure council to steer private investment in rural areas, including in broadband roll-out across rural communities and in electricity grids to power our growth. We are reforming the apprenticeship levy to improve rural apprenticeships and skills and give farmers the freedom and flexibility to upskill their workforce, and are opening specialist technical excellence colleges to match skills to local economies.

A few weeks ago, the Minister responsible for farming and food security, my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), tabled a statement on the previous Government's astonishing underspends in the farming budget. They failed to get £300 million that was allocated to farmers into the hands of those farmers. I am working with Treasury Ministers to ensure farmers have the public investment they need, and although the financial inheritance from the previous Government is appalling, there is no shortage of positive things that the farming budget can and will deliver: cleaner air and water, food security, abundant wildlife and biodiversity, and thriving and connected rural communities. Those things are the foundation of a sector worth billions of pounds—the largest manufacturing sector in the country. I can assure this House that I am making the strongest case for that funding, despite the financial black hole and flatlining economy the Conservatives left behind.

Food security is national security, and of course, energy security is also national security. This Government will deliver the mandate we were elected on. Our plans to boost solar power do not risk the UK's food security: even in the most ambitious scenarios, less than 1% of the UK's agricultural land would be used for solar. More broadly, there are challenges and trade-offs. Land is finite, but the pressures we put upon it are increasing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Steve Reed: I will finish my speech, if Members do not mind.

That is why this Government will do what the previous Government failed to achieve, despite repeated promises. We will publish a land use framework, providing more clarity and starting a conversation on land use and how we can maintain food production, restore nature and grow the economy.

Farmers do a fantastic job for our country. They produce the food we eat and steward our beautiful countryside, and they deserve our support, but the previous Government let them down. Our new deal for farming will offer farmers a fresh start—action to cut energy bills, action on rural crime, action to open

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markets to trade and export, and action to cut the appalling levels of mental ill health that affect farmers right across our country. I welcome this debate and the chance to restate this Government's support for farmers. After 14 years of failure, change has begun.

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

5.12 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to take part in this debate and to speak not just on behalf of my party, but as the Member of Parliament for farmers from the Cartmel peninsula to the Eden valley, the Yorkshire dales, the Westmorland dales and the Lake district—for 1,500 wonderful farmers throughout the length and breadth of Westmorland and Lonsdale. I am humbled and utterly privileged to be their MP.

I am here primarily not to say how great the Liberal Democrats are—I am sure that is self-evident—but to state how utterly, unspeakably valuable farmers and farming are. They are valuable for producing the food that we all eat; if Members have eaten anything today, they should thank a farmer. They are utterly valuable in our fight against climate change. They are on the frontline tackling that threat, and are our best answer to the nature and biodiversity crisis that we have in our land. They are the people who protect the towns and villages near the countryside from the expensive and heartbreaking horrors of flooding, and who support and protect our heritage and—in my constituency in particular—underpin our remarkable tourism economy. Across the country, tourism and hospitality is our fourth biggest employer, but in Cumbria, that sector is our biggest employer. Some 60,000 people work within the industry; it is a £4.5 billion economy. Undoubtedly, farming is the backbone, the backdrop and the underpinning of that wonderful and important tourism and hospitality economy. Farmers need to hear that, and they need to hear that they are valued by this place and by this country, because they do not feel that. They feel beleaguered. Yes, beleaguered by things that are beyond our control—the weather, or the global shocks that are undoubtedly causing huge pressure on farmers—but also deeply beleaguered by public and Government policy.

We have an agriculture policy minted by the previous Conservative Government and, for the time being at least, maintained by this Labour Government, that is based on—this is the maddest thing I have heard myself say in this place, and I have said some mad things—disincentivising the production of food. Can we believe that that is literally the case? It is a policy created by the Conservative party and that, for the time being at least, is being maintained by the party currently in power. The consequence is that only 55% of the food we eat in this country is produced in this country. I have talked to Adam Day from the Cumbria Farmer Network, and he has been reported in the *Farmers Guardian*, so this is an absolutely legitimate figure: we have a year-on-year reduction in the number of sheep in this country of 4.2%. If we destock the fells of animals, we will soon after destock the countryside of human beings. It is a deep threat to our ability to feed ourselves.

Dr Murrison: I am following the hon. Gentleman's remarks with a great deal of interest. Does he agree that the vast majority of people in this country, given the choice, would rather buy British food? Certainly, all the surveys that have been done would bear that out. However, one of the principal problems is the information they are provided with by the supermarkets and, I am afraid, the cynical way in which many of those supermarkets approach the labelling of food, suggesting it is British when in fact it is not. What does he suggest we do to give consumers, who have not yet been mentioned in this debate, the genuine choice they are seeking and to help our farmers along the way?

Tim Farron: The right hon. Member is absolutely right. I support the NFU's call for accurate labelling that is enforceable, and he is right to say that.

To move on, if we are losing farms and losing farmers, which we are as we speak, not only are we losing our ability to feed ourselves as a country, but we are undermining our ability to deliver for the environment. Let us not fall into the mistake of thinking that this is a debate between caring for the environment and producing food; we either do them both or we do not do them at all. Some 70% of England's land mass is agricultural, and the figure would be greater across the UK as a whole. If we think we are tackling the climate and nature crises without farmers, we are kidding ourselves. The greenest policies in the world will just be bits of paper in a drawer if we do not have the farmers on the ground to put them into practice.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): Farmers in Frome and East Somerset, like many farmers, work tirelessly to produce food for our country. However, does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital to acknowledge the role they also play in restoring nature and mitigating the effects of climate change, and that the Government need to support farmers to develop natural climate solutions to restore nature?

Tim Farron: I completely agree with that, and it leads me on to what I was going to say next, which is to praise Michael Gove. The environmental land management scheme created at the beginning of the last Parliament has an awful lot going for it, and there is actually cross-party support for the idea of public money for public goods, as my hon. Friend rightly points out.

I will say this: we have searched high and low for Brexit benefits, and this might be one of them. The common agricultural policy was riddled with all sorts of failures, some of which have been mentioned already. ELMs provide the possibility to have a bespoke farming and cultural environment policy that actually delivers what we want in the places where we want it, and providing environmental goods is absolutely part of that.

However, this positive idea with all-party support was botched by the last Administration. There was a £2.4 billion budget for England alone—eroded, of course, over five years by inflation and all the shocks we have talked about—yet even that pitiful budget, which was frozen by the last Government, was underspent by £358 million. What does that mean? It reduces our ability to feed ourselves as country, to restore nature and to tackle climate change. We did not spend the money not because farmers did not need it, but because

of a surplus of complacency from a Conservative party that thought the countryside would always vote for it, because of a lack of care for farmers, their families and their communities, and from a fundamental absence of competence.

My message to the Secretary of State, the Treasury, the Prime Minister, and every Labour MP is this: please do not let the Treasury take financial advantage of Tory incompetence. Do not bake in the underspend. Please, Secretary of State, do not give in to No.11 and No.10. Protect this budget, because without that public money we will not get those public goods. Please fight your corner—[*Interruption.*] I am pleased to hear him say that he will do so. In fighting his corner, he will be fighting the countryside's corner, and I want to support him in that.

I would like the Labour party to understand why the Conservatives botched the transition and why the money did not get spent. One of the few efficient things that the previous Administration did was to get rid of the basic payment on time and without any delay. That happened without any problems whatsoever. What did not happen at the same time was the adequate rolling out of new ELMs payments, in particular the sustainable farming incentive. We had a stop-start approach, and many people on historic stewardship schemes for example, were simply not able to get into the SFI.

At the Westmorland county show a few weeks ago I spoke to a youngish hill farmer in his 40s—I mention this particular case because it is so typical of all the others I have spoken about in my constituency and beyond. He said to me that by the end of the process he will have lost £40,000 in basic payments from his annual income. He will gain £14,000 in SFI, and by the way that cost him £6,000 in agent fees. That is a net loss every year of £26,000, and that is typical. That is why there is an underspend. Please do not bake it in. The Secretary of State rightly spoke about mental health, and in this time of flux and change I have never worried more about the mental health of my constituents, and of farmers in particular.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): The suicide rate among male farmers is three times the national average. The Conservative party left rural communities such as mine facing a mental health crisis. A close family friend of mine, Rocky Poulson, took his own life just four days after a farm inspection found that 18 of his sheep were tagged with the wrong coloured ear tags, leaving him facing criminal sanctions and the embarrassment of that among his friends and colleagues—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. May I respectfully suggest to the hon. Lady, and all Members—she should be sitting if I am standing—that interventions should be short, they should be spontaneous, and they certainly should not be read out as if they were part of a speech. I am sure the hon. Lady has made her point.

Tim Farron: She really has, and I completely sympathise with her and those around her over the loss of her friend.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about young farmers and mental health, and I know there is a brilliant project

in his patch called Growing Well. Does he agree that the young farmers of this generation are very different from those who I grew up with, who were very much chemical farmers post-war? This generation believes in habitat and conservation, and all they ask for through ELMs is a strategic framework by which they can grow their businesses in the long term. That is the best security we can give them.

Tim Farron: I agree with that, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising Growing Well at Sizergh and Tebay, and the fantastic job it does in building mental health and connecting that with the countryside. I particularly want people who are not from rural constituencies to imagine what it is like in this time of flux and change, when people see the money going out the door and do not see it coming in. Typically, farmers are male. They will be my age or even older than me, and they will be perhaps the fifth, sixth or seventh generation who have farmed that farmstead. They see the very real prospect of being the one who loses the family farm. What does that do to someone's head? We have heard the horrific consequences, and we need to love, cherish and care for our farmers, and recognise the terrible situation they are in at this moment of flux.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): As a past president of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster I think the hon. Gentleman's point is very apt. At this moment across the UK, 95% of farmers under 40 say that mental health is their biggest concern. It is not only about losing the family farm; it is about worrying where the next payment comes from. It is about relying on making that payment and about what they do for the next generation and the ones before and after. Mental health is a real problem, and I am disappointed that the Secretary of State did not go into any great detail on that issue.

Tim Farron: Hopefully we have established that we need to care for those who feed us and care for our environment. Farmers need friends, so let me mention one potential very important friend: the Prime Minister. People may be aware that during the general election, the Prime Minister turned up in my constituency. I have the claim to fame that mine is the only constituency in the entire United Kingdom where Labour lost its deposit—by the way, my Labour opponent Pippa was excellent, and it was nothing to do with her—but the Prime Minister came to the Langdale valley in my constituency. Despite the fact that I am a Blackburn Rovers fan, I was pleased to see Gary Neville there. People will remember the party political broadcast that Labour had during the election campaign, as well as the Prime Minister's recent speech at the Labour conference, where he talked about the importance of the Langdale valley to him personally growing up and to the development of who he is. I was moved by that. As the Member of Parliament for the Langdale valley, I am grateful to him for saying that. Langdale needs friends, and this is a moment where Langdale could do with the most important of friends, particularly when it comes to spending money.

I will read out some words from a hill farmer related to the Prime Minister's comments about his upbringing in the Langdale valley. He said that he was "moved" that the Prime Minister championed Langdale so well, but he then said that

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“farming communities in Langdale and other upland areas are facing severe financial hardship with many wondering whether they will survive...they have now lost 50% or more of the basic payment scheme, an integral part of their business income, which will actually all be gone soon. These farmers are almost all in old environmental stewardship schemes, which means that they are hardly able to access anything from the new ELMS scheme and the sustainable farming incentive. Not because they don't want to, but because of computer and agency issues in DEFRA.”

If the Prime Minister loves Langdale, will he please prove it by ensuring that we invest in hill farmers and in farming more generally? We have focused on what the last Government got wrong.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I happily give way to my neighbour.

Markus Campbell-Savours: I thank the hon. Member for allowing me to intervene. I am a fellow Cumbrian MP and I grew up in the Lake district, so I was pleased to see the Prime Minister's story of an area that I know and love as well. Does the hon. Member agree that while the shadow Secretary of State's introduction to this debate challenged us over our budget, the real issue that I hear from farmers in Cumbria is that it is one thing to have a budget, but if we cannot get it out the door, it is pretty meaningless? Does he agree that that is the real challenge?

Tim Farron: That is the real challenge, so we need to ensure that there is more money in the budget for welfare schemes and support to ensure that farmers can carry on farming. If we are taking the basic payment out relentlessly without anything to replace it, the Government should not be surprised if there is carnage. That is not just personal carnage and tragedies, but also a reduction in our ability to feed ourselves as a country.

Let us concentrate for a moment or two, before I shut up, on what we can do to put things right. First, the Liberal Democrats believe wholeheartedly, as in our costed manifesto, that there should be an additional billion pounds in the budget. We recognise that we cannot restore nature, tackle climate change or produce food on the cheap. We want to use at least some of that money to invest in trusted on-farm advice. A Conservative Member earlier made the point about how much of the EU money went to big landowners, but the problem is that the current situation is even worse. Who is not getting in? It is smaller farmers. If someone is working 90 hours a week on their farm, they do not have time to go and get informed and to engage in the process outside. They need someone they trust on their farm to hold their hand through the process of getting into this new world, so that there is a future for them and for their family. That is where some of that money needs to go.

We need to recognise that much of the money has disproportionately gone to big landowners, both public and private. The BBC reported, and I know this to be true, that one landowner alone evicted 65 tenants from one estate in April 2024, giving people notice to quit that estate. The distribution of money between the richer farmers and the poorer is even worse than it was

under the common agricultural policy, and we never thought that would even be possible. But we are seeing what I would describe, in no way lightly, as the Lakeland clearances, and as we lose livestock, we lose people.

I want to say something else positive. I have already mentioned at least one Conservative positively; Baroness Rock also did a tremendous job with the tenant farming review. The shadow Secretary of State's predecessor did not meet her in all her time in her position. I am concerned to learn that Baroness Rock got the sack—whatever happened, she has been removed from her role—as the report is hugely important. Tenants need protecting, and there must be a tenant farm commissioner. I urge the Government to take on Baroness Rock's report and recommendations in full, without any mitigation or equivocation.

The Government could also ensure that people in stewardship schemes are allowed into the SFI. Let us ensure that Farming in Protected Landscapes, which is a really important grant scheme, is renewed; its current end date is the end of March. Let us also do something fundamentally radical but blindingly obvious: let us make food a public good. Let us ensure that our agricultural policy actually encourages people to produce food.

This issue is not just about transition—people have talked about the trade deals; the Conservative Government threw Britain's farmers under the bus when it came to them. There is also the lack of access to our nearest markets, which some Labour Members have mentioned, and the importance of restoring and normalising relationships with our biggest export market over the channel. For a generation, the Conservatives will carry around their neck, like an albatross, their record of betraying and taking for granted our rural communities in general, and farmers in particular.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that one of the elements of that betrayal was on rural crime, which increased, again, in the last 12 months? Will he join me in congratulating Cumbria's rural crime team on their one-year anniversary, and in supporting the Government's commitment, finally, to reversing the disgraceful rise in rural crime that we saw under the last Government?

Tim Farron: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman resumes his remarks, I point out that the Front Benchers have used about 20 minutes each. I am sure that he is coming to a close.

Tim Farron: I have been generous in giving way, and you have been even more generous, Madam Deputy Speaker. A minute and I am done. I agree with the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns).

The Conservatives' betrayal will rightly weigh around their neck for a generation—farmers have long memories—but if Labour bakes the Conservatives' failure into its spending plans, it will hang out to dry not only Britain's farmers, but its newly elected Members of Parliament. Rural communities need champions; Liberal Democrats will be those champions. We will make a conscious choice to step into the void; that is what rural communities need. We will be the voice for farmers, and for the whole of our countryside. We value our farmers; every day, on

their job list is feeding the country and saving the planet. What a mission! It is our duty and our privilege to support them in that mission.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the next speaker, I should say that the Front-Bench speakers have used up a significant amount of time, aided and abetted, I have to say, by excessively long interventions, some of which were made by Members who did not hang around long in the Chamber after making them. It is a courtesy to the Chair, and to the Front-Bench speakers, that Members who wish to contribute to a debate be here for the start of it. Those who were not here then will not get called, because we have very little time left. I call John Whitby to make his maiden speech.

5.33 pm

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a genuine honour to address you and the House today. It is not just a privilege to represent the Derbyshire Dales; it is a privilege just to be there, because it is truly an area of outstanding natural beauty—known to many hon. Members, I am sure, because it is a destination for millions. But its great appeal also presents a problem, particularly for younger people who are looking for housing. The little house building that takes place is more or less matched by the number of properties lost to second homes, holiday lets and Airbnbs. That results in the highest house prices in the region, which puts houses out of the reach of many young people; they end up moving to other areas to find more affordable housing. That in turn means fewer young families, fewer children, and schools with falling numbers on roll. Small businesses, including farms, pubs and restaurants, suffer as well, as they struggle to get staff due to the lack of affordable accommodation nearby. It is vital that we address this housing crisis.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Sarah Dines, who stood up for the farming community in the dales—something that I very much hope to continue. I have had the pleasure of meeting her predecessor, Lord Patrick McLoughlin, who is in the other place, and I hope to benefit from his vast experience of the constituency.

The main industries in the dales are, unsurprisingly, tourism, leisure and hospitality, quarrying and agriculture. I am hopeful that the new Government can secure a veterinary agreement with the European Union to give our struggling farmers a boost. I have spent much of my first few weeks in the role speaking to farmers to try to understand what the key issues are for them. Food security in an increasingly unstable world must be a high priority.

The dales have great historical significance. According to the Anglo-Saxon chronicles, in the 10th century, the northern kings met Edward the Elder at the Bakewell burh and chose him as father and lord, effectively creating the entity that we call England. Arkwright's mill at Cromford is the birthplace of mass production, and of course it was powered by renewable energy. I recently met the Arkwright Society, which is restoring the site for the benefit of future generations and doing a great job. I also recently met Jamie Needle, who has taken on Masson mill, another of Arkwright's mills. He

is also concerned with the delivery of hydroelectric power from the Derwent—what goes around comes around. Stone from Derbyshire quarries was used in the reconstruction of Parliament in the 19th century, and the founder of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale, lived in the constituency, at the family residence at Lea Hurst. She said:

“Nursing is a progressive art such that to stand still is to go backwards.”

Today's health service is barely standing still. We need to reduce the waiting lists, and to get 3 million working-age people back to work as soon as possible.

I know from my time as the Mayor of Derby that so much of the good being done daily never makes the headlines; good deeds do not appear to sell newspapers or attract advertising. But in my few weeks in this role, I have already met some remarkable people and organisations who are making a difference in the constituency and further afield. Aquabox is a Cromford charity with over 80 volunteers who supply clean water solutions to people in disaster zones. Terry Eckersley at River Network provides social housing and a second chance to people in need. Bakewell Youth Theatre has been led and inspired by Sue Stones for 46 years. I appreciate that this is on a different scale, but Chatsworth House, no less, has given invaluable opportunities to children and young people in the area by having a “takeover” day at the world-famous stately home. I must mention Ben Woodroffe, our world champion toe wrestler—yes, it's a thing. As well as being a great bloke and a champion, he has raised valuable funds for the mental health charity Mind.

I hope the days of having a reasonable expectation that one's children will do well in life are not over, but they seem at least to be on pause. A lack of housing, a reduction in opportunity due to political decision making, unrestrained social media and a climate crisis mean that my children are entering adulthood with much greater uncertainty than I did. As a foster carer of teenage children for 24 years, I know how tough things are for young people in general, but they are much harder for young people leaving care now than they were just a few years ago. Local authorities are running on fumes, so the support has diminished, and unfortunately the prejudice against care-experienced young people still persists. The new Government must work towards fixing the broken children's social care market, address the lack of placement sufficiency, and end the profiteering from vulnerable children that is driving our local authorities to the brink of bankruptcy.

I did not even bother to check with the Commons Library, but I am very sure that I am the first former singer of a progressive metal band to be elected to this House. Although my gigging days are behind me, I think, I am extremely pleased that the Labour Government will seek a deal with the EU to help our touring acts, who suffer no end of red tape when trying to get to the continent to ply their trade. The UK music industry has been an enormous success story over many decades and we need to support all of it—not just the multimillion selling acts, but the ones playing to a couple of hundred people, who will hopefully be tomorrow's multimillion selling acts.

During my campaign, I was struck by the sheer number of constituents whose No. 1 priority for an incoming Government was either the climate or nature,

[John Whitby]

so I feel empowered to say that as influencers and makers of law, we have a duty to think not just in the short term and until the next election, but about those who have not even been born yet, and to leave behind a habitable planet. I was particularly proud to campaign under a banner of public service—service to our constituents and the nation. Country first, party second. We are here not for the status, but for the people who elected us. I will try to keep reminding myself of that. We must deliver on our commitments, but we must also treat the staff here, the staff working in our offices, our colleagues in local government and in the civil service and our constituents with the respect that they deserve. If we can do that, we will move this great bastion of democracy a little closer to the people it serves.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Due to time pressures, there will immediately be a three-minute time limit, other than for maiden speeches, which Members should try to make around seven minutes long—certainly no longer. I call Sir John Hayes.

5.40 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I will make five points in three minutes—if I can pull that off, I trust I will go up even further in your estimation, Madam Deputy Speaker.

First, this Government, like all Governments, need to recognise that the food chain in this country is distorted by the power of a handful of huge corporate retailers. For far too long they have taken the lion's share of the agricultural cake. It is critical that we rebalance the chain in favour of primary and secondary producers. Previous Governments have done some work on that, with the establishment of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. I was in government when that was set up, but it needs more teeth to act on sharp practice by retailers who run ragged over primary producers.

Secondly, we need a strategy for food security. That means recognising that food security is as important as energy security; they must not be made competitors one with the other. We saw during covid and after the start of the war in Ukraine just what damage the unforeseen and unexpected can do to international markets and supply lines. It is critical that we grow more of what we consume, and shorten those supply lines to ensure that people will be fed by produce that is made here in the United Kingdom.

Graham Stuart: Is my right hon. Friend disappointed, as I am, that the Secretary of State did not say more about food security, and how we can make sure that a greater share of our food comes from this country?

Sir John Hayes: My right hon. Friend has been a champion of these matters for a considerable period. I have hopes of the Secretary of State. I had a debate just before the recess in which the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs participated. I made the case for food security, and he gave me a fair hearing. I look forward to the meeting to which I know he is about to invite me; I can bring along a group of farmers and growers, to

have that ongoing conversation. The core point is that food security matters. It not only helps with economic resilience but assists with traceability, quality, standards—all those things.

My third point was stimulated by the Secretary of State's comments about investment and our need to think big. We do indeed. To maintain productivity and efficiency in farming and growing, we need to look to the future. That means greater automation and changing the way we go about the food production business. It means greater integration, but not at the expense of the small farmers and growers. An efficient system does not necessarily mean exclusively huge farm businesses, as we need an entry point to the industry. If we simply create a handful of very large corporate farmers, we will not allow the kind of fluidity necessary to maintain the health of the industry.

My fourth point is on procurement. The Government need to use procurement to support British produce. It is not that difficult, but no Government, of any party, have got it right. We have made some progress over time, as different Governments have launched different initiatives, but we need to use the public purse to support what we do in this country more effectively.

My final point is this: we can have a debate about the detail of policy but, as has been said by the shadow Secretary of State and others, we need to take a bigger view than the partisan knockabout that too often prevails in this kind of discussion. This is about the future good of our people through the production of food to feed the nation.

5.45 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for food security, I have been working across the House to ensure that we work towards affordable food that is available and accessible to everyone. Yet from some of the contributions I have heard from Conservative Members, it is clear that over the past 14 years they have not reflected on how they have failed rural communities. We would not be here today if they had held the mantle on food security. Our farmers already have low confidence because the Conservatives eroded their trust, but our rural communities are not a political football. They deserve respect. They want action, not words. If the Opposition think that rural affairs is tricky ground for those on the Labour Benches, they can well and truly think again. Just look at our new crop of Labour MPs. We won seats right across the country, from Scarborough to south Pembrokeshire. The farming community has firm friends on the Labour Benches.

Let me turn to work that the Government are doing, from unlocking precision breeding to launching a new deal for farmers. The Government's work on food security transcends the work of a single Department, from seeking to secure a new veterinary agreement to launching GB Energy, which will lower production costs. We are also paving the way on flood resilience. If I may, I will draw on some local context in York. I visited a fantastic carrot farm in York Outer, but I was gobsmacked to hear that in a bad year of flooding it can lose a quarter of its crop. I dread to think about the impacts if we do not turn the tide of climate change. That is why I urge the continuation of critical resilience funds to support farmers like the one I met.

Water scarcity is a critical issue. There are real pressures, despite the wettest 18 months on record. It must be 30 years since we last built a reservoir, and farmers struggle from drought, too.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): As my hon. Friend said, many Labour Members are supportive of farmers. I am a proud farmer's daughter and I am delighted to speak in this debate. The previous Government sold farmers down the river. We had disastrous trade deals and they suffer from terrible weather—we can, at least, say that that was not the Tories' fault. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are to support Welsh farmers, they need a strong financial package?

Mr Charters: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic advocate for her constituents. The agriculture budget is hugely important to protect food security.

Another critical issue is biosecurity, so I was disappointed to see that the Opposition left it out of their motion. At present, the UK has a number of confirmed cases of bluetongue. I was briefed by the deputy chief veterinary officer earlier today. I welcome the Secretary of State's action on bluetongue serotype 3 vaccines. That, coupled with the exclusion zones policy, is a welcome first response to what is a complex crisis fuelled by climate change—I will not get into the intricacies of midges and the wind from the continent. That is a clear signal that the Government are taking biosecurity seriously.

I want to touch on my recent engagement with Sainsbury's. I hope colleagues from across the House will join me in welcoming food retailers that put food security at the heart of their business model. I am encouraged by what Sainsbury's is doing.

I am conscious of time, but I just stress that food is one of the 13 critical national infrastructure sectors in the UK. Food security is national security, so I respectfully say to the Opposition: stop the politics and work constructively with us on food security. It is great to see the Government making progress. I look forward to working with them to safeguard Britain's national food security.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dr Roz Savage to make her maiden speech.

5.49 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak to the House. I also thank my hon. Friends for their contributions to this important debate on food and farming.

It is an absolute honour to address the Chamber as the newly elected Member of Parliament for South Cotswolds. It is a new constituency, formed from parts of the former Cotswolds and North Wiltshire seats. The hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) continues his service in his constituency, while James Gray served North Wiltshire for 27 years. Although Mr Gray's and my political views may differ substantially, he was a dedicated constituency MP, and I hope to follow in his footsteps in that regard at least.

The Cotswolds has a well-deserved reputation for natural and architectural beauty. It always gladdens my heart to see the soaring, slender spire of St Mary's church

in Tetbury, the elegant honeystone buildings around the marketplace in Cirencester, or the awe-inspiring arches of Malmesbury abbey. We have beautiful villages, including three category winners of the Wiltshire Best Kept Villages competition: Ashton Keynes, Seagry and Hankerton. We have vibrant communities, thriving businesses, and visionary innovators and inventors. King Charles had the good taste to choose Highgrove, near Tetbury, as his country home, and his gardens are well worth a visit; I am still waiting for my invitation to join His Majesty there for an organic cream tea.

South Cotswolds is a rural constituency, characterised by a rich agricultural landscape, with a proud farming heritage and a plethora of fabulous farmers' markets full of tempting goodies. Eighty-seven per cent of the land within the Cotswolds area of outstanding natural beauty is dedicated to agriculture, and we have more than 750 farm holdings in South Cotswolds, employing over 2,000 people. Our beautiful landscape is a diverse mix of crops and grassland, and livestock farming constitutes a significant sector, with cattle, sheep and pigs. I can recommend Cirencester livestock market as probably the best place in the constituency, if not the country, to get a gargantuan farmer's breakfast that really sets you up for the day—if not for the entire week.

The Cotswolds is known for our traditional farming practices—most of the farms are family run, and often have been for many, many generations—but there is plenty of innovation too. Earlier this year, I hosted an event at the Royal Agricultural University in Cirencester, where we heard that many farms in the region are embracing sustainable and regenerative approaches, focusing on soil health, wildlife conservation and local food production. The "Royal Ag" itself is leading the field, so to speak, with zero dig farming methods. However, not all is rosy in the Cotswolds garden. Our farmers are frustrated by the absence of a long-term strategy. They need to plan 20 or 30 years ahead, beyond the next electoral cycle. They need a clear vision of the future, a vision that can survive changes of Government.

We need to attract more young people into farming. Last year, I "helped" a couple of farmers to bring in the brussels sprout harvest. As I stood in a muddy field on a grey December day, they told me about the problems they had had in recruiting young people into farming. Thirty-eight per cent of farmers are 65 or older, and only 15% are under 45. Astonishingly, it seems that not many young people enjoy being out in the middle of a field in all weathers, doing hard physical work for very little money! A significant number of them do, but the main obstacle is gaining access to land. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State imply that he would be working to encourage more younger people into farming, making it easier and more rewarding for them to help to feed our country high-quality food that has not travelled halfway around the world.

On the south-eastern edge of my constituency, a really exciting initiative is under way at the marvellously named Crapper's landfill site, which is leading on sustain circles. This concept aims to meet 80% of a community's food, housing, jobs and energy needs within a defined radius around the community, increasing self-reliance and resilience. The idea is being pioneered with a plan to position pressurised plastic greenhouses on old landfill zones, using the methane emissions from the decomposing rubbish to heat the greenhouses. It aims to grow enough

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fruit and vegetables to feed Royal Wootton Bassett, Brinkworth and Malmesbury. We need more creative projects like this.

Elsewhere in Wiltshire, a proposal for a massive solar farm on 2,000 acres of mostly agricultural land has sparked debate about how we choose to use our land. We need to stop thinking, “Housing here, renewables here and food production here,” and to look at more creative ways to make our land multi-layered and multi-purpose. It is becoming clearer than ever that we need an integrated strategy, not least because building more houses will increase rainwater run-off and increase the burden on an already overloaded sewage system.

In my constituency in the last year alone, the Fairford sewage treatment works pumped untreated sewage into the River Coln for 3,391 hours, which equates to over four and a half months. Incidents that are meant to be exceptional are happening on average over three times a week. Across the constituency, sewage is flooding into houses, gardens and schools. It is flooding out across fields, where cattle consume it, get sick and die. I urge Thames Water to upgrade the Fairford sewage works as a matter of the utmost urgency, and Ofwat to make sure that it does.

For me, the cleanliness or otherwise of our rivers is personal, and I would like to share a little background. I am not from anywhere in particular. My father was a Methodist minister, and my parents moved house for the first time when I was two years old. They continued to move house with annoying frequency thereafter. My father’s excuse was that he ran out of sermons after a certain number of years, so we had to move house so that he could recycle them. I am all in favour of recycling, but I think he presumed a higher degree of attention, and a longer span of memory, than the typical church member has. Sadly, my parents are no longer around to see me take my seat in this House, but I know they would have been proud. Above all else, they believed that their job was to serve the community as exemplars of God’s love, and I am honoured to follow in their footsteps—but I digress.

Since I have been old enough to choose where I live, I seem to keep coming back to the River Thames. I took my first oar strokes on the Thames in Oxford, and rowed out of Thames rowing club in Putney for several years. I lived in Fulham, Putney, Brentford, Kew, Richmond and Windsor before moving to the Cotswolds. The River Thames rises in my constituency as little more than a trickle just outside Cricklade, gradually gathering tributaries, including the highly polluted Coln, to become the magnificent Father Thames that flows past these Houses of Parliament.

The Thames has been a constant thread throughout much of my adult life, so I care passionately about water issues, and about climate and nature more generally. This is a passion that led me, in my 30s, to spend an inordinate amount of time alone in a tiny rowboat in the middle of various oceans as I rowed solo across the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian, using my voyages to raise awareness of environmental issues and our growing ecological crisis. Along the way, I gained some really impressive callouses, four Guinness world records and, hopefully, some highly transferable skills in navigating shark-infested waters, which may possibly stand me in good stead in my new career.

Like many who care about our environment, I sometimes despair, but in closing I would like to say that what gives me hope for the future is the public spirit, the energy and the goodness that I see in action in the South Cotswolds. When the Government are telling us that there is no money and councils are struggling, I see our communities coming together, using their creativity and resourcefulness to work out how to make a little go a long way, sharing resources, looking to their neighbours, donating time and skills and looking out for each other. We have fabulous organisations, including the Cirencester Pantry, Heals of Malmesbury, and Community Fridges in Purton, Malmesbury and Tetbury. It is so inspiring to see people coming together in mutual support.

People of the South Cotswolds, you inspire me and you humble me. I am so grateful to my constituents for trusting me to represent their interests and those of this country. I commit to doing my absolute best to rise to this challenge with unwavering determination, integrity and dedication.

6 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): It is an absolute honour to follow the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage). Hearing her speech and her passion and dedication, not just for the area she lives in but for the environment in general, is inspiring for everyone in the House, so I congratulate her on her maiden speech.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I would like to pay tribute to my neighbour, the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), for an excellent maiden speech. I am very glad that she appreciates the huge beauty of parts of my former constituency. I know that she will represent it well. I was very sorry to lose it. I have many friends in that constituency and I wish her well.

Ben Goldsborough: It is lovely to hear a bit of cross-party action to start off; I will try not to spoil that tone.

Today’s debate is a vital one on the future of not only South Norfolk’s food security but that of the UK. For too long, those who have put food on our table have worked our land but sadly been taken for granted. I stand here as the first Labour MP for South Norfolk in 74 years. That should show the House that rural communities up and down the country have wanted change, and it is for us to prove that we are ready to take up that mantle.

In South Norfolk we are lucky, because we have the innovation of the Norwich research park. Those who are local—I can see nodding from the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman)—will know that these are the centres of excellence that will drive our agriculture forward in agritech and high-end industry. The innovation of the John Innes Centre is second to none as it strives to meet the increasing demands and pressures on the national and international food security system. The gene editing techniques that it has been developing and working on have the potential to transform British agriculture by increasing yields and crop resilience, and to help us face the climate crisis that we are all heading towards.

I welcome the news from the Front Bench that the Government will be taking action on precision breeding. That is a great step forward in what we needed to see. There is an incredible opportunity in the heart of South Norfolk to transform our food security and to support farmers on the frontline who are dealing with the consequences of climate change in producing more food with less impact on the environment.

As we address the challenges facing our farmers and the urgent need to secure our food supply, it is important to highlight the amazing work of the Earlham Institute. The Earlham Institute is a beacon of life sciences training and innovation, and its contributions are vital to tackling food insecurity and safeguarding our future. Its cutting-edge research is developing the latest tools and approaches to monitor and predict how diseases evolve and spread. This kind of knowledge is critical for the future of British farming, as it will allow us to anticipate and mitigate the risks that threaten our food security. The Earlham Institute's contributions go far beyond research. It is also a hub for training the next generation of scientists and ensuring that Britain remains at the forefront of life sciences and agricultural innovation. I am immensely proud to represent the constituency that is home to such important institutions. The Earlham Institute is doing the hard work necessary to safeguard our food security and supply.

Faced with the challenges of water security—sadly, I note that that was missing from the Opposition's motion—farmers tell me when I meet them that there is a huge barrier in the way of their collecting the water that they need and building the reservoirs that they want on their land because of action taken by the Environment Agency. Why on earth should we stand in the way of farmers who want to protect their land from drought, while also protecting local areas from flood risk, by capturing water to use at a lower cost than tapping into the mains water that we all need? I hope that my Front-Bench colleagues will work with me to secure planning reform on this issue, so that we can build more reservoirs on farming land to help with food security.

Farmers have also raised concerns with me about biodiversity net-gain regulations, which are currently slowing down our progress on food production. I recently visited Fischer Farms, just over the border, and it is a great step forward. I hope that we can adopt these measures.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call David Chadwick to make his maiden speech.

6.5 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I stand here as the first ever MP for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe. It is the largest constituency in England and Wales, and I therefore have a foot in two worlds—one in rural mid-Wales and the other in the Swansea valley. I wish to pay tribute to my predecessors, Fay Jones and Christina Rees, for their commitment to Welsh politics and their service to these communities.

The north of the constituency starts in the uplands of Radnorshire, a historical county featuring the market towns of Knighton, Rhayader—the outdoors capital of Wales—and Presteigne. Our constituency has three spa towns: Llandrindod Wells, Builth Wells and Llanwrtyd

Wells. Builth Wells, of course, is where the Royal Welsh show, Europe's largest agricultural gathering, takes place each summer.

At the centre of the constituency is my handsome, historical hometown of Brecon, which is home to the Army in Wales and a thriving Nepalese community. The world book town of Hay-on-Wye shows that a small rural town can be a world leader, as does Britain's best high street in Crickhowell, not forgetting the horticultural talents on display in Talgarth. At the head of the Swansea valley is Ystradgynlais, the birthplace of the British iron industry, and Pontardawe, where the roof of the White House was made.

This enormous constituency was not created by popular demand but was welded together following the previous Government's decision to cut the number of Welsh constituencies by a fifth. Wales responded by cutting the number of Welsh Conservative MPs to zero. Welsh farmers will not forget the trade deals that the previous Government signed with New Zealand and Australia. Wales wants a fairer deal from this Parliament.

Yesterday, we debated the challenges facing the NHS in England. Many of my constituents travel to England for NHS treatment, and I have tried healthcare systems across the world. I was run over by a car in the Netherlands and was paralysed by Guillain-Barré syndrome in Argentina—it was a tough couple of years—so I have seen how high-quality healthcare changes lives and saves lives.

I am sorry to say that the Welsh NHS is in dire straits. Its outcomes are worse than those in England, yet no equivalent review is taking place in Wales. Instead, the Welsh Government are forcing health boards to make heavy budget cuts. They are proposing to cut the opening hours of minor injuries units at hospitals in Brecon, Llandrindod Wells and Ystradgynlais, forcing local residents to travel long distances, relying on roads that are often closed or bus journeys that can take a whole day. People living in rural areas should not have to pay a rural penalty to access healthcare. Indeed, rural areas can help to tackle the healthcare crisis we face.

Let us take obesity, for example. We can lighten the load on our NHS by bettering the nation's diet. If we recognised the true value of good food and local produce, we would appreciate the public health and environmental benefits from money spent on the agriculture budget. The Government must be aware of the agriculture budget's massive multiplier effect for the rural economy, and they should give farmers the stability and funding they need.

Food security is a major concern. Some 61% of farmers are considering giving up, and the farming workforce is dwindling. Our farmers and growers produce world-class produce, battling harsh weather and constantly changing market conditions. These market conditions are often set by the retail giants, and I know that my predecessor, Roger Williams, fought to level the relationship between retailers and farmers by strengthening the Groceries Code Adjudicator. It is a shame that the Conservatives did not do more to strengthen that code during their time in office. I will carry on that fight.

During the past week, we have seen an important campaign by Riverford, holding supermarkets to account for misleading shoppers with fake farm brands and driving Britain's family farms to the brink. That is just

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one example of the challenges that farmers face. We need to champion local food systems, not imports. Let us support the movement towards rebuilding local supply chains, driven by a new generation of rural entrepreneurs, who are opening restaurants, building brands, bringing back jobs and remaking our high streets.

That spirit of innovation still flourishes in Wales. We once had the lead in industrial sciences. We were the world's first industrial nation, but now Wales is £10,000 a head poorer than England, and still shedding jobs. For both of my grandfathers, the steel industry was the first rung on the career ladder. One of them climbed the ladders at Port Talbot, but now those ladders have been taken away. Those jobs must be replaced for the families in my constituency who are now facing unemployment before Christmas.

If this Government want to back Welsh industry and Welsh jobs, they can show it by backing the global centre for rail excellence in Onllwyn. Great Britain has no all-purpose testing centre for railway vehicles and infrastructure, but a former mine has been repurposed to be that facility. Give us the tools and we will get on with it, for we still know how to dig ourselves out of a hole in Wales.

We are a creative people. We love music, words and singing. We love reading about other people, which is why my constituency sustains three local newspapers—*The Brecon and Radnor Express*, *The County Times* and *The Mid Wales Journal*—as well as the *Ponty Mag*, *The Beacon* and the *Rhosgoch Gossip*.

Finally, I thank my partner, Gemma, whose bravery and resourcefulness continue to inspire me; my son, William; and our next soon-to-be-born child, who does not have a name yet. I am opting for Enzo, so I would love the House's support for that. I dedicate my work here to fighting for the future they deserve.

6.11 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) on such an impassioned maiden speech, and I wish him the best of luck in his naming battles, as they develop.

I have become very fond of saying that I am the MP for the largest constituency in England, where I am conscious that agricultural and rural communities have a significant stake. They make a significant contribution to the local economy. If the farms were taken out of the constituency, it would not just be the economy that is ruined; the landscape and tourism would also be ruined, and countless communities that have existed for centuries would be undermined.

Unfortunately, our rural communities are in the midst of a crisis, including a depopulation crisis. Young people cannot find the jobs and homes that allow them to afford to remain where they grew up, and therefore we have an ageing population. Hospitality businesses are unable to continue to grow and are forced to close their doors. That is directly linked to the crisis in our farming communities, because they are often the customers for those businesses.

Over the weekend I was privileged to visit Goodfellow Farming in Longwitton, on the eastern border of my constituency. I spoke to the owner about the shape of

British farming and the very real crisis we have inherited from the Conservatives. The shadow farming Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), is a former Northumberland county councillor. He was very gracious in welcoming three new Labour Members for the area to this place, and I thank him for his friendliness and candour in doing so. I just complimented him on the beauty of the Alnwick ward, where I look forward to campaigning in the local elections that are coming up.

The people of the Hexham constituency voted for Labour for the first time ever at the last election because they recognise the crises we face. I say that not to make a hackneyed political point, but to make a real point about the work that I intend to do, as a new Member in the House, to shine a light on the depopulation crisis we face. I gently remind shadow Ministers on the Opposition Front Bench that we know that we have inherited a very broken farming system. I was delighted to welcome my right hon. Friend the now Secretary of State to my constituency during the general election campaign to meet local farmers. I am confident that this Government and this Front-Bench team are listening to them and that we can work to drive up standards in our farming and secure generational farms for the future. Ultimately, a Department that managed to underspend by £300 million is not one that was functioning properly under the previous Government. I say that not to be overtly political, but simply to emphasise that we need a Government who work in the interests of communities up and down the Tyne valley and from the County Durham border up to the Scottish border.

6.14 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is an honour to follow my constituency neighbour across the border, the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris).

Today's debate is on a topic that interests me greatly as the son of a farmer, and also as a proud MP for a rural constituency where farmers, land managers and workers in the rural economy deliver some of the finest produce anywhere in the United Kingdom. We have so many outstanding farmers and food producers in the Scottish Borders it is impossible to name even half of them.

We should be immensely proud of the food and drink produced here on our doorstep, but too often the concerns and the needs of farmers are taken for granted. They are overlooked by the SNP Government at Holyrood and now they seem to be ignored by the Labour Government here at Westminster. Politicians in those parties talk freely of the need for food security, but they do not seem to understand who delivers that food security. They speak of the need for great and high-quality produce without properly recognising the hard work that goes into producing it. They talk of the benefits of reaching net zero targets by managing land effectively and reducing the air miles for food, but do not give enough credit to the farmers who are achieving that.

If Members wonder what I mean, they should look no further than this Labour Government. The Labour party manifesto for the recent general election made no mention of its plan for funding for farming.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I know that many farmers in my constituency of Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge are deeply worried about some of the talk about changes to the tax regime, not just to inheritance tax, but to capital gains tax, and how that will impact the future viability of their business and the ability for farms to be farmed by families.

John Lamont: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point about both the funding arrangements and the tax changes that have been speculated about in the press.

Farmers are in the dark about what comes next. There may be budget cuts and there may be financial pain, but they do not really know. The Government should be listening to NFU Scotland, which recently submitted a detailed budget submission to the United Kingdom Government. Let me put on record what that submission said. It underlined the need for an increased, multi-annual, ringfenced agriculture and rural economy funding commitment in the Budget. Labour must also pay attention to the warning from NFU Scotland that, without adequate funding from the UK Government, the majority of farmers in Scotland would cease to be viable.

This Labour Government cannot do to farmers what they have done to pensioners by cutting their winter fuel payment. The change they promised in the election is already looking hollow to the Scottish and British public. If they go on to cut farmers' funding, that will reveal again that Labour is not on the side of businesses and workers. It will show that all its priorities are wrong. I do hope that it will see sense, listen to our farmers and do the right thing.

6.18 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): In addressing food security, I wish to begin with food insecurity. Both families and farmers across the UK have seen increasing food and energy bills because of the chop and change policies of the previous Government. More than 12,000 farmers and agri-businesses have been forced out of business since 2010 due to Tory neglect. Furthermore, repeated sell-out trade deals—we have heard about the botched Brexit deal—have lumbered farming with the lowest profitability of any sector in the economy. It is important to my constituents in Bathgate and Linlithgow, and to all our constituents, that we have a stable and secure supply of food. We need to see earnings returned to farmers as profit, not spent on costly energy bills.

For households across the country, the cost of energy has undermined personal food security. Farming is exposed to skyrocketing energy prices and the soaring cost of animal feed and fertiliser, which is up 44% compared with 2019.

In recent months, we have heard from some Opposition Members that solar energy farms are a risk to our food security. I am very glad that we heard mention of the NFU president—whose ears must be burning today—because he called for balance when criticisms are made of where and when land is taken out of production. Perhaps the Conservatives could take note of that constructive approach. The farming community has shown great initiative and led on solar energy—something that Opposition Members have failed to recognise.

NFU Scotland has struck a new deal with a major solar energy company, affirming that the land use required for new solar initiatives would have a marginal impact on farming. That deal involves farmers, who know the land best, in identifying sites for development and earnings from that partnership, and I believe that the House should welcome such commitment to net zero and to collaborative working. As a result of cutting energy costs and delivering more revenue directly to farmers, such working offers the opportunity for a positive future between the farming community and renewable energies.

For farmers it is not just about energy costs, but about market access and trade, as we have heard; and delivering for farmers does not just mean fixing the problems of previous botched trade deals. I welcome the Government's quick action to ensure that our farmers get a fair deal, meaning lowered energy costs and increased renewable energy sources, and ensuring that households, including farmers, have the means and the ability to put food on the table.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Luke Taylor to make his maiden speech.

6.21 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity. It is a pleasure to follow the fine speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick), whose recollection of the three newspapers in his constituency is incredibly impressive—I encourage him to tell us all about his achievements in those pages over the next few years; from the hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby), who described Dovedale and Chatsworth House, which I remember fondly from holidays in my youth and from playing rugby in Matlock and Ashbourne; and from my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), whose description of farming as standing in the fields in all sorts of weathers made me recall my experiences of playing rugby in the Derbyshire dales all those years ago.

I do not exaggerate when I say that it is the honour of my life to serve as the Member of Parliament for Sutton and Cheam. I am so grateful to the thousands of residents who put their trust in me just a few months ago. I promise them: I will always do my very best for you and our communities, from Sutton to Worcester Park, Cheam to Belmont and everywhere in between. I hope I am already going some way to repaying the trust they have put in me by voting to end the two-child benefit cap, voting to save the winter fuel payment, and already helping hundreds of them with issues and concerns through my office. To the people who did not vote for me, or did not vote at all, who have lost all faith in politics and its servants, please allow me the opportunity to restore some of that trust.

To my predecessor, Paul Scully, I say thank you for his nine years of service to Sutton and Cheam. Politically, we agreed on very little, but I know he did what he thought was best for our residents. I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to my Liberal Democrat predecessor Paul Burstow, who served for 18 years and whose name is still fondly remembered by so many residents on the doorstep. And to my loved ones—my wife and children, my mum and dad—I say that I would not be here without your support.

[*Luke Taylor*]

As the Father of the House may remember, my dad stood against him in Gainsborough in 1992 and '97. Therefore I must thank him, too, for helping to ensure that I am the first member of my family to find themselves in this place, rather than my old man.

Sutton and Cheam is small, but it is perfectly formed. It is the smallest of all 72 Liberal Democrat constituencies. Our boundaries have remained largely unchanged for 80 years, which alone must prove that Sutton and Cheam is the greatest constituency in the country. They got it right in 1945 and they have not felt the need to change it ever since.

I could give Members a guided tour of our beautiful constituency but, for me, it is the people who make up our community and make Sutton and Cheam what it is. We have recyclers, repairers and reusers improving sustainability and protecting our planet. We have litter pickers, bulb planters and neighbourhood watchers making our area safer, cleaner and better to live in. We have Sutton fans, Dons fans, Palace fans, Chelsea fans and even the odd long-suffering Spurs supporter. We have had recent arrivals of Hongkongers, Ukrainians and Afghans who have come to Sutton to find a new home. We have long-established communities of Tamils, Ahmadiyyas, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. We have Anglicans and atheists, Catholics and Methodists—all building the unique mosaic of our communities.

Our local football team, Sutton United FC, play at Gander Green Lane, in my council ward, where their fight to rejoin the football league continues. A recent point apiece from Eastleigh and Yeovil—other Lib Dem constituencies—will help us get there, but the generous people of Woking gave us three points only two weeks ago, so I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for that. With its fantastic community outreach work, the club proves every year the value of our local football clubs. In politics and football, the people of Sutton know that their colour truly is amber. That is why they have had a Liberal Democrat-run council for almost 40 years—our longest-running local administration in the country.

As many of my colleagues will know, however, there is only so much that councils and councillors can do to tackle the biggest problems that Governments have failed to solve for years. That is why I decided to run for election to this House: to tackle the national issues that people in my constituency face.

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to fix things. I went from building Lego as a child to rebuilding gearboxes as a teenager. I attended my local comprehensive school in rural Lincolnshire, and many of my friends and classmates growing up were involved in the critical work that farmers do to keep food on our tables and act as stewards for our environment—vital tasks that this debate correctly highlights. At school, I served as a prefect, alongside the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore). Our political paths have diverged since we last worked together—more than 20 years ago, arranging the De Aston school sixth-form leavers' ball—but I am proud that we are part of the largest cohort of state-educated MPs in history.

My passion for fixing things led me to London and to Imperial College, where I studied engineering, which led to many years working in the transport industry

around the world, but there is so much more that needs fixing in our country than planes, trains and automobiles. Raising my family in Sutton and Cheam with my wonderful wife, I have seen at first hand the broken cogs and blown fuses across our public services, from the NHS and social care to education and policing.

In today's Britain, the social contract has been broken. In our politics, cynicism and self-interest have replaced service and duty, and many feel that it is simply no longer true that if they work hard and play by the rules, they will enjoy the security and opportunity that everyone deserves. A fair deal no longer exists between the British state and the people, and that is evident across every policy area. As an engineer, I feel confident in saying that the very foundations of our country are broken. It is time that we picked up our tools to fix them.

As the Liberal Democrat Front-Bench spokesperson for our capital, I will hold the Government to account for all Londoners—fixing London's creaking infrastructure and never-ending housing crisis, and pushing for reform of and proper funding for the Met. If people have been listening to the Lib Dems for the last few years, they will know exactly what the River Thames is full of.

There is much to be said on all those topics, but I will finish by highlighting one that is dear to me and my constituents: hospices. One of the first emails I received after being elected was from our local hospice, St Raph's, which is searching for help to stop £1 million-worth of funding cuts that would see staff made redundant and clinical services slashed. The cuts would put Sutton's GPs, hospitals and district nurses under huge and unmanageable pressure, and leave families abandoned, unsupported and in genuine distress at a time when they need kindness and support the most. For patients, the cuts could tragically hasten their passing and deny them their dignity.

In this Parliament, we have an opportunity to build a better plan, so that people have somewhere to spend their final days in the comfort and care that we all deserve as human beings. I look forward to working with Members from across the House. If they will pick up their tools with this engineer, who knows a thing or two about fixing things, together we can fix our country, restore trust and deliver hope.

6.29 pm

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): May I start by paying my respects to the resident who died in my constituency during the recent floods? I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with her family. I thank the Secretary of State for leaving the Labour conference early to visit Northamptonshire and ensure that we had the support that we needed. Over 1,000 Northampton South residents were evacuated from their homes.

I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor). I send my commiserations to his father on his election losses, but I am sure that he is very proud to see his son sitting on these green Benches.

Unfortunately, I cannot support the Opposition's motion. I believe that we should support all possible funding opportunities for our farmers, but the motion seeks to commit the Government to underfunded—and in some cases imaginary—policies proposed in May 2024 by the previous Prime Minister. Those policies have

contributed to the £22-billion black hole that the Labour party has inherited. They were political gestures and not a real offer to the UK farming community. People saw through that: 61% of people told *Farmers Weekly* that they trusted a Labour Government, whereas only 6% trusted the Conservatives.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that so many Labour MPs have a farming background, as I do, and that so many rural seats are represented by Labour, makes it clear that we are now the true champions of our farming community?

Mike Reader: It is very clear that Labour is on the side of our farming and agricultural sector. I stand here as the hopeful chair of the all-party parliamentary group for food. I am sure that those who are concerned about food security will join us at our inaugural general meeting very shortly. I am also a member of the NFU's food and farming fellowship. It is clear that Labour Members take this issue seriously, and we are dedicating time to ensure that, unlike the previous Government, we work with farmers, not against them.

We are also working across industry. The motion focuses solely on farming, but in order to deliver food security, there must be a cross-sector approach, as I am sure everyone in the House recognises. The approach should include food manufacturing, logistics, retail and the hospitality chain. The whole agrifood ecosystem delivers a gross value added of £147 billion to our economy, including £15 billion through our farming sector, and a whopping £70 billion through our manufacturing, distribution and wholesale sector in food and retail. We want to improve food security in the UK, which is already classified as "broadly stable" by DEFRA.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): On the issue of stability, I remind my hon. Friend of the opening lines of Labour's 2010 food and farming strategy:

"We can't carry on just as we are."

Farmers I have met in my constituency would make exactly the same claim now, given the record of the last Conservative Government, who scrapped Labour's food plan in 2010. Does he agree that if we are to invest in food and farming, and to bring jobs and prosperity to rural and urban constituencies, we must back Labour's new deal for farmers, invest in food and farming jobs, and put a real plan for food security back on the table?

Mike Reader: I could not agree more, and could not have said it better myself. However, a holistic approach must be taken across the whole ecosystem to subsidies, funding and investment.

One reason why I chose to speak today is that food security is important to me and my constituents. A recent study found that nearly 10% of people in Northampton struggle to access food, and that gets worse in rural Northamptonshire, as I am sure my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool), recognises. Northamptonshire Action with Communities in Rural England found that 45% of residents in rural Northamptonshire worried about food

prices, and in 22% of families with children, adults missed meals in order to feed their kids. That is simply not good enough.

I commend the Opposition for supporting the Government's efforts to improve food security, but the motion is not the way to do that. We must work together, collaboratively and across parties, to support the agrifood industry, and I hope that the Opposition will endeavour to do so after their motion is defeated.

6.34 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): We in this country have the best farmers. They produce food to the highest animal welfare standards, and we should be very proud of them. Food security is a key part of national security, and I urge the Government to look at the EFRA Committee's report on food security from the last Parliament. The previous Government took up the recommendation for an annual food security report, and I urge the Government to continue with that. They must protect the farming budget, not cut it, and must protect land, not bulldoze it for solar. We have to make sure that solar goes in the right places: on industrial buildings, brownfield land and rooftops, not on prime food-producing land. We must also protect inputs. In the past few years, we have lost the ability to produce a lot of fertiliser in the United Kingdom. We need to look at that as a matter of resilience.

Biosecurity is a key part of national security. As we have heard, we have a lot of cases of bluetongue in the south and east of England; we know what happened in the past couple of years with avian influenza; and we have African swine fever advancing up the continent. The Government must act, and they must support the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which is in urgent need of full redevelopment. The EFRA Committee has called for that redevelopment, and I know that DEFRA wants it, so I urge Ministers to make the case to the Treasury for it to be funded in full.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend guested on the Public Accounts Committee last year, when we had a full inquiry on this issue. There is a real need for proper capital investment, because the biosecurity of the nation is at risk if we do not have properly biosecure laboratories.

Dr Hudson: I thank my hon. Friend the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee for that intervention. It is so important that the Government listen to this request and fund the redevelopment of the APHA in full.

My journey into politics started in 2001 with the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. I know what the implications are—I saw sights then that I never want to see again in my lifetime—and we have seen what happens when biosecurity breaks down. That brings me to mental health, which has been touched on.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way on the point of farmers' mental health. As my constituency neighbour, will he join me in championing YANA—You Are Not Alone—a local charity that is now stretching into Essex, and supports the mental health of farmers and rural workers?

Dr Hudson: I would be happy to champion YANA, the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, Yellow Wellies, and all the other institutions and charities that

[Dr Hudson]

support mental health. I urge the Government to look at the EFRA Committee's report last year on rural mental health, which touches on many of these issues and makes key recommendations. We need to support our farming communities when serious things happen, such as flooding or disease outbreaks. When something more chronic happens—say, when farms get a positive result during periodic tuberculosis testing—we need to make sure that the mental health of farmers, vets, and everyone else is supported. That is so important.

We have talked about flooding. People in rural and urban communities in flood risk areas have not only the trauma of being flooded, but the anxiety of worrying about being flooded. Ministers will be called out in their wellies in floods, but communities need to be supported when the waters go down and the blue lights leave—that is another key recommendation of our report. We need to protect the farming budget and make sure that the money goes out through the farming recovery fund to support flooded communities.

We can help our farming and food-producing communities. We encourage people to buy British, and I pay tribute to the NFU and to my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for the Buy British campaign that all the British supermarkets have signed up to. We need to support our local communities by eating local and buying local. That is so good for local communities, and it is also good for the animals: it reduces distance and time to slaughter, and food miles.

George Freeman: As a distinguished vet, my hon. Friend is making a powerful case on welfare standards. Does he agree that one of the great prizes of British agriculture is that it sets such high welfare standards, and that one of the good things the last Government did was pass legislation on transporting animals, setting ever higher standards for UK farmers?

Dr Hudson: Absolutely; that was a key Bill. Animal welfare unites us in humanity across this House, and I urge us to work across parties on it. As I have said, farmers in this country produce to the highest animal welfare standards, and we should be proud of that and protect them.

Markus Campbell-Savours: My understanding is that the 2019 Conservative party manifesto said:

“When we leave the EU, we will be able to encourage the public sector to ‘Buy British’ to support our farmers and reduce environmental costs.”

What went wrong?

Dr Hudson: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

I finish by saying that food security is national security, biosecurity is national security, and we must protect both.

6.40 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): My grandad was a tenant dairy farmer, and rural communities such as mine feel let down by the Conservative party. I spoke earlier about a close family friend who

took his life following a farm inspection. Many farmers who had been let down and forced out of producing food were my clients when I practised as a high-street solicitor in North Warwickshire. They could have done with the £300 million that the Conservative party failed to allocate to the support of rural farmers. They needed a better inspection regime that worked for them and for consumers. I was inspired recently when visiting Aldi, which has its national headquarters in my constituency, because it is passionate about British food and forming good relationships with local farmers.

The agriculture and food industry sector contributes £148 billion to the economy, and provides 4.2 million jobs in the UK, including many jobs in my constituency. However, the Conservative party created a cost of living crisis that forced families to buy less fresh food, particularly vegetables, because they could not afford it. That squeezed our local farmers further. Because the last Government did not prioritise energy or food security, farmers were crippled by escalating energy prices, and animal feed and fertiliser prices. The last Government's chop-and-change approach to rolling out environmental land management schemes left farmers reeling with uncertainty, and it is no wonder that they and their representatives are looking to this Government for much-needed reassurance. We need to reassure our farmers and give them the confidence to invest for the future. We need to make sure that they know that this Government have their back.

Rural and freight crime in my constituency, like many others, has become intolerable. The Conservative party left rural criminals to roam free, with crime in rural areas spiralling out of control. Farmers are losing valuable equipment essential to the running of their businesses, and to add insult to injury, they are often the ones left to clear up fly-tipping. I am glad to be part of a party and a Government taking rural crime seriously with a cross-Government rural crime strategy that is the first of its kind. This strategy will crack down on issues such as fly-tipping and antisocial behaviour that affect rural communities such as mine.

I am looking forward—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. The time is up, I am afraid.

6.43 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I rise to proudly voice my support for the 27,000 farming families across Northern Ireland who, day in and day out, work tirelessly to help feed our nation. I also stand for the 100,000 people employed in the agrifood sector directly or indirectly, and the 10 million people across the UK who consume Northern Ireland's top-quality produce on a daily basis.

We DUP Members take great pride in the fact that Northern Ireland sets a high bar for food quality, animal welfare and environmental standards. Our farms are committed to sustainable practices, ensuring that food is produced responsibly and with respect for our landscapes and ecosystems. Despite the efforts of those who unfairly criticise our farming community and treat them as scapegoats for climate change, our farmers should be seen as partners, not problems. They are already working with some of the most rigorous environmental regulations, and should be recognised for their role in meeting climate targets across the UK.

Farmers are and always have been the best custodians of our land. They must be enshrined in UK policy, given a seat at the table in key discussions and supported financially, so that they can continue their vital work.

However, not all is well in the industry. Northern Ireland is grappling with the daily impacts of the protocol and the Windsor framework, which have created significant uncertainty. Our agri-industry is subject to more than 120 EU laws over which we have no democratic say, and our agriculture sector faces unnecessary trade barriers and supply chain issues that complicate the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Jim Allister: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the most pernicious impacts of the protocol is that in a few months, the European Union will stop the veterinary medicines that are so vital to the health of animals in Northern Ireland coming over from Great Britain, because the EU insists that its veterinary agency should control these matters?

Carla Lockhart: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member. The growing uncertainty over the availability of veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland because of the protocol poses a grave threat to the agri-food sector and animal welfare. If a permanent solution is not reached now, Northern Ireland risks losing access to more than 1,700 vital veterinary products, around 51% of its current medicine portfolio, as per the British Veterinary Association's advice. That will have devastating consequences, not only for farmers and their livestock, but for consumers and companion animals such as cats, dogs and horses. Without those essential medicines, animal health and disease control will be severely compromised, leaving our agricultural sector, and the broader public, exposed to significant risks. This is a 2024 problem, not a 2025 problem, and it needs a fix.

We also have the unsatisfactory situation around the transport of second-hand farm machinery from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, due to requirements such as a phytosanitary certificate just because there might be soil on the wheels. We had the eleventh-hour U-turn on the UK-wide "not for EU" labelling policy, which demonstrated no sign of a willingness to mitigate the Irish sea border—an outrageous move on the part of the Government, but not surprising given the continued bending to the EU and big business. This Government have demonstrated their complete disregard for Northern Ireland in that regard. We also have ongoing issues around potatoes and plants coming from Scotland to Northern Ireland—the list goes on. Those issues are far from resolved and need to be addressed.

On top of those difficulties, our farming community is dealing with the rising cost of living, rising energy prices and volatile farmgate prices. I call on the Government to ensure that funding for agriculture in Northern Ireland is adjusted in line with inflation, at around £389 million. Our farmers need certainty, and that means a ring-fenced support package that extends beyond short-term budget cycles, ideally for at least 10 years. In conclusion, the message is clear: no farmers, no food. They need our support.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I will be calling the Front-Bench speakers at 6.50 pm, so Chris Hinchliff is the last voice from the Back Benches.

6.47 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I do not doubt the motivation of Opposition Members, but the inescapable fact is that the Conservative party is ideologically incapable of putting forward real solutions to bolster our national food security. I share some of the concerns about the use of high-quality farmland for ground-mounted solar schemes, which is an ongoing issue in North East Hertfordshire, and we need a land use framework to give strategic direction to where we generate the solar energy that we need, instead of allowing a chaotic proliferation of profit-driven schemes wherever grid capacity, which the Conservative party failed to sort out, allows.

Under the previous Government, just 5% of houses had installed rooftop solar, and neither did they take any of the obvious steps to mandate solar panels on new build houses or car parks. For 14 years, they allowed that situation to develop unchecked, and it will be this Labour Government who deliver the land use strategy that we need to provide a framework to ensure that we are making the best possible use of our finite land.

On other challenges, it is estimated that one third of UK soils are degraded, yet the previous Government ditched the planned soil health action plan for England. On biodiversity, the previous Conservative Government authorised the use of harmful pesticides, despite knowing that that would have a devastating impact on pollinators. On new entrants, it is well known that the average age of farmers is too high, yet when it was in power the Conservative party's austerity measures led to the closure of 15,000 acres of county farms estate, which is crucial for getting younger people into a farming career and contributing to national food security.

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

6.49 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Food security is national security, and in a time of rising global uncertainty, we must support the British farmer and the British food and drink sector to deliver high-quality domestic food for our economy and our national security. That means providing farmers and growers with the certainty they deserve.

Unfortunately, in recent weeks and over the course of this debate, we have seen what happens when a Member for one of the least rural constituencies in the country is put in charge of the countryside. Some £50 million of the farming recovery fund is not yet paid out. Some £75 million ring-fenced for internal drainage boards has not yet been distributed. There is no commitment on the £220 million for farm innovation and productivity grants. There are reports that the farming budget is about to be slashed, leaving uncertainty and farmers facing a cliff edge.

While the first assault of this Labour Government has been on pensioners right across the country, I fear that farmers are next on their hit list. The Secretary of

[Robbie Moore]

State has had the chance in this debate to stand up for farmers and to confirm that the farming budget and other schemes will be protected. Instead, he seems to have already surrendered to the Chancellor, suggesting a cut of £100 million. I fear that it will be much more.

As we know, Labour could only bring itself to include 87 words in its manifesto on its plan for farmers, which stands in contrast to our Conservative Government's commitment to food security and our rural sector by putting food at the centre of policymaking. We introduced the food security index and an annual food security report, and we set out plans to introduce legally binding targets to enhance our food security. We established the farm to fork summit, held at Downing Street, bringing together key stakeholders from across the food and farming sector. That was all to ensure that the Government's Departments were aligned on this agenda. We were willing to look farmers in the eye, to engage directly with the whole agricultural sector and to make sure that its priorities were heard across the whole of Government. I ask the Minister: why is the Prime Minister not guaranteeing the same level of engagement and reporting?

I congratulate the new Members who gave their maiden speeches: the hon. Members for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby), for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) and for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick), as well as my friend, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), with whom I went to our local comprehensive school in Lincolnshire. I look up to the Gallery and I can see not only his mother but my secondary school teacher looking down at me. I welcome Mrs Taylor to the House. I am sure she will be proud of her son, who has got a seat on these Benches.

We have all collectively agreed in our speeches on the need for certainty right now for our farmers. At a time when farmers need to plan, Labour is offering them a farming manifesto that could be placed on a postcard. That is exactly why we have had to secure this debate today, bringing Ministers from the Department to the Chamber, all with the best interests of giving our new Labour Government the best chance to stand up for our farmers. In the past 100 days in office, we have seen that the Secretary of State is too weak to stand up for our farmers and too weak to even stand up for his own Department against the Chancellor's red pen.

As has been said, we have experienced the wettest 18 months on record. That cannot go unanswered, and thousands of farmers across the country are being crippled by crop losses and damage to their fields. In fact, farmers are already fearing for their second year without any crop at all. The £50 million pledged by the last Conservative Government was designed specifically to support farmers hit by flooding, and it was ready to go when we left office. Farmers on the ground, however, say that they have not seen a penny of it. Where is that money? Why has it not been delivered to the farmers who desperately need it?

The previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), and I also pledged £75 million for internal drainage boards to give them the investment they needed to protect the worst hit agricultural land from flooding. Again, some small amounts have been released, but the

vast majority of the funds have not been released by the Department. Why is that? We know that the Labour party's grasp on the public finances is tenuous at best, but this is vital money for our farmers, with businesses on the brink of collapse. Do Ministers realise that for every day that goes by without that support, another farmer gets closer to shutting up shop?

Labour has a choice in the debate and in bringing forward the Budget this month. My advice to the Secretary of State is to pick up the phone, speak to the Chancellor, back British farming, fight for the farming budget in full and deliver for farmers up and down the country.

6.55 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I am grateful to have the opportunity to close the debate. The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) spoke for so long that it will not be possible to answer many of the questions he posed, but I am grateful to have the opportunity to show my gratitude and support to farmers working hard to feed the nation and protect our environment up and down the country.

We have heard some excellent first speeches from new Members today, and I want to pay tribute to them. From my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby), we heard about the housing crisis and about the beauty of the constituency—from toe wrestling to Chatsworth. From the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), we also heard about a beautiful constituency, as well as about the glorious breakfasts available in Cirencester and a eulogy to the Thames. Importantly, she made the point about young new entrants being able to enter farming, which is a passion of mine and something that we will be pursuing with vigour.

We heard from the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) about the beautiful spa towns of his constituency, as well as the health issues that he has faced and health systems. I very much recognise the points that he made. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) talked about his internationally diverse community with real passion.

We also had excellent speeches from a range of people. My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) talked about water scarcity. My hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) talked about the need for reservoirs. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) talked about depopulation and the need to get young people into farming. My hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) endorsed the sensible call from the president of the National Farmers Union for balance in our attitude to solar farms.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) talked about food hardship. We heard powerful interventions about the mental health issues and challenges facing our farmers and the challenges of rural crime, and we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) on the need for a land use framework.

I have to say that, from listening to Conservative Members, they do not seem to have grasped the level of their own failure. The Conservative Government failed farmers and rural communities. We have heard about low levels of confidence, 12,000 businesses going out of

business, and input costs and energy costs spiralling. That is why rural communities voted them out in their droves. It will be very different in the future.

We have heard the complaints about budgets for the future. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches have the experience to know how spending reviews work. They will find out in time where the money is. But, of course, given that they spent the money many times over, they know the problems that we are having to clear up. What we have heard is the need for stability in the future to overcome the economic problems that we have inherited from their failed Government.

Farmers are the backbone of rural communities, our environment and our economy, but they face multiple challenges from flooding and droughts to soaring input costs and rural crime. We need a proper long-term strategy that works. We will do away with the sticking-plaster approach that we have seen for the last few years and replace it with a new deal for farmers that genuinely will boost farmers' resilience in the face of climate change and wider external shocks.

We will work in partnership with farmers, listen to their concerns and their ideas and tackle the root causes of the long-term issues that they continue to face. Only after those discussions and considerations will it be possible to deliver the changes that farmers really want to see. In summary, that will be a long-term approach—a Labour approach. That approach will be good for farms, good for consumers, good for the environment and good for nature—frankly, a real change from the short-term, quick-fix operators now deservedly relegated to the Opposition Benches.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 187, Noes 359.

Division No. 17]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Allister, Jim	Cocking, Lewis
Amos, Mr Gideon	Coghlan, Chris
Anderson, Stuart	Collins, Victoria
Andrew, rh Stuart	Cooper, Daisy
Argar, rh Edward	Cooper, John
Atkins, rh Victoria	Costa, Alberto
Babarinde, Josh	Coutinho, rh Claire
Bacon, Gareth	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Cross, Harriet
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Dance, Adam
Barclay, rh Steve	Darling, Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter	Davey, rh Ed
Bennett, Alison	Davies, Ann
Bhatti, Saqib	Davies, Mims
Blackman, Bob	Davis, rh Sir David
Bool, Sarah	Dean, Bobby
Bowie, Andrew	Dewhurst, Charlie
Brandreth, Apha	Dillon, Mr Lee
Braverman, rh Suella	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Burghart, Alex	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Easton, Alex
Cane, Charlotte	Evans, Dr Luke
Cartledge, James	Farron, Tim
Chadwick, David	Foord, Richard
Chamberlain, Wendy	Forster, Mr Will
Chambers, Dr Danny	Fortune, Peter
Chope, Sir Christopher	Fox, Sir Ashley
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Franklin, Zöe

Freeman, George	Morello, Edward
Fuller, Richard	Morgan, Helen
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Morrison, Mr Tom
Garnier, Mark	Morrissey, Joy
George, Andrew	Morton, rh Wendy
Gibson, Sarah	Munt, Tessa
Gilmour, Rachel	Murray, Susan
Glen, rh John	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Glover, Olly	Norman, rh Jesse
Goldman, Marie	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Gordon, Tom	O'Brien, Neil
Grant, Helen	Olney, Sarah
Green, Sarah	Paul, Rebecca
Griffith, Andrew	Perteghella, Manuela
Griffiths, Alison	Philp, rh Chris
Harding, Monica	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Harris, Rebecca	Raja, Shivani
Hayes, rh Sir John	Rankin, Jack
Heylings, Pippa	Reed, David
Hinds, rh Damian	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Hoare, Simon	Robertson, Joe
Hobhouse, Wera	Robinson, rh Gavin
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Roome, Ian
Hollinrake, Kevin	Sabine, Anna
Holmes, Paul	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Huddleston, Nigel	Shannon, Jim
Hudson, Dr Neil	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Jeremy	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Hussain, Mr Adnan	Simmonds, David
Jardine, Christine	Slade, Vikki
Jarvis, Liz	Smart, Lisa
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Smith, Greg
Jenrick, rh Robert	Smith, Rebecca
Johnson, Dr Caroline	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Jones, Clive	Sollom, Ian
Jopp, Lincoln	Spencer, Dr Ben
Kearns, Alicia	Spencer, Patrick
Khan, Ayoub	Stafford, Gregory
Kohler, Mr Paul	Stephenson, Blake
Kruger, Danny	Stride, rh Mel
Lake, Ben	Stuart, rh Graham
Lam, Katie	Swann, Robin
Lamont, John	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Taylor, Luke
Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Thomas, Bradley
Lockhart, Carla	Thomas, Cameron
Lopez, Julia	Tice, Richard
MacCleary, James	Timothy, Nick
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Trott, rh Laura
Maguire, Ben	Vickers, Martin
Maguire, Helen	Vickers, Matt
Mak, Alan	Voaden, Caroline
Malthouse, rh Kit	Whately, Helen
Martin, Mike	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Mathew, Brian	Wild, James
Mayhew, Jerome	Wilkinson, Max
Maynard, Charlie	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Medi, Llinos	Wilson, Munira
van Mierlo, Freddie	Wilson, rh Sammy
Miller, Calum	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Milne, John	Wrigley, Martin
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Young, Claire
Mohamed, Iqbal	
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	
Moore, Robbie	
Moran, Layla	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Louie French and
Mike Wood

NOES

Abbott, Jack	Akehurst, Luke
Abrahams, Debbie	Alaba, Mr Bayo
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Alexander, Mr Douglas

Alexander, Heidi	Dalton, Ashley	Hughes, Claire	Mullane, Margaret
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Darlington, Emily	Hume, Alison	Murphy, Luke
Ali, Tahir	Davies, Jonathan	Huq, Dr Rupa	Murray, Chris
Amesbury, Mike	Davies, Paul	Hurley, Patrick	Murray, James
Anderson, Callum	Davies, Shaun	Hussain, Imran	Murray, Katrina
Anderson, Fleur	Davies-Jones, Alex	Ingham, Leigh	Myer, Luke
Antoniazzi, Tonia	De Cordova, Marsha	Irons, Natasha	Naish, James
Arthur, Dr Scott	Dean, Josh	Jameson, Sally	Naismith, Connor
Asato, Jess	Dearden, Kate	Jarvis, Dan	Narayan, Kanishka
Athwal, Jas	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Jermy, Terry	Nash, Pamela
Atkinson, Catherine	Dickson, Jim	Jogee, Adam	Newbury, Josh
Atkinson, Lewis	Dixon, Anna	Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Niblett, Samantha
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Dollimore, Helena	Johnson, Kim	Nichols, Charlotte
Bailey, Olivia	Doughty, Stephen	Jones, rh Darren	Norris, Alex
Baines, David	Dowd, Peter	Jones, Gerald	Norris, Dan
Baker, Alex	Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Jones, Lillian	Onn, Melanie
Baker, Richard	Eagle, Dame Angela	Jones, Louise	Opher, Dr Simon
Ballinger, Alex	Eccles, Cat	Jones, Ruth	Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Bance, Antonia	Edwards, Lauren	Josan, Gurinder	Osamor, Kate
Barker, Paula	Edwards, Sarah	Joseph, Sojan	Osborne, Kate
Barron, Lee	Efford, Clive	Juss, Warinder	Osborne, Tristan
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Egan, Damien	Kane, Chris	Owatemi, Taiwo
Baxter, Johanna	Ellis, Maya	Kane, Mike	Owen, Sarah
Beales, Danny	Elmore, Chris	Kaur, Satvir	Paffey, Darren
Beavers, Lorraine	Entwistle, Kirith	Khan, Afzal	Pakes, Andrew
Begum, Apsana	Eshalomi, Florence	Khan, Naushabah	Patrick, Matthew
Bell, Torsten	Esterson, Bill	Kinnock, Stephen	Payne, Michael
Benn, rh Hilary	Falconer, Hamish	Kirkham, Jayne	Peacock, Stephanie
Bishop, Matt	Farnsworth, Linsey	Kumar, Sonia	Pearce, Jon
Blake, Olivia	Fenton-Glynn, Josh	Kumaran, Uma	Pennycook, Matthew
Blake, Rachel	Ferguson, Mark	Kyrke-Smith, Laura	Perkins, Mr Toby
Bloore, Chris	Ferguson, Patricia	Lamb, Peter	Phillips, Jess
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Fleet, Natalie	Lavery, Ian	Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Bonavia, Kevin	Foody, Emma	Law, Noah	Pitcher, Lee
Botterill, Jade	Fookes, Catherine	Leadbeater, Kim	Platt, Jo
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Foster, Mr Paul	Leishman, Brian	Pollard, Luke
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Foxcroft, Vicky	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Powell, Joe
Brickell, Phil	Foy, Mary Kelly	Lewin, Andrew	Powell, rh Lucy
Bryant, Chris	Francis, Daniel	Lewis, Clive	Poynton, Gregor
Buckley, Julia	Frith, Mr James	MacAlister, Josh	Prinsley, Peter
Burgon, Richard	Furniss, Gill	Macdonald, Alice	Quigley, Mr Richard
Burke, Maureen	Gardiner, Barry	MacNae, Andy	Race, Steve
Burton-Sampson, David	Gardner, Dr Allison	Malhotra, Seema	Rand, Mr Connor
Cadbury, Ruth	Gelder, Anna	Martin, Amanda	Ranger, Andrew
Caliskan, Nesil	Gemmell, Alan	Maskell, Rachael	Rayner, rh Angela
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	German, Gill	Mayer, Alex	Reader, Mike
Campbell, Irene	Gilbert, Tracy	McAllister, Douglas	Reed, rh Steve
Campbell, Juliet	Gill, Preet Kaur	McCluskey, Martin	Reeves, Ellie
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Gittins, Becky	McDonagh, Dame Siobhain	Reid, Joani
Carden, Dan	Glindon, Mary	McDonald, Andy	Rhodes, Martin
Carling, Sam	Goldsborough, Ben	McDonald, Chris	Richards, Jake
Carns, Al	Gosling, Jodie	McDonnell, rh John	Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos	Gould, Georgia	McDougall, Blair	Rigby, Lucy
Charters, Mr Luke	Grady, John	McEvoy, Lola	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Clark, Feryal	Greenwood, Lilian	McFadden, rh Pat	Robertson, Dave
Coleman, Ben	Griffith, Dame Nia	McIntyre, Alex	Roca, Tim
Collier, Jacob	Gwynne, Andrew	McKee, Gordon	Rodda, Matt
Collinge, Lizzi	Hack, Amanda	McKenna, Kevin	Rushworth, Sam
Conlon, Liam	Hall, Sarah	McKinnell, Catherine	Russell, Mrs Sarah
Coombes, Sarah	Hamilton, Fabian	McMahon, Jim	Rutland, Tom
Cooper, Andrew	Hamilton, Paulette	McMorrin, Anna	Ryan, Oliver
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Hardy, Emma	McNally, Frank	Sackman, Sarah
Costigan, Deirdre	Hatton, Lloyd	McNeill, Kirsty	Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Cox, Pam	Hayes, Helen	Midgley, Anneliese	Sewards, Mr Mark
Coyle, Neil	Hayes, Tom	Minns, Ms Julie	Shah, Naz
Craft, Jen	Hazelgrove, Claire	Mishra, Navendu	Shanker, Baggay
Creagh, Mary	Hendrick, Sir Mark	Mohamed, Abtislam	Shanks, Michael
Creasy, Ms Stella	Hillier, Dame Meg	Moon, Perran	Siddiq, Tulip
Curtis, Chris	Hinchliff, Chris	Morden, Jessica	Simons, Josh
Daby, Janet	Hinder, Jonathan	Morgan, Stephen	Slaughter, Andy
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Morris, Grahame	Slinger, John
	Hopkins, Rachel	Morris, Joe	Smith, Cat

Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt

Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Keir Mather and
Gen Kitchen

Question accordingly negated.

PETITION

The Darwin Oak

7.14 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): This petition mirrors the one that I delivered to Downing Street yesterday, with 108,000 signatures. It seeks to protect the Darwin oak, a veteran tree which is 550 years old, at Shelton Rough, outside Shrewsbury, in a green space where Charles Darwin himself played frequently as a child. It is one of hundreds of trees that are threatened with felling should the proposed north-west relief road scheme go ahead in my constituency. That would not only lead to a significant loss of biodiversity and carbon capability, but would breach the Government's national planning policy framework, and would also mean a huge loss of green space that is currently used for the wellbeing of Shrewsbury residents.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Shropshire Council to safeguard the Darwin Oak tree... and ensure its preservation for future generations.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Darwin Oak, a 550-year old oak tree, is threatened with felling by the proposed North West Relief Road scheme at Shrewsbury; further declares that the loss of large-canopy, open-grown trees like the Darwin Oak would amount to a significant loss of biodiversity and carbon sequestration capability; further that the proposed felling of hundreds of trees, including numerous veteran trees and the Darwin Oak, goes against the Government's National Planning Policy Framework and the 'Keepers of Time' policy; and further that the proposed felling of trees would lead to a huge loss of green space used for exercise and the well-being of Shrewsbury residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Shropshire Council to safeguard the Darwin Oak tree as part of the North West Relief Road scheme and ensure its preservation for future generations.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003010]

Health Services: Bridlington

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Anna McMorris.*)

7.16 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this important subject. I thank the Minister for being here this evening, and I thank everyone I spoke to before the debate, particularly the Bridlington health forum and representatives of local NHS trusts and the integrated care board. Bridlington is not alone in needing improved access to health services, but I will seek to explain today why that has become an extremely acute problem in the town.

Constituents of mine living in and around Driffield, Hornsea, Market Weighton and the remote Wolds villages will have valid concerns about their own public services, but I hope they will forgive me for taking this opportunity to speak in depth about Bridlington and why it is in so much need of extra support. I will describe the demographic backdrop against which these issues have arisen, the challenges over supply of services, and, lastly, the need for a robust strategy to tackle the various problems faced by local people in the town.

Bridlington is a fantastic coastal resort on the edge of the rolling hills of the Wolds, and it welcomes millions of visitors every year. It is world famous for its seabird colony, and is the lobster capital of Europe. However, like many seaside towns it has significant challenges, and the demographic data is stark. It has the oldest and most deprived population in the East Riding of Yorkshire, and men living in the Bridlington South ward have a life expectancy 10 years lower than those living elsewhere in the county. Indeed, data shows that two of the three wards covering the town are the two most deprived in the county, and the other is the fifth highest of a total of 26. The age profile is equally stark. One third of the population are over 65, and that rises to 44% of residents in Bridlington North, where a significant number are over 80. Bridlington has the highest percentage of people with limiting long-term illness or disability in the York and Scarborough NHS Trust catchment area, and Bridlington residents have the highest levels of health inequality in that catchment.

The director of public health for East Riding of Yorkshire county council has said of the town:

“we have found that the inequalities are growing, they’re large and they’re serious.

In terms of length of life, quality of life and the amount of people with long term health conditions, Bridlington has got the worst levels in all of the East Riding...So this is a wake up call to do something about it.”

I certainly cannot disagree with that sentiment.

As for the supply of health services, the House will no doubt be shocked to hear that there are entire classrooms of children in Bridlington who have never seen a dentist. One patient needing emergency dental work was sent more than 60 miles to Doncaster, and in January there were 8,500 people on the waiting list for the only local NHS dentist. Many people have been forced to go private, but that is not a solution affordable to most. Will the Minister agree to look again at NHS dental contracts, so that they incentivise dentists to open practices in areas where there is such a clear and obvious shortage?

Access to primary care has seen some recent improvements, but the consolidation of GP practices from six to two has not been without its problems. Local patients still find it challenging to secure appointments at one of the two practices, but I know that GPs operating across the town have worked tirelessly to improve services in the wake of the pandemic and the shortage of local healthcare professionals. The direction of travel for secondary care, however, is not positive.

Bridlington is blessed with a fantastic hospital site, which opened in 1989. It recently enjoyed an investment of £4.7 million in 1,500 solar panels, making it one of the greenest NHS sites in the country. However, the site is chronically underused. I am not suggesting for a second that the Bridlington hospital site could be a major trauma centre or large infirmary, but it can and should be a vital community asset for health. It has the potential to be a health hub for the town, bringing together a wide array of local health services. York and Scarborough NHS trust might not be the owner of the site, but it is the provider of secondary care there. Many people in the town feel that its focus, which is naturally leaning towards North Yorkshire and not East Yorkshire, means that investment and new services are being prioritised in York, Scarborough and Malton.

Out-patient appointments are a particularly key metric, as they make up a large bulk of the interactions between the NHS and older people in Bridlington. The number of out-patient appointments at Bridlington hospital that are offered to residents in Bridlington, Driffield and the surrounding area has reduced from 46,500 in 2019-20 to just over 27,500 in 2023-24—a reduction of more than 35% in just four years. Ophthalmology appointments are down, audiology appointments are down and rheumatology appointments are down. Instead of recognising that an ageing population will result in greater demand for out-patient services locally, we are seeing these services being provided at sites away from the town.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this issue. He and I knew each other long before he came to this House, as he was one of our advisers for the all-party parliamentary group for eggs, pigs and poultry. It is a real pleasure to see him in this place, and we look forward to his contributions.

The hon. Gentleman’s constituency and my constituency are very similar. He mentioned that Bridlington is a seaside resort and that he represents seaside areas, as do I. He also mentioned the fact that much of the population is over 70 years old—again, there are similarities with my constituency. Is the hon. Gentleman seeking a new rural strategy that addresses this issue in coastal areas? If he is, it is something we can all welcome.

Charlie Dewhirst: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution. I will come to that point shortly.

East Riding patients travelled an astonishing 2.7 million NHS miles to attend out-patient appointments in 2023-24, and two thirds of Bridlington residents attend out-patient appointments away from the town. That is not acceptable, and I will not stand by and let it continue. However, part of the problem is that local Members of Parliament have very little, if any, direct influence over the direction

of our health services, which is why I am appealing to the Minister for his support. I believe that this is particularly timely.

In his recent report, Lord Darzi described the NHS as “broken”, and in the case of Bridlington he is correct. He states that:

“An ageing population is the most significant driver of increased healthcare needs since it is associated with the development of long-term conditions”

and that

“by the time people are aged 65-74, a majority will have at least one long-term condition and some 40 per cent will have two or more. By the time people are aged 75-84, this rises to nearly 60 per cent having two or more, and by the time people are aged 85 or above, 9 out of 10 will have at least one long-term condition.”

I remind the House that one third of residents in Bridlington are over 65.

Lord Darzi makes the following very pertinent observation:

“At the highest level, the NHS has had the strategic intention to shift spending from reactive care in hospitals to more proactive care in the community setting—but care has in fact moved in the other direction.”

That is very much the experience of my constituents. The report also makes it clear that “care should be more joined up, or more ‘integrated’...to reflect the fact the people living with long-term conditions”

need more support and

“a variety of different physical and mental health professionals and often rely on social care too. The frequency of their interactions with the health service means that their care is more complex and therefore requires coordination.”

Finally on this point, Lord Darzi is right to say that “care should be delivered in the community, closer to where people live and work”,

and that

“hospitals should be reserved for specialist care. This is more convenient for patients—especially for those with long-term conditions who will need contact with the NHS more frequently.”

I would also like to refer the House to the chief medical officer’s 2021 annual report on health in coastal communities. In this insightful piece of work, Sir Chris Whitty noted:

“Given the known high rates of preventable illness in these areas, the lack of available data on the health of coastal communities has been striking whilst researching the report. Coastal communities have been long overlooked with limited research on their health and wellbeing. The focus has tended towards inner city or rural areas with too little attention given to the nation’s periphery.”

He went on to add:

“Data is rarely published at a geographical level granular enough to capture coastal outcomes, with most data only available at local authority or Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) level. As a result, deprivation and ill health at the coast is hidden by relative affluence just inland which is lumped together.”

In conclusion, he recommended:

“Given the health and wellbeing challenges of coastal communities have more in common with one another than inland neighbours, there should be a national strategy to improve the health and wellbeing of coastal communities.”

Unfortunately, and perhaps as a result of the health service working its way through the impact of the pandemic, the report has been somewhat sidelined and the recommendations have yet to be acted upon, so what should be the solution?

We need a comprehensive strategy, bringing together all parts of the health service, that recognises the challenges and put together an immediate action plan. The Humber and North Yorkshire integrated care board is trying to address these issues, but I am concerned about exactly what its role is, or should be. Some ICBs interpret their population health duties as requiring them to act upstream of healthcare needs on the social determinants of health, where the NHS has few direct levers. Other ICBs interpret their duties as requiring them to understand and adjust healthcare services to match the needs of the population that they serve, in line with the NHS operating framework. Some interpret them as both and others as neither, preferring to focus on what they see as their traditional role of performance managing providers. Ultimately, their roles and responsibilities need to be clarified so that they can be better held to account. This is not a criticism of the performance of my local ICB, which is working hard to tackle the challenges, but I think we would all benefit from greater clarity of purpose.

In conclusion, we cannot escape what is in front of us. As one senior local authority figure commented to me:

“The health crisis in Bridlington is not a car crash waiting to happen, it is happening right now.”

My appeal to the Minister today is simple. I have no doubt that he has the very best of intentions when it comes to improving the nation’s health, but realistically many of those ambitions will take decades. If he wants to make a real difference today, will he please focus some of his Department’s collective effort on tackling the enormous health inequalities in seaside towns such as Bridlington, and will he please take the recommendations of Lord Darzi and Sir Chris Whitty and apply them to our town? We are happy to be his pilot scheme or his trailblazer.

I know that with the right energy and direction, we will not be left with a generation of children who have never seen a dentist and we will not have elderly people travelling long distances for regular routine appointments. Instead, we will have a health service to be proud of and a happier and healthier local population. I implore the Minister and his Department to work with me to ensure a better future for the brilliant people of Bridlington.

7.27 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) on securing the debate and on the constructive tone in which he put his comments forward.

This Government are committed to fixing our broken health and care system. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we will be honest about the problems facing the NHS and serious about tackling them. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the problems in Bridlington, which sadly will be familiar to colleagues right across the House. The truth is that we are very far from where we need and want to be, as he so rightly set out. He talked a lot about Lord Darzi’s report, and I am pleased that he has read it and appears to agree with the true extent of the challenges it sets out. Even Lord Darzi, with all his years of experience, was shocked by what he discovered.

The report is vital because it gives us the frank assessment we need to face the problems honestly and properly. It will take a decade of national renewal,

[Stephen Kinnock]

lasting reform and a long-term plan to save our NHS. We have committed to three big shifts: from hospital to community; from analogue to digital; and from sickness to prevention. Our 10-year plan will set out how we will deliver those shifts to ensure that we have a health and care system that is fit for the future, in Bridlington and across the United Kingdom.

To develop that plan, we must have a meaningful conversation with the public and those who work in the health system. We will conduct a comprehensive range of engagement and consultation activities, launching very soon, bringing in views from the public, the health and care workforce, national and local stakeholders and system leaders. Importantly, given the hon. Gentleman's comments, parliamentarians will also have an opportunity to feed into this important national conversation. It will be the biggest national conversation about our health and care system since the NHS's foundation in 1948.

The Government are committed to restoring our health and care system to its founding promise that it will be there for all our constituents when they need it. I hope that context helps the hon. Gentleman to understand that we are taking this very seriously, and that we do not want to make policy in the ivory towers of Westminster or Whitehall. This needs to be a national conversation, feeding into a 10-year plan that will be published in the spring of next year.

I will now address some of the hon. Gentleman's specific points. First, I share his concern about dentistry access. The single biggest cause of children aged between five and nine being admitted to hospital is to have their rotten teeth taken out, which is frankly a disgrace. As the Prime Minister said a few weeks ago, it is soul-destroying for those young people, and it can so easily be prevented. That is why we will work with the sector to reform the dental contract, with a focus on prevention and the retention of NHS dentists.

In the meantime, we know that patients cannot wait. We will not wait to make improvements to increase access in the current system. That is why we are working to deliver our rescue plan to provide 700,000 more urgent dental appointments. These will be available across the country, including, of course, for the residents of Bridlington. I am aware that an initial procurement for the additional service in Bridlington was unsuccessful. The ICB has since reviewed the specification and is working to further understand what may work best for the town, with preferred options for procurement due to be approved this month.

Unfortunately, people across the country will recognise the picture that the hon. Gentleman describes of GP access in Bridlington. Almost everywhere, patients are finding it increasingly difficult to see a GP. When they cannot get an appointment, the chances are that they will end up in accident and emergency. This is unacceptable, as it is worse for patients and more expensive for the taxpayer. Lord Darzi is clear that the situation is particularly acute in certain areas—that speaks to the hon. Gentleman's point about health inequalities—and Bridlington is one such area.

Our plan starts with recruiting over 1,000 newly qualified GPs through an £82 million boost to the additional roles reimbursement scheme. In the longer

term, we are committed to training thousands more GPs, guaranteeing face-to-face appointments for all those who want one, delivering a modern appointment booking system to avoid the 8 am scramble and, ultimately, shifting resources from acute care into primary and community care.

The hon. Gentleman raised the recent merger of GP practices in Bridlington, where six practices have been consolidated into two larger practices. These decisions are, of course, made by local commissioners, who determine what services and care pathways best serve the needs of patients in the area. I am pleased that performance has improved in both practices, with one demonstrating some of the best access within the integrated care board footprint. Of course, there are still issues, and the people of Bridlington deserve better, which is why we are committed to delivering our plan for primary care.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Bridlington hospital, which currently provides a range of services, including an urgent treatment centre, radiology, rehabilitation, in-patient surgical wards and out-patient clinics. Patients attending those services can, and often do, come from outside the Bridlington area. I am aware that there is more space at the hospital that can be used, and I can assure him that we are looking carefully at capital requirements as part of the spending review. We will know more about that on 30 October.

I hope I have addressed some of the hon. Gentleman's concerns. I absolutely agree with his view about health inequalities, and it is quite shocking to hear the difference between one ward and another in his constituency. Those gaps have to be narrowed, and a lot of this is about ensuring that people are not only living longer but living healthier lives. The increase in complex conditions that we are now seeing at younger ages is creating huge pressure on our health system, and it is not good for his constituents either. I absolutely understand and see the context in which we are operating, and that is a top priority for the 10-year health plan we are bringing forward.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward the issue and giving me the opportunity to reiterate from the Government Dispatch Box our promise to fix our broken health and care system and deliver for people in Bridlington and across Yorkshire. Sadly, the situation he describes resonates with the broader findings of Lord Darzi's review. The health and care system is in a critical condition, but I assure him that this Government are committed to getting our healthcare system back on its feet and fit for the future.

Charlie Dewhirst: On the particular issue of coastal towns, Bridlington is not unique in the challenges it faces. Will the Minister pledge to look at the broader recommendations in Sir Chris Whitty's report of 2021?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. One of the trends we are seeing is that an older demographic is moving to coastal towns. Those towns are often most the challenged because they are under-doctored, dental deserts and lacking in social care facilities. A toxic combination is caused by the additional pressures brought by that demographic and a lack of the required facilities on the supply side. The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the issue of coastal towns. I know our chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, is

alive to the issue, and it will have to be factored into the 10-year plan. The 10-year plan cannot just be about the sectors we are looking at; it is also about geography and the lived experience of people in particular parts of the country.

Question put and agreed to.

7.36 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 October 2024

[DAME CAROLINE DINENAGE *in the Chair*]

Independent Schools: VAT and Business Rates Exemptions

9.30 am

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the removal of VAT and business rates exemptions for independent schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. This debate matters for various reasons. I have always been and will remain committed to supporting education across the board, including our excellent state schools. I want all schools to be adequately funded to present opportunities for children from all backgrounds. I say that as someone who was proudly educated in state schools and who cares about the life chances of everyone.

I have secured this specific debate to highlight how Labour's ideologically driven plan to remove VAT and business rate exemptions for independent schools is an inherently flawed policy. If Labour will not abandon the education tax I will also suggest some improvements that the Government could make to lessen the impact of the policy on pupils, parents and school staff in Bromsgrove and across the country.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): Order. We seem to have a problem with the sound—it seems to be everybody's microphones. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to plough on while we see whether we can change a few plugs and get it rolling again. In case he was put off by the tinny quality of the sound, we are trying to get it rectified. Please plough on.

Bradley Thomas: Thank you, Dame Caroline. Education is an investment in our future. It is in everyone's best interests that children are well educated so that they can make an engaged and positive contribution to our society. We do not charge VAT on many types of private healthcare, as that is beneficial when people use their own money to pay for a service that the state would otherwise provide. We do not charge VAT on university or nursery fees, so why should schooling be any different?

There are approximately 2,500 independent schools in the UK educating more than half a million children. They are often small schools: more than 40% of independent schools have fewer than 100 pupils according to Department for Education data. The reality is that the policy will not fulfil its aims and will displace children mid-education. State education must be funded by the state, supported by taxpayers. The VAT exemption encourages greater use of independent education, reducing the number of state school pupils, meaning more money available per pupil in the state sector.

The Times recently stated that 71% of parents felt that rising school fees would influence their future decision about independent schooling. Additionally, 26% of parents said they would have to withdraw their children from independent schools if VAT is introduced.

An Adam Smith Institute report provides a detailed examination of the potential economic impacts. If 10% to 15% of students transfer, the net revenue could be negligible. Alarmingly, in a scenario where 25% of students switch from the independent sector to state schools, the tax could cost the Government £1.6 billion.

Currently, independent schools' significant economic benefits include supporting 328,000 jobs, saving £4.4 billion from the education budget, and supporting £5.1 billion in additional tax revenue. They do this while saving the state £4.5 billion by removing the requirement to fund the education of 7% of children as the result of parents exercising this choice. Furthermore, independent and state boarding schools are a unique subset of the schools system, with the additional feature of attracting overseas students to the UK. Some 62,700 pupils are international students in independent schools, making up 11% of the population. This is a key export for the country, adding £2.1 billion to our economy annually.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Member give way?

Bradley Thomas: I will not give way. Independent schools should be seen as a British success story, both culturally and economically, instead of being discouraged and punished with the imposition of an education tax for socialist ideological principles. Most importantly, the human impact of the policy is stark. The failure of this education tax will not just be academic or financial; it will have a serious impact on families.

One parent wrote to me:

"As a widowed single mother who works full-time, I make enormous financial sacrifices to ensure my child can attend the same school from age 3 to 18. This stability is not only essential for my child's development but also enables me to work and contribute to society. This proposed VAT would be devastating for families like mine."

Another mother wrote to me and said,

"We also have a daughter who will need to start secondary school in two years. We had hoped for her to attend the same school as her brother but, with no scholarship likely and the addition of VAT, it is simply impossible. This is a painful realisation, and I worry that she will resent the opportunities that we couldn't give her (but we could give her older sibling)."

We have yet to talk about the impact on special educational needs and disabilities education. This measure will cause particular problems for children who are in receipt of such bespoke education. Nationally, at least 130,000 pupils in independent schools receive SEND support in mainstream and specialist settings. That is 20% of the pupils in UK independent schools, which is slightly higher than the state school average. Independent schools help to provide additional value-adding capacity to SEND education.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. On special educational needs, this measure will devastate many families around the country who make huge sacrifices. When the Minister sums up, will he tell us what mitigations and support will be given to local authorities to cover the cost and the pressures they face, particularly with shortages in special educational needs provision across the country?

Bradley Thomas: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point, which I will touch on later, and I hope the Minister will address it. Independent schools provide additional value-adding capacity to SEND education, as has been acknowledged, and VAT on fees risks their ability to do that. There is simply not the capacity in the state sector to accommodate all those extra pupils, particularly when SEND services are already under pressure.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. My city of Edinburgh has the highest proportion of independently educated children in the country, at between 20% and 30% every year. According to the local Labour authority, 16 schools will already be over capacity at the end of this year. If the predicted percentage of children drop out of independent education into the state sector, it will not be able to cope. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this measure is ill thought-through and that the Labour Government must come up with a way to support education, particularly as the matter is devolved in Scotland and VAT is reserved?

Bradley Thomas: I agree with the hon. Member. The examples she cites highlight the situation perfectly. The Government have failed to consider that the capacity is not there. We have already seen, in the few months since this Parliament began, several debates highlighting issues of SEND capacity.

Another mother wrote to me to outline the benefit that independent schools can have for children with SEND needs:

“We moved our autistic child to a small independent school and the transformation was immediate. Classes are small and quiet, and the school is very nurturing and family oriented. It has been wonderful to see her blossom and slowly get more and more involved in school life. We would not have chosen for our daughter to go to private school but there was no suitable state provision available. We are paying a significant amount of money to be able to do this. Adding VAT on top feels like we are being punished twice for having a child that doesn't fit into the state system, either in mainstream or specialist schools.”

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Nobody here is not interested in a positive educational experience for all children in all our constituencies, in all establishments. My own youngsters have enjoyed brilliant learning in both private and state schools, while one is currently in an independent school. Would my hon. Friend agree that the heart of this policy of bringing in taxation on education is stoking division, creating harm to aspiration, and stopping the sharing of facilities and opportunity? It is exemplified by the Education Secretary's proclamation on social media. Despite the impact on jobs and community harm, the Government still want to introduce this policy.

Bradley Thomas: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. The comments made by the Education Secretary on Twitter over the weekend epitomise the way in which the mask of this Government is slipping—socialism is revealing its true face—and how reprehensible the policy is.

Adjacent to SEND schools, we must consider faith education. This education tax will make independent faith schooling unaffordable for many families, hurting

the 370,000 pupils who attend independent faith schools in England according to Department for Education figures. It is important that the House notes that fees at those schools are frequently below the independent school average, and sometimes below state per-pupil funding levels. Often the schools have a suggested fee, but the community supports those who cannot afford the full fee by themselves.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. In Birmingham Perry Barr there is an all-girls faith school where parents earning just above minimum wage secure places for their children. We already have an enormous problem in the constituency with the secondary school sector, where waiting lists are somewhere in the region of 100 places. Does the hon. Member agree that not only does it not stack up financially but we simply have not got the infrastructure to deal with this policy?

Bradley Thomas: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member. We have yet to talk about military and diplomatic families, who need boarding schools to provide a stable education while parents are deployed overseas; 4,700 children are funded by the Government under the continuity of education allowance, which assists service personnel and diplomatic families in educating their children at boarding school.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. The Government say that they are pursuing economic growth. In his excellent speech I hope that my hon. Friend will highlight the value of export earnings to the United Kingdom from the fantastic independent school sector, which is a key part of growth. No other western economy taxes education.

Bradley Thomas: My right hon. Friend echoes the point that I made earlier that this is about not just a service that is provided but a key segment of the UK economy that bolsters the value of UK plc and UK GDP.

Rachael Maskell: Will the hon. Member give way?

Bradley Thomas: I will not; I will make progress. Labour committed in the House of Commons in 2023 that armed forces families need not be concerned about proposals to charge VAT. With the current retention crisis in the armed forces, and the current volatile state of world affairs, the Government need to confirm what impact analysis has been carried out on the effect of taxing education on military personnel.

We then get into issues around the implementation of the policy. Implementation in January will put pressure on local authorities to find rare and academically disruptive in-year placements. Those will be difficult, as state schools will be full and many will be oversubscribed, with areas that have a high number of pupils attending independent schools having some of the busiest state schools.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking eloquently about the impact on children's education, on children with special educational needs and on children being ripped out of their schools, perhaps in the year of their GCSEs or A-levels. This is

obviously a debate about education. There are Members of Parliament in the Chamber from the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats, as well as independent MPs and Members from Reform—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): And the DUP.

Richard Fuller: And the DUP.

Jim Shannon: I am always here, by the way.

Richard Fuller: It is not always about the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The Labour party has marshalled all but two of their MPs, one of whom hates the policy—I do not know what the other thinks.

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) think that it is shocking that not a single member of the Education ministerial team of the Labour Government has bothered to show up today, yet they continue to use the airwaves to spew out spiteful and divisive messages about this Labour policy? The Minister present, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), does not care about education; he cares about money—he is a Treasury Minister. He knows that the policy will not raise any money, but it is going to cost taxpayers.

Bradley Thomas: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. The Government have shown the true intent of the policy over the weekend with the divisive, “us and them” mentality that was revealed on social media.

I call on the Government to pause and reconsider this education tax, with a view to abandoning it. It is unethical and will damage a British success story. It will not fulfil its stated aims. The policy will not raise significant money, but is being forced through at the expense of state and independent schoolchildren to further the Government’s divisive ideological agenda that so many in this House have recognised.

If the Government refuse to abandon the policy, there are some sensible and practical steps that they can take to minimise the impact that it will have on parents and children. First, delay the imposition of VAT until September and the start of the next academic year. There has been no proper impact assessment of these policies on state schools, SEND provision or faith schooling; a full consultation and impact assessment is needed before changes are announced. Secondly, assess how very small schools can be protected from VAT and tax changes. They are a vital community resource and charge much lower fees; that should be acknowledged. Thirdly, exempt service families on continuity of education allowance from VAT. Those who rely on independent education to serve our country should absolutely not be penalised. Furthermore, the Government should protect children currently applying for an education, health and care plan, as parents should not be penalised for the delays in the process.

I would like the Minister to provide clarity on the following points. Will the Government be issuing guidance for state schools on how to deal with applications from parents, to prevent parents from being asked to prove that they cannot afford to fund independent education? During the general election campaign, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) commented that state sector classes must increase and

that they will just have to cope. What assessment have the Government done to determine whether state sector classes have the resources available?

When it comes to students transitioning from the independent to the state sector, what provision will there be to prevent disruption to their education in subjects that may not be taught at their new state schools? In the event of academic performance failures due to the disruption caused by transitioning between schools, will academic leniency be granted to students? I also seek clarity on what funding and support will be made available for students with special educational needs who are transitioning between the independent and state sectors.

I hope that the House will clearly appreciate that this short-sighted policy will hit hardest those in society who it claims to be supporting, that it will damage the wider education sector as a whole, and that it will worsen academic and social inequalities while being a net cost to society, the education sector and the British taxpayer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): Order. A lot of people want to take part in this debate, so I remind everybody that they need to bob if they wish to be called. Given the nature of the debate, I recommend that Members declare any interests if they have them. I am going to kick us off with a three-minute limit on contributions because 19 people are down to speak.

9.47 am

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. The Government are about to realise the reality of governance over manifesto ideology. Fundamentally, this policy will remove the ability of people to send their children to local primary schools as places get filled by those who currently can just about afford to use private schools. As there is limited time, I have a series of questions that I would like to put to the Minister. To be fair to him, this is not his Department—education Ministers are running away from their policy—so I doubt he will be able to answer them today, but perhaps he can take them away. Some of them have been covered, but I think it is important to get them on the record.

Will the Minister confirm whether a low-income family whose child is in receipt of a bursary would be liable for VAT on the total school fees? Would a staff member in receipt of an employee discount on fees also be liable? With boarding schools already at 86% capacity and some already withdrawing from the market, will the continuity of education allowance for military families still be able to house the 4,200 who currently use it? Will arts schools be exempt? If so, and we are starting to exempt schools, is this even legal? If we do not exempt art schools, that means people who have the talent to go will have to be in the vicinity of the school or travel. That is going to withdraw a huge amount of opportunity from those in the arts sector.

What mitigation is there going to be for the financial planning of international pupils? They have a choice of a global market. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) mentioned, this is a

[*Sir Alec Shelbrooke*]

£2.1 billion export market. Again, is it going to be legal to exempt certain schools, such as those involved with SEND provision? What impact will there be on council budgets? There is an issue for those of us who represent vast rural communities: if children are taken out of the private sector and put into the state sector, the state will have to fund the transport for those children to go to school. Upon whose budget will that fall? Fundamentally—there is evidence of this from every council—if primary schools are already close to capacity, will the state pay to put those children into private places? Will parents then be taxed on that as an in-kind benefit or will the law be retrospectively changed—which, of course, would suit the Prime Minister and a lot of people with free wardrobes?

9.50 am

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): My constituency of South Devon is home to several small independent schools that offer an alternative education from the mainstream offer from state schools: education that caters brilliantly for pupils who struggle to fit in with the demands of the mainstream curriculum. I have heard from several parents whose children could not cope in state schools—they live with autism or other mental health challenges—but are thriving in those small private settings. These small independent schools, whose fees are as low as they can make them, offer smaller class sizes, fewer class transitions during the day and more emphasis on wellbeing and creativity.

The parents who have contacted me in desperation over this proposed change are not wealthy. They are scraping together the fees so that their children can attend a school where they can thrive. One told me that she had sold her house and given away the family pet in order to move into a flat. She changed job to be able to afford the fees, and she now buys everything second hand. Another said that they had also sold their home and moved house to afford the fees at their local Steiner school as their children had also failed to cope with mainstream schooling.

The introduction of VAT on private school fees may not have much impact on parents who can afford £50,000 a year for a child. However, one school in my constituency, whose fees are just £10,000, said that it will face closure if it loses just four more children from its roll. All those small schools are trying to absorb as much of the cost as possible, with teachers taking salary cuts and much-needed building repairs being put on hold indefinitely. Will the Minister think about the impact the tax will have on the children who cannot get an EHCP? They cannot cope with the rigours of the state school system and they will quite probably end up dropping out of school completely if this goes ahead, with all the implication that has on working parents who then may have to consider homeschooling instead. I urge the Minister to think about a lower fee threshold for the introduction of VAT. After all, those parents are already paying income tax to cover an education that their children do not receive.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): My hon. Friend raises a good point, and I was glad to hear that Labour is giving consideration to cases in which independent school provision has been specified in education, health

and care plans. However, as has already been raised, many children have special educational needs and do not require an EHCP; that means that many children with SEN are currently being educated in independent schools as there is insufficient support in the state school system. As such, the families are having to bear the fee increase. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must ensure that those vulnerable children are not disadvantaged by this policy?

Caroline Voaden: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that those children are going to be most affected by this policy. For those families, the tax change is a regressive step that will force them into an impossible situation and have a devastating impact on children who have already had a difficult start in life—many of whom have experience of the care system, our failing mental health system and a state school system completely unable to cope with all their additional or complex needs. Yes, the state school system desperately needs investment—we know that. We know that the provision for SEND is in a disastrous state, nowhere more so than in Devon, and the chronic underfunding of councils by the previous Government has decimated SEND provision.

Mr Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this important debate. In my constituency, Taunton school, Wellington school, King's college and Queen's college make a massive contribution to the local economy. Beyond that, they also cater for many children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister should consider resources for local authorities to cope with the wave of applications for support from SEND children currently being supported in independent schools? They are not applying for EHCPs now but will doubtless need to in future, if they are no longer able to get the care and support they need at their schools. Does she also agree that the Minister should secure a rise in the armed forces allowance to cope with the 20% increase?

Caroline Voaden: It is interesting that nobody is here from the Department for Education to defend the policy and that we have heard nothing about the contribution it will make to increasing SEND provision in state schools. I certainly know that the state schools in my area cannot cope with any additional need, and we have heard nothing about that. Dare I say that the Liberal Democrats had several suggestions for tax-raising options in our election manifesto that do not seem to have been considered yet by this Government? I humbly suggest that a tax on social media companies might be a good place to start, given the impact that they have on the mental health of our young people.

I implore the Minister to rethink how the VAT policy will damage families who have tried so hard to find the right setting so that their children can thrive. If he would like to come to South Devon and see for himself what some of these brilliant schools offer, I will be delighted to show him around.

9.55 am

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): We have been told by the Government that the rationale for this policy is not class hatred or class warfare; it is a revenue-generation mechanism for state schools. It is a

sort of novel, hypothecated tax: education has always been tax free in this country and, in fact, around the world. Even going back to the last flowering of Labour's socialism in the 1970s, when there was beer and sandwiches in No. 10, there was no suggestion that we should take socialism into the classroom in the way that this Government are.

If tax take is in fact the rationale, where is the impact assessment? How much will actually be raised by this policy, and what costs will be associated with its implementation? We have already heard that some 10,000 students have left the private sector and are going into the state sector just this September. What impact will there be on the education of those children?

On Friday I went to see a local headmaster at a private school in my constituency—the only one that I am aware of. At this stage, I should register my interest: I have one child at a fee-paying school. The headmaster said that there are primary schools locally that are totally full and there is no space for those children leaving the private sector to go into local primary education. Where is the impact assessment on SEND children? Some 34% of the intake of that private school are pupils with special educational needs. Partly because of the delay in the EHCP process, will they be penalised? What happens when they get taken out of their educational setting and put into a new school with new friends, or a lack of them? What will be the impact on their personal education? What will be the impact on SEND provision in the county of Norfolk?

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way. I have always had great concern about segregation in our education system, but parents in York say that due to the different pedagogy environment and culture, certain independent schools provide the only way that their children with SEN, anxiety or care experience can currently access education. It is through necessity, not choice. Does he agree that the Government should publish an impact assessment not only for this, but for the Budget, so that we can assess the full analysis of this policy?

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I am sorry that she waited so long to intervene. I quite agree with the point that she makes. We need to have an impact assessment on another issue, which is the provision of boarding facilities for children in care, which again are provided in my constituency. The school provides full boarding for not just children in care, but the boarding pathway programme put forward by Norfolk county council for children on the edge of care. Their education is the single point of continuity in their lives, and this policy has a real risk of reducing that support and removing them from their school and their friends halfway through an educational year.

What assessment have the Government undertaken before the Budget on these policies and their costs, and what mitigation will they put in place? We have already heard about the impact on military families. Is it right to target the children of our servicemen for this hypothecated tax? Was targeting poor pensioners not enough for this Government?

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the policy disproportionately affects families on lower and middle incomes, which the

vast majority of these students come from? Parents I have spoken to in my constituency are really concerned. They have forgone foreign holidays, a new car and a bigger home because they have chosen to invest in their children's education. Should the Government not encourage people to make those right decisions on behalf of their families, rather than penalising them?

Jerome Mayhew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It feels as though the Government have a cartoonish characterisation of what a private education looks like—top hats and tails—but that is not the real experience of the modern private educational sector.

That brings me nicely on to the impact on bursaries. At the school in my constituency, 20% of fee revenue goes on bursaries. It is exactly that level of support for people with greater financial disadvantage that will be the first casualty of this unfair and ill thought-out policy. Again, it is an odd target for a tax take. What about the impact on local businesses? The school employs 286 people of all different types in my constituency, and job cuts are already under way. I ask the Government to think again. Surely the introduction of this ill thought-out policy halfway through the academic year needs to be revisited.

Then there is the impact on children who are sitting for public examinations. It is always bad when children have to change schools because of circumstances that are forced on them, but even more so when they are sitting for their GCSEs or A levels. At the very least, the policy should not be implemented for people in those years. For pupils applying for education, health and care plans, the delay in the Government process of undertaking those assessments should not mean that costs are forced on parents who are taking active steps to support the education of their children. For military families and for specialist music and dance schools, the Government have put forward no evidence to support their stated policy objectives. The policy feels rushed. The only people here to support it are those who are paid to do so, and it is vulnerable children in our society who will pay the price of these internal Labour politics.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): I am desperately trying to squeeze everybody in, but, as we can see, a lot of people want to speak, so I will now take the time limit down to two minutes.

10.1 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To provide an example of the two minutes, I will speak at a very speedy rate. I thank you, Dame Caroline, for allowing me to speak, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on bringing forward the debate.

I will make two points. I have a large number of independent schools in my constituency, but I want to speak about our local grammar school, Regent House. It is one of the top schools in Northern Ireland and has a preparatory school attached. I have been contacted by parents of children in the school, who have succinctly outlined their view: this is clearly yet another blow to the working family who are trying their best for their children and making sacrifices, which become more

[*Jim Shannon*]

difficult with every passing Budget. Our schooling system in Northern Ireland is different, and I agree with my party colleague, the Education Minister Paul Givan, who has outlined reasons why the change cannot go ahead. Some 2,500 pupils in Northern Ireland attend grammar school preps, Christian schools and other independent schools, and their parents top up to allow them to have this privilege.

Let us be clear about what is happening: these are not people with lots of money. These are people who use their money to send their child to a good school to provide them with an education. Taxation is decided at Westminster, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) said, and that is important. The headmaster of one independent Christian school said,

“We have some pupils in our Christian schools who are entitled to free school meals, so by no means are many of our parents rich.”

The options facing those parents are to send their children to the mainstream school against their religiously held views or to homeschool them, and there is very little regulation of homeschooling in Northern Ireland. A private school in Northern Ireland is not a status symbol, as many believe, but a human right based on people’s right to their faith. The Government will massively overstep if they use a massive, sweeping brush to address something that requires a fine brush.

A school in my constituency on the border in Holywood has a different approach to learning, under which children are excelling. Other international schools need to be able to provide schooling for children who move around with their parents’ work and who need access to a different format of education—one where there is some continuity. None of those are status symbols, and they need to be considered separately. I fully agree with the arguments that have been made today, and I ask the Minister to consider them.

10.4 am

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. The Turnford school was a secondary school in decline in my constituency of Broxbourne: academic standards were poor, and the school had never received a satisfactory rating from Ofsted. But thanks to a unique partnership with Haileybury, an independent school also in my constituency, the tide began to turn. In 2015, the Turnford school was relaunched as Haileybury Turnford school, with Haileybury the sole sponsor. A generous annual improvement grant worth £200,000 a year was established—to date, £1.2 million has been given to the state school—and other wraparound support was provided, including for teaching staff and kids with SEND. In 2022, for the first time in its history, Haileybury Turnford School was judged to be good.

Ministers think this policy will impact only on the rich, but, for nearly a decade, a genuinely working-class community in the Cheshunt and Turnford area has benefited from the state and independent sectors working together. I therefore urge the Government—I would like to hear from the Minister today on this—to allow independent schools to offset the financial support and resources they provide to state schools against their VAT liability.

10.5 am

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I thank the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this important debate. In my constituency, there are six small independent schools, two of which are dedicated to special educational needs, serving a total of 820 students. I have heard from each of those schools, from families of current students and from teachers in the state sector about the potential impacts of imposing VAT on private education provision.

I want to highlight two issues that relate particularly to the educational ecosystem of Surrey Heath, but which will, I think, also resonate widely across the country. The first is special educational needs. Of the 820 students in private schools across Surrey Heath, 230 have special educational needs of varying degrees of severity, and, of those, 138 are not in possession of an EHCP. That figure indicates the disproportionate service and choice that small, local private schools provide children and families with special educational needs.

For those children and families, private provision is more than just an alternative to the state sector; it is a crucial lifeline for children who struggle in mainstream education or who cannot secure one of the limited places in a special educational needs school provided by Surrey county council. Parents and headteachers have made it clear to me that families with children with special educational needs already face significant financial strains, and an additional 20% will be the tipping point that forces already stretched families to withdraw their children and turn again to an overstretched county-run system.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The state schools in my constituency are already bursting at the seams, and we have hundreds of children who are outside of education, many of whom are unable to receive homeschooling. There are six private schools in my constituency, educating more than 1,000 children. The lowest fees start at £1,800, with the highest at around £3,300. We are talking about working-class, low-income families with children who have special educational needs. If enacted, the policy would be hugely damaging to those families’ financial situation and their children’s education. I strongly urge the Government to assess the impact of that and put in place protection mechanisms for such schools.

Dr Pinkerton: I agree with the hon. Gentleman entirely.

My second point relates to military families. As we have close ties to Sandhurst, Pirbright and nearby Aldershot, around 10% of pupils in my constituency come from military families. Those families already report that they are struggling with fees because of the increasing gap between the continuity of education allowance paid by the Ministry of Defence and the rising cost of private education, and adding 20% would widen that gap further still. Many families would reach their tipping point and be forced to withdraw their children from their current schools, with all the attendant risks.

Helen Maguire: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. As the Liberal Democrat defence spokesperson and as a veteran myself, I can only reiterate the importance

of a stable environment for the children of armed forces personnel. Does he agree that the Government must continue to support a stable environment for our armed forces personnel as they continue to protect our country, both at home and overseas, and that the Government must explain exactly how they will achieve that?

Dr Pinkerton: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I know that residents in my constituency face having to leave the armed forces because of the disruption that the added VAT would cause and the difficulty of procuring educational offerings. I ask the Government to think again about this policy—this education tax—and its timing and application, especially now, when SEND provision is already broken in counties such as Surrey and requires fundamental reform; when local independent schools are already struggling, having borne many of the costs associated with inflation, lived through the pandemic and endured many of the costs attached to that; and when state schools are already struggling to provide the education that they want to provide.

10.10 am

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am amazed by the Conservative Opposition's chutzpah when they talk about special educational needs. No one would have thought that they had been in power for the last 14 years and overseen the running down of the system so that it is almost impossible to get an education, health and care plan—these days, 98% of tribunals award plans against councils. We have a system without special educational needs co-ordinators. We have a special educational needs system that, thanks to the legacy of the Conservative Government—14 years of decline—is failing.

I speak as someone who was for 14 years the governor of two special schools near my constituency. I am proud of what the last Labour Government achieved: £1 billion into services for disabled children and young people and their families, and lots of new rights for those people. Under the Conservatives, we have gone backwards, and the situation in the special educational needs sector is dire. As a result, young people cannot get the EHCPs they need.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Ben Coleman: Let me make a little bit more progress. Cash-strapped councils are having to send their constituents' children to private schools because state provision is not available. Parents from my constituency have written to me saying that their only reason for sending a child to a private school to meet their dyslexia, neurodivergence or other needs is not that they are ideologically in favour of doing so, but that they cannot do anything else. The provision is not there locally, and that is because of 14 years of Conservative decline. It is absolutely extraordinary.

Dr Spencer: Bearing in mind that around 15% of children in independent schools have special educational needs and only around 5% have an EHCP, given the move back into the state sector that this policy will cause and given the hon. Gentleman's experience and personal concern about EHCPs, will he be voting against the policy?

Ben Coleman: The one thing I did not hear from the hon. Gentleman was an apology for what his party did to the special educational needs system in this country over 14 years.

We do have a problem as a result of the policy, however. Parents who cannot easily afford to send their children to private schools are digging deep into their pockets, as my constituents in Chelsea and Fulham have written to me. That is the situation we are faced with. Local councils are sending kids to private schools because they cannot do otherwise, and the schools are small and cannot easily absorb the VAT. I am pleased that the Government recognise the particular challenges facing children with additional needs and have agreed to exempt those with EHCPs from VAT. I am pleased that the Government have committed, as the Minister said when discussing SEND in a debate before the recess—

Mr Amos: I appreciate the point the hon. Member is trying to make, but given that children simply cannot get an EHCP, how does he expect them to get the support they need?

Ben Coleman: I am glad the hon. Member appreciates the point I am trying to make. I will make the point it absolutely clear: because children cannot get an EHCP thanks to the failures of the Conservative Government, local councils and parents who can ill afford it are having to send their kids to private schools. I am concerned that the use of EHCPs as a criterion for VAT exemption is too limited, but I do not think that any Conservative Member here has a right to talk about SEND without first saying, "I am sorry." I support the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that before we go ahead with this policy, we undertake a proper assessment of the impact on the education of children with special educational needs who do not have EHCPs. That is a perfectly reasonable point to make, given the hideous, cruel and inept situation in which the Conservative party has left this country's special educational needs system.

10.14 am

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this debate. I should declare that I am a governor at Shillington and Stondon Federation, and a Central Bedfordshire councillor.

Labour Members are notable by their absence. I can only imagine that they are ashamed of this policy to charge VAT on education. Parents across the country and in Mid Bedfordshire deserve to be able to send their child to the best school for them. Parental choice is crucial to ensuring that our children get the best start in life, but too many parents in Bedfordshire are already struggling to get that for their children. The Department for Education has acknowledged that Bedford borough's secondary schools are effectively full. A new school will not come along until 2027, and it is anticipated that even that school will be filled by future housing growth.

Just over 15% of children in Bedford borough, and nearly 10% of children in central Bedfordshire, did not receive an offer for their first choice secondary school. That situation will get worse as our population grows.

[Blake Stephenson]

Across Bedfordshire, 19 independent schools currently support 5,744 pupils. It is a policy of envy—the Labour Government want to drive pupils away from the independent sector and into state schools. That means less choice for parents and bigger class sizes, reducing the quality of education for all.

The Government have talked about growing the economy, but imposing VAT on independent schools will fundamentally damage the economy in Bedfordshire. Independent schools contribute £800 million to the east of England's economy, supporting 47,000 jobs. In a recent visit to Orchard school in Barton-le-Clay in my constituency, I was struck by its wider economic impact. It employs local people, uses local suppliers, and supports local businesses.

10.16 am

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this important debate. Just last week, I held a roundtable with headteachers, school governors and bursars from five independent schools in and around my constituency. I am grateful to Abbey Gate college for hosting. The message from everyone at that meeting was clear: the child is not at the centre of this policy. This is not just about the more than 1,600 pupils attending independent schools in my constituency; it is about the education of every single child, because every pupil who leaves the independent sector as a result of this ill-thought-through policy will mean further pressure put on the state system.

As independent schools try to absorb rising costs to minimise the impact of these taxes, they are faced with difficult choices about how to continue the important charitable work they do, including fully-funded bursary places—as many as one in 14 pupils at one senior school in my constituency. Like others here, I am particularly concerned about the impact on children with special educational needs.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Hard-working families sacrifice huge amounts to put their children into independent schools. There are more than 2,000 pupils in Epping Forest independent schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Labour policy of removing VAT and business rates exemption from independent schools will impact pupils right across the country, including SEND pupils, and will also impact our fantastic local state schools, which will be hit with serious capacity issues when pupils are forced to transfer? This policy is about the politics of envy, rather than the politics of evidence.

Aphra Brandreth: Absolutely. The policy will impact all children across our country, and needs to be taken seriously. I have spoken previously about the challenges of SEND provision in my constituency, where families wait months for an EHCP. They are already being let down, so I am deeply concerned about the added pressure of this policy.

Finally, the policy is simply unworkable. The Government are asking staff and bursars to rethink how they operate invoicing and fee processing halfway through an academic year. At the very least, I urge the Government to move

the start to the beginning of the next academic year. This is not about embossed stationery, swimming pools and astroturf; it is about children and their education. I urge the Government to think very carefully about this decision and to do as the headteachers at my roundtable on Friday suggested: put children at the centre of this policy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): This is a reminder that there is a two-minute time limit and, in order to get through the remaining speakers, I am now not going to add an additional minute for each intervention.

10.20 am

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. What irony that the Government have sent a Minister to listen to these debates who went to a private school. I wonder whether his parents would have been able to afford the extra 20%.

However, as the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) said, this is about the education not just of those at independent schools, but of the hundreds of thousands in the state system. Their education will also be damaged because of the capacity crisis. Class sizes will grow. There is an SEN crisis everywhere. Local authorities are in panic; headteachers are in panic; parents are in panic and, most shamefully of all, children are panicking. Will they be removed from their school in the middle of a school year, be taken from their friends and have their education damaged? It is extraordinary.

I give one example: I have had a letter from a constituent who has two children with SEN provision. She cannot afford the extra 20% so she has to put her children into the state system. There is no capacity within an hour's drive, so she has a quote from the local taxi firm. The cost to the local authority will be over £20,000 in taxi fares per child. That is not only damaging to the education of children; it is an economics of utter tomfoolery and madness.

10.21 am

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that even a modest migration of 3% to 7% of private school students to the state sector will cost the Government hundreds of millions of pounds a year, wiping out much of the projected revenue from VAT. Far from improving the education system, the policy will add stress to state schools already grappling with limited resources and overcrowded classrooms. It is a tax on aspiration, which disproportionately impacts hard-working families already making sacrifices. Perhaps most importantly, this policy will damage the significant contribution that independent schools make to special educational needs and disabilities provision.

A constituent of mine is worried about this exact issue. She got in touch to say:

"My son has been diagnosed with ADHD and high-functioning ASD...he has already been let down by the state education system. His first school reported us to social services, rather than

offering the support he needed. His second school refused to help us secure an EHCP, and instead suggested we monitor his intake of E-numbers.

Given these challenges, we made the difficult decision to enrol him in private education.

We are not part of the elite; we work very hard and have had to borrow a significant amount of money to cover his tuition fees for next year.”

The proposed removal of business rates relief will exacerbate the financial challenges faced by independent schools, and the loss of those schools will devastate local communities, limit educational choice and further diminish the capacity for SEND education. The Labour Government’s lack of impact assessment and weak fiscal evaluation will ultimately be detrimental to many families in my constituency.

10.23 am

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. After 20 years’ experience in local authorities on education and children’s services and as a father of young children, I have had the opportunity to see the best in both the private and state sectors. I declare an interest as someone who will be impacted by the policy. I agree with everything that has been said about the educational impact, so I will focus my remarks on the financial angle of the Government’s proposals.

Representing a constituency with six mainstream independent schools and numerous small SEND providers, I can clearly see that there is a huge amount of anxiety among mums and dads and school teachers about the impact the policy will have. The first key factor is that where private schools are full, the state schools are usually also full. Parents are finding that if they need to move, there is simply not the capacity in the state system locally because of the demographics of pupils.

We have to ask ourselves: does the harm done by this policy produce a benefit in the state sector that would justify it to our constituents? The Government’s proposal amounts to less than half of the cost of a single classroom teacher per state school across the whole of England—not even sufficient to make up for the numbers of children displaced by the impact of this policy. So it is no great financial gain for state schools that may be feeling pressed—and, as has been said, it makes us the only country in the developed world to tax schooling.

More concerning, however, are two impacts. The first is the reclaimability of VAT that bringing schools within scope entails. It is likely that the Government will have to repay far more VAT to independent schools than they will raise by this policy. Secondly there is the impact of business rates; we have not spent a lot of time on them in this debate, but, at a time when we know that the average state school in England has a surplus balance of more than £162,000, we have to ask whether, given the harm it does to the sustainability of our private sector, this policy is possibly justified at a time of declining state school roll numbers.

10.25 am

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this debate. I want to bring up a specific Northern Ireland and constituency-based concern. When the addition of VAT to special schools was first proposed,

I was contacted by the administrator of Newtownabbey Independent Christian school. I want to quote what he informed me:

“We receive no revenue or capital funding from the Department of Education to run our school therefore our parents have no choice but to pay fees when, out of religious conviction, they chose to send their children to our school. We are not an elite school, nor do we practise academic selection in any form. We believe this policy lacks fairness. Some of our school parents are on low incomes, demonstrated by pupils being entitled to free school meals. An added cost of 20% will deprive them of their religious based choice to send them to a Christian School.”

That is important not only in a Northern Ireland context, but in the context of this Government’s intention to add VAT to independent school fees, because under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, public authorities must

“have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity”.

Adding this VAT fee to a religious-based school deprives the protected characteristic of religious belief. The administrator also believes that the addition of VAT may well be an infringement of parents’ religious freedom and liberty. Article 2, protocol 1 of the European convention on human rights states:

“No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”

Dame Caroline Dinéage (in the Chair): Order. We have to move on to the next speaker.

10.28 am

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. At the outset, I must declare a personal financial interest in relation to this issue. There is a multiplicity of reasons why the Government plan to impose a 20% VAT levy on private education is a fundamentally poor choice. It plays to the idle trope that independent schools are the preserve of the privileged and the wealthy when, as many of my own constituents will attest, that is simply not the case. It is a policy that lacks nuance in its pursuit of an ideological desire to level down rather than lift up the standard of education across the board.

The detrimental effect of this ill-conceived policy is nowhere better illustrated than in the cohort of pupils whose parents are in receipt of continuity of education allowance. CEA is critical for military and diplomatic service families, who need boarding schools to provide a stable education. A societal and moral contract exists between the state and our military, a golden thread that runs through our society and binds the two together. The Government’s proposals threaten not just to shake that bond, but to break it. To date, the Government have provided no assurances that the policy will exempt those service families in receipt of CEA. Combine with that the rushed decision to implement the plan by January 2025, and it is little wonder that service families are deeply distressed by the ongoing uncertainty.

If the Government fail to grip the situation, the cost of a suitable education for many armed forces children will become unaffordable. Many parents will be forced to withdraw their children from the school they currently

[*Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst*]

attend and, in the worst-case scenario, many will make the decision that service life is no longer compatible with their family and leave, risking our national security.

By failing to act with competence, the Government are failing to uphold the contract between the state and our armed forces. My request to the Minister is to provide the service community with reassurances that they will not be left high and dry.

10.30 am

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this important debate.

My constituency of Huntingdon has three independent schools and the issue we are debating today will significantly affect Kimbolton school in the west of the constituency. The absence of any secondary school places at schools within a commutable distance of Kimbolton has caused concern for many of the parents who have contacted me. Cambridgeshire, and specifically Huntingdonshire, has grown significantly in recent years; with large areas of development already approved, as well as changes to planning regulations and the Government's commitment to greater Cambridge, we will see tens of thousands of homes built in the county during this Parliament alone.

As secondary schools in Huntingdonshire already have waiting lists for every year group, and local parents are troubled by the governance and educational environment at the three schools within the Astrea multi-academy trust, an exodus from the independent sector might exacerbate existing issues and create unnecessary pressures. Thus far, the Government have done nothing to address or assuage these pressures and concerns.

The views of the students impacted are among the voices that we rarely hear. Harriet Dolby, the former head girl at Kimbolton school, who left the school this past summer, told me of her concerns about how the school's culture could be irrevocably altered. She said:

"Kimbolton School has made such a significant impact on my life, giving me opportunities I would not have been able to get anywhere else, growing my confidence and helping me to gain positions of leadership, which have set me up with skills for the future. However, I am concerned that Kimbolton will not be able to make that positive impact on as many people's lives in the future. 20% VAT on school fees will be too much of a stretch for too many parents and will likely damage the family feel made possible by having pupils from a wide range of family backgrounds. I am worried that the Kimbolton School that my siblings will attend won't be the same school that I attended because of this VAT."

I have little confidence that the Government will deviate from their present course, but mitigation of the concerns is much needed. The Government are wedded to their aspiration tax. It will level the playing field but, sadly, that level is likely to be lower and not higher.

10.32 am

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure, Dame Caroline, to serve under your chairmanship and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this important debate. I am so pleased to speak in it.

I support all our schools and I am proud to have a range of independent schools in the Runnymede and Weybridge constituency. I declare an interest: my children, like one in five children in my constituency, go to an independent school.

I want to take the opportunity that we have today with a Treasury Minister responding to the debate, because Treasury Ministers are all over numbers and impacts. I am pleased to see that it would seem that, following the election, the Treasury has looked at Labour's manifesto commitments and actually thought about them, to the extent that we are starting to get various leaks and stories that it will abandon them. I hope that the Treasury will do the same thing with this awful policy.

I know that a Treasury Minister will not make a decision without an impact assessment and I am sure that the Exchequer Secretary will express his concerns about the absence of an impact assessment for this policy. However, while he is considering what the impact of the change—I hope he comes to the Dispatch Box to tell us the numbers around it—let me share some information from my constituency, where about 7,500 to 8,000 children attend independent schools.

My schools tell me that about 5% to 10% of these pupils will move because of the imposition of a tax on education. That means there will be far more pressure on our local state school system and there will also be disruption for those children. It also means that the 10% to 15% of children with special educational needs who do not have EHCPs will start seeking them, which will mean more cost for the taxpayer and more transfers between schools, which would be a backwards policy. Most egregiously of all, the Government are going to do that halfway through the educational year, with no consideration for our constituents' GCSE, A-level and baccalaureate exam results. Will the Minister think again and persuade the Secretary of State for Education to abandon this ridiculous policy?

10.34 am

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): I should be clear that both my children attend independent schools. Like many parents who make the same choice, my wife and I, with the support of our families, made sacrifices to enrol them. We did so because, with that support, we could.

Make no mistake: I recognise it is a privilege to have that opportunity. Like many parents, I want to give my children something I did not have growing up—an excellent education. My schooling in Lambeth, where I grew up on a council estate, left a lot to be desired. As I grew older, I realised that an excellent education was the way out. With my children, I spent what I had to give them the best possible education. Crucially, our decision for our family did not impact anyone else.

Sending children to independent school—a personal and privileged choice—is not a bad thing that should be taxed and regulated out of existence, as Labour also want to do with smoking or by introducing a two thirds of a pint measure. It does not mean that state schools are poorer. In fact, we pay our taxes and opt out, leaving more space and school resources for others. Independent schools also offer bursaries and donate the use of their facilities to other local schools. Those who

think differently have an ideological obsession, and I am afraid that this new Labour Government share it. They are not thinking about lifting schools up, but tearing some down. Remember, in 2019, it was the Labour party that voted to abolish independent schools.

Instead of the complete destruction they desire, the Government have settled, for now, on taxing these schools to the brink by imposing VAT on fees and removing their charitable status. What they picture are Eton schoolkids fresh from the family estate, high on their parents' aspirations. They do not picture the kid done good from a council estate who also has high aspirations, the shopworker doing the extra shifts to give her kids the chance she never had or the parents giving up everything to get the extra SEN care they want to provide for their child.

This is ideological, not practical. It is knocking people down, not lifting our country up. Worst of all, it is ill-considered. As one local headteacher told me, this policy is nothing short of cruel.

10.35 am

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline.

As the MP for Wimbledon, I am proud to represent a constituency with such a rich and diverse education offering, including fantastic primary and secondary schools in both the independent and state sectors. I am deeply concerned about the impact that the removal of the VAT exemption will have on many of these schools. Private school enrolments have already dropped in expectation of the tax hike, and there is growing concern that the numbers leaving the private sector and entering the state system will be much higher than the Government estimate.

As the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) made clear when she said it did not matter if imposing VAT resulted in state school class sizes increasing, this decision is ideological, not practical—levelling down, not up, with red meat to show that the red flag is still flying, or at least fluttering. It will be rushed through in just three months' time, in the middle of the academic year, giving institutions with no tax expertise little time to register for VAT, let alone assess and adapt.

Labour can only do this because the UK left the EU. Who said there were no Brexit dividends? Not for the first time, my party is in harmony with Brussels, and believes that education should not be taxed. We are a party that believes in giving individuals agency and supporting them in making choices about their and their families' lives.

For many, such decisions are made because they know their child would not receive the support they need within the state sector. Independent schools in my constituency, such as the Hall school, Willington and the Study, to name but three, do a huge amount to support children with special educational needs. I have spoken to many parents who have made tough financial sacrifices in order to send their children to these schools. They speak of the barriers to their children receiving the support they need, including long waiting lists to receive an EHCP. According to the Independent Schools Council, 90,000 children are receiving SEND support without an EHCP.

In short, this Government should be aiming to improve all schools, regardless of their status, and they should be pursuing policies based on evidence, not dogma.

Dame Caroline Dinage (in the Chair): I thank all Members for their forbearance and efficiency this morning. We have managed to get through everybody. I also thank the Front-Bench spokespeople for forgoing a little bit of their summing up time. I call Sarah Olney for the Liberal Democrats.

10.38 am

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this important debate and thank all Members who contributed so eloquently.

The Liberal Democrats do not support imposing VAT on private school fees. We do not support treating independent schools differently to other independent education providers for VAT purposes.

VAT is a complicated tax with many quirks and exemptions. Goods and services that are outwardly similar can be given different tax treatments based on the smallest of variations and those different tax treatments can have a large impact on the eventual cost borne by the consumer. Administering VAT and negotiating its various intricacies creates a huge burden for organisations that provide VAT-able goods and services to the public, and that burden is expensive.

All forms of education have always been exempt from VAT for the simple reason that taxing education services would disincentivise people from purchasing them. As with healthcare services—also exempt from VAT—it has never before been considered good public policy to discourage people from purchasing education. Additionally, exempting education providers from VAT frees them from the burden and expense of administering the tax, which means that money that otherwise would be spent on educating children does not have to be spent on tax returns.

The Government propose that their new tax treatment should be applied only to the provision of private schooling, but taxing some forms of education and not others would almost inevitably create loopholes. Creative accountants will find ways of delivering education services that fall outside the VAT legislation, while other education providers—which the Government did not intend to tax—will unwittingly find themselves caught up in it. The risks of those distortions increase if the legislation is hastily framed, with insufficient time for scrutiny.

Of the 615,000 children in private schools in this country, almost 100,000 are being educated privately because they have special educational needs but do not have an EHCP. The Government have announced that they plan to exclude privately educated pupils with an EHCP from VAT on school fees. That is a welcome step, but does not protect those who do not have an EHCP from a steep rise in fees. The parents of many of those children will find that they cannot afford the increase, throwing the future of their children's education into doubt. Moreover, there will be an increase in demand for local authorities to issue EHCPs stating that the local authority must fund a private school place. Local authority resources for special education needs and

[Sarah Olney]

disabilities are already stretched to breaking point, and additional demand will be impossible to manage. The inevitable result will be that thousands of children with SEND will be forced into the state sector all at once, which will be enormously disruptive and potentially traumatic for those children, as well as being immensely difficult for state schools to manage.

It is not just children with SEND who will be affected. There will be many thousands of other children across the country whose parents will find that they can no longer afford to keep them in their current school. Those children will experience enormous disruption to their education as they are forced to change schools and, for many, the upheaval of being separated from their friends and a familiar environment. The Government should reflect carefully on whether the benefits of the policy they are intent on pursuing is worth the damage that it will cause to these children's education and wellbeing.

I have been contacted by many schools in my constituency who say that even a small reduction in their roll as a result of this change will make their situation untenable. Between parents who cannot afford to pay their children's fees and schools that cannot keep their doors open, the state will need to find space, and resources, for an influx of new students. That influx will not be evenly distributed. In my constituency it is estimated that more than 45% of children attend a fee paying private school. In common with other parts of London, demand for state primary places is down, so younger children will be easily accommodated. However, secondary schools are experiencing great pressure for places, and a rise in requests for in-year admissions will be difficult to meet.

The Liberal Democrats believe that a better alternative to charging VAT on school fees is to encourage private schools to support their local communities, by building links with local state schools and sharing facilities. There are already good examples of these kinds of partnerships happening all over the country and we believe that those can be developed further. Last week, I visited Lowther primary school in Barnes. As I was being shown round the school by Leo, Talia, Elia, Milla, Nick and Abdullah, they were keen to tell me about the swimming lessons they enjoyed at St Paul's school, a nearby boys' independent school. The schools link up for a range of activities, and I was very impressed to see the trophy that the children won in the recent Lego competition hosted by St Paul's. A majority of independent schools have already developed similar partnerships with local schools and the Liberal Democrats want to see that become the norm with every single school.

In conclusion, the Liberal Democrats are opposed to the Government's plans to impose VAT on private school fees because we believe that it is wrong to tax education, however it is provided. Imposing this increase in fees will cause a precipitate increase in costs for families, resulting in many being forced to undertake a forced, disruptive change in schools. That change will have a disproportionate impact on children with SEND, which will not just create hardship for those children and their parents, but also enormous difficulties for the local authorities and state schools that will be required to provide alternative schooling. There are other routes

to equalising outcomes between those educated privately and those educated in the state sector, and the Liberal Democrats believe that communities can be strengthened by encouraging partnerships between different schools, of which there are already many excellent examples.

10.44 am

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Dame Caroline. May I first congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this important debate? I thank all those who have participated today; we have heard some very insightful contributions. I am also glad to have the shadow Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), sitting beside me today.

We can see from the large number of contributions, particularly from Opposition Members, how important this issue is to Members and their constituents, many of whom are greatly distressed by the Government's proposals. We believe they are flawed in both design and execution, or at least planned execution, which is perhaps why so few Members from the Government party are here to defend them today. The policy will move away from a long-held principle that educational services are not taxed in this country, or in most developed economies. We have five broad categories of concern: the impact on state schools, the impact on overall Government finances, the timing of the proposals, consideration of exemptions, and the impact on SEND and EHCP provision. I shall turn to each of these briefly.

First, it is clear that the policy will have a detrimental impact not only on the independent sector, but on the state sector. The imposition of a 20% VAT tax hike overnight will clearly mean that some families will no longer be able to afford the fees. That is basic economics. In addition, the imposition of business rates will further disrupt the business model of independent schools and make less money available for bursaries and subsidies, which many parents rely on. Inevitably, that will mean children leaving the private sector and moving to the state system, putting an additional burden on many state schools, some of which do not have the capacity. It will also make fewer spaces available at good and outstanding local state schools where spaces would otherwise have been available, because more pupils would have taken the independent route. This is not a fear or scaremongering; this is reality. It is happening now.

According to the Independent Schools Council, more than 10,000 pupils have already been pulled from independent schools. One think-tank has estimated that far from bringing additional money into the Treasury, the policy could cost the taxpayer £1.6 billion, which brings me to my second point about the impact on overall Government finances.

Out of total Government spending of more than £1.2 trillion, is this policy really the top target of the new Government? It smacks of the politics of envy, not of careful deliberation and consideration of evidence. On the topic of overall Government finances, will the Department for Education get more funding from the Treasury if the number of state pupils exceeds expectations, or will they be expected to pay for it within existing budgets? Have the Government set aside capital for additional new school places if that is needed?

Regarding the timing of the proposals, it is unfathomable why the Government are considering introducing this policy in the middle of the school year. Why? It does not make any sense to cause so much mid-year disruption to so many schools, pupils and families.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: This will clearly be open to legal challenge, which stands very little chance of being in the courts within the next three months. As it gets held up, will this policy not cause mass disruption by being introduced in the middle of the academic year?

Nigel Huddleston: My right hon. Friend raises another important point, and I believe some legal challenges are already in place. Regarding timing, is the Minister truly confident that the policy could be implemented within weeks? Is His Majesty's Revenue and Customs adequately resourced and prepared for it? Is the legislation ready? Is the legislation and guidance sufficiently clear? Even if the answer to all of the above is yes, is it fair on independent schools to expect them to suddenly get their heads around new legislation, register for VAT, implement new systems and processes, and logistically carry out the execution of this policy, all before Christmas? The answer is clearly no. I implore the Minister at least to delay the implementation, and carefully consider some exemptions and special considerations, my fourth category of concerns, which have been raised by many hon. Members today.

The rushed policy appears not to have properly considered carve-outs for pupils from military families, students on the music and dance scheme, children attending small or small faith schools, those paying low fees or who are on bursaries, or children in exam years who may have to move to another school that does not offer their current subject, offers different syllabuses, or has different examination boards. I hope that when we finally see the impact assessment, we will see some consideration of those matters.

My fifth category of concern is what consideration has been given to pupils with special educational needs and those with an EHCP or who are in the process of getting an EHCP.

Ben Coleman: Given that the situation confronting the Government is entirely of the previous Government's making, will the hon. Member apologise for the terrible state of the SEND system?

Nigel Huddleston: I applaud the hon. Gentleman for his bravery, given that 2,500 pupils attend independent schools in his constituency. I think they will have a different view from his.

Ben Coleman: Will he apologise?

Dame Caroline Dinenege (in the Chair): Order.

Nigel Huddleston: As for provision, as my right hon. Friend will articulate this afternoon, more than 200,000 EHCPs were issued with SEND provision. We provided more support than the Labour Government ever did.

If, as many predict, there is displacement of children with SEND and EHCPs into the state sector, is there capacity? Is there adequate additional financial support for local authorities to deal with the predicted surge in demand? If the answer is no, or I do not know, to any of those questions, the Government must delay this policy.

Before I conclude, I ask the Minister to have the decency to recognise the apparent hypocrisy of so many Members on the Government Benches, including himself, who attended independent schools or send their children to one, yet are now determined to increase the costs on others, depriving many families of the choice that they benefited from.

I also ask him to apologise on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education for her appalling divisive tweet over the weekend, which betrays her lack of awareness of the realities of independent schools across the country. Headteachers, teachers and parents in both the state and independent sectors, unions, tax experts and think tanks are all appealing to the Government to think twice about this policy. I appeal to the Minister to listen and act accordingly.

10.51 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Dame Caroline. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this debate, and thanking all hon. Members for their contributions. I have listened carefully and, although I do not have much time, I will attempt to address as many of the points raised as possible.

Every member of the Government cares deeply about education, and we are committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity. We are determined to fulfil the aspirations of every parent in our country to get the best education for their children. We are committed to doing so by improving state schools, and by making sure that every child has access to high-quality education.

We will start to make that happen by expanding early years childcare for all, by opening 3,000 new nurseries across England. We will recruit 6,500 new teachers, alongside improving teacher and headteacher training. We will roll out breakfast clubs to all primary schools, so that no child starts class too hungry to learn.

Those improvements to the state education system will begin our work to make sure that every parent's aspiration for their child can be fulfilled. We want to get on with those important changes right away, and to do so, they must be paid for.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I will make some progress first. That is why, to help fund those improvements to our state schools, we have made the tough but necessary decision to end tax breaks for private schools. At the July statement, the Government announced that as of 1 January 2025, all education services and vocational training provided by a private school in the UK for a charge will be subject to VAT at the standard rate of 20%. Any fees paid from the date of the 29 July statement, relating to the term starting in January 2025 onwards, will be subject to VAT. As hon. Members know, the Government also announced that private schools in England with charitable status would lose their eligibility for business rates charitable rate relief from April 2025, subject to parliamentary passage of the legislation.

Those changes were set out in a technical note published online, alongside draft VAT legislation, which formed a technical consultation. As part of that consultation, the

[James Murray]

Government, at both official and ministerial level, engaged with a broad range of stakeholders, including the devolved Governments, to make sure that we understand the impact of the policy in each nation of the UK.

We have listened carefully to the points people have raised with us. We recognise that, while this policy will raise revenue to help support improvements in the state education sector, it may lead to increased costs for some parents and carers whose children are in the private education system. Let me be clear that while private schools will now be required to charge VAT on the education services and vocational training they provide, we expect most private schools will be able to absorb a significant proportion of this new VAT charge to keep fee increases affordable for most parents. They will be able to make efficiencies and recover the VAT they incur on the things they buy.

Mr Adnan Hussain: Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I am going to make some progress. Those recovered costs can be used to offset the increases to fee payers. We are already seeing that some schools have committed to absorbing the VAT liability entirely, while others are choosing to cap fee increases at 5% or 10% to keep fees as low as possible for parents. Members have asked today why we will introduce this policy in January 2025. The reason for doing so is simple: we want to raise the funding we need as soon as possible to deliver our education priorities to state schools across the country.

Dr Ben Spencer: Will the Minister give way on that point?

James Murray: I do not have much time and I need to address the other points that hon. Members have made in this debate. Importantly, a January 2025 start date means that schools and parents will have had five months to prepare for the VAT change. HMRC is ready to ensure that schools are supported in delivering this change. To respond to the shadow Minister's comment, HMRC will put in place a number of measures to ensure that all private schools can be registered ahead of 1 January 2025, including publishing bespoke guidance on gov.uk ahead of 30 October, updating registration systems and putting additional resource in place to help process applications.

Ahead of the policy being implemented, the Government have carefully considered the impact the changes will have on pupils and their families across both the state and private sectors, as well their impact on state and private schools. The Government's costings of this policy are currently being scrutinised by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility. The Chancellor will confirm our approach to the measures at Budget, where we will set out our assessment of the expected impacts of the change in the normal way.

We recognise, as some hon. Members have raised, the changes may lead to some pupils moving into the state education sector. However, we believe that the number of pupils who may switch schools as a result of the changes will represent a very small proportion of overall pupil numbers in the state sector and such switches

will take place over several years. We are confident that the state sector will be able to accommodate any additional pupils.

Damian Hinds: Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I have only a few moments left to address a number of points, so I will make some progress. Several hon. Members in their contributions today also raised their concern about the impact of the policy on pupils in private schools with special educational needs. We have carefully considered that element of the policy. Our proposed approach makes sure that pupils will not be impacted where they have acute additional needs and an education, health and care plan—in England, or its equivalent in other nations—specifies that those can be met only in a private school. In such cases, where a pupil's needs can be met only in a private school, local authorities will fund their places and will be able to reclaim VAT. Similarly, on business rates, the Government are developing an approach to address the potential impact of the changes in cases where private school provision has been specified for pupils through an EHCP. More widely, as a Government, we are committed to transforming the system for supporting children and young people with SEND in all schools. We need to deliver better outcomes in a financially sustainable way.

I close by again thanking all hon. Members for taking part in this debate. In our consultation about the technical detail of this policy, we have been engaging widely and in depth, and of course the views of MPs are an important part of that. As I said earlier, it has been a tough but necessary decision to end tax breaks for private schools. We believe it is the right decision and one we need to implement as soon as possible to help raise the funding we need to deliver our priorities for state education in our country. We are determined to improve the education that is available to all, because that is how we will ensure that the aspiration of every parent to get the best possible education for their children can be fulfilled.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): Bradley Thomas has one minute to wind up.

10.59 am

Bradley Thomas: I thank every single Member who has spoken today in this debate, and I particularly thank the families in attendance who are affected by this policy. We have heard Members talk about the concerns of the impact of the policy on capacity, SEND and simply the element of choice, as well as human stories of how this policy will impact many families and children across the country. I am disappointed that an Education Minister has not attended and instead a Treasury Minister has. The Minister has demonstrated that he can read Labour's political script but has sadly lacked the courage to answer the points that have been raised in this Chamber.

To sum up, we have heard words such as "cruel", "sacrifice" and "disruptive", as well as concerns from families that their children's performance will suffer in schools. In short, this is a joyless, mean-spirited policy from a joyless, mean-spirited Government, and I think it is evident from the lack of Labour Members present that they probably agree with the sentiments expressed on this side of the Chamber.

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

Creative Industries: Stoke-on-Trent

11.1 am

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for the creative industries in Stoke-on-Trent.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I thank Members for joining me in what I hope will be a much better-tempered debate than the one you have just officiated over.

Stoke-on-Trent was and is the crucible of creativity. We were at the forefront of the last industrial revolution, and we are now quietly and diligently leading our very own creative renaissance in the city and the surrounding area. The last measurement suggested that growth in our creative industries stood at about 6.3%, which is in no small part down to the determination of a number of organisations. With your indulgence, Dame Caroline, and that of Members present, I will take a short canter through the A to Z of the cultural organisations and institutions in Stoke-on-Trent that are doing so much excellent work.

Let me start with Appetite, a public arts organisation that has been demonstrating to communities across north Staffordshire not only that public art is available to everybody but the joy that can be had from interaction with and involvement in art, in a way that would not normally have been available to some communities even 10 years ago.

B arts is a wonderful participatory arts organisation that currently has its Bread in Common shop at the bottom of Hartshill Road in my constituency, where it has fused creativity with a burning passion for food justice.

We are also home to some incredibly well-placed and innovative business organisations. Carse & Waterman, a Stoke-based animation company, is doing world-leading work from a converted bank on Stoke high street.

Members will have noticed the change to some of the design work on the crockery and tableware in the Members' Dining Room, which has all come from Duchess China 1888 in Stoke-on-Trent, where it still manufactures using high-grade bone china techniques, and does so with flair.

On the ceramics front, Emma Bailey is still active in Stoke-on-Trent. She is one of the most beautiful designers, using her talent for creativity and art to keep alive the spirit and patterns of Clarice Cliff, who was of course one of the city's best-known residents.

Alongside the well-known names we have a growing group of freelancers—I will talk to the Minister about this later—who indulge in the opportunity to turn their creative ability into a viable income. We have a network of individuals who see creativity as a path for their own determination, success and fulfilment, and we need a bit of help to ensure that that can come to fruition.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. It is a pleasure to see him back in the House, and I thank him for his contribution. He has outlined what is happening in Stoke, and we have the same things across Northern Ireland and in my constituency. In Northern Ireland,

creative industries contribute some £1 billion to the economy, and the Department for Communities estimates that they account for some 5% of the entire workforce and 29,000 jobs.

In my town of Newtownards, action has been taken on controlled graffiti, as it costs the council and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive money to cover up illegal graffiti. A company has come up with a real opportunity for the creative sector in possibly employing students from local colleges to partake in action on illegal graffiti. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that is something the creative industries can do to help practically, in all communities?

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman, who is my friend, is absolutely right. With the right structure, creativity and public art can go a long way to helping to reduce some of the structural problems we see in our communities, whether that be antisocial behaviour or derelict buildings. If he would ever like to join us for a tour around Stoke-on-Trent, I can show him some of the wonderful public art and particularly some of the murals on our buildings, which not only succinctly tell the story of the city but do so much to brighten up the place in a vibrant way.

I had reached G in my A to Z, so I shall talk about “The Great Pottery Throw Down”, which is not only a wonderful demonstration of the heritage skills we have in Stoke-on-Trent but proof that blockbuster television can be made in Stoke-on-Trent. We are privileged that it is filmed at Gladstone Pottery Museum, which was also the set for “The Colour Room”, a wonderful Sky adaptation of the life of Clarice Cliff. That demonstrates that with the right imagination anything is possible in Stoke.

That imagination is what has allowed us to take some of our heritage buildings back into use. The Spode site in the middle of Stoke town is becoming a createch hub—a place where creative industries and organisations are coming together to work together, not only to share their ideas and aspirations but to put their creative skills to use. That is producing this microcosm of energy and ideas that is having real dividends for those organisations, particularly as they now have a shared apprenticeship scheme that allows individuals from Staffordshire University to see different areas of the creative industries that could be available to them once they graduate.

One of the organisations involved is i.creation. It is run by the wonderful Andy Jackson, who does so much work in terms of community news and helping organisations to tell a better story about who they are.

Just down the road from Andy's i.creation we have Junction 15, which is technically in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), but we are one big, happy north Staffordshire family. One of Junction 15's directors won an Emmy for the work they did at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. *[Interruption.]* The Minister corrects me—not for the first time—but we will hear his speech later.

We are fortunate in north Staffordshire that underpinning the creative industry are two wonderful universities. Next year, Keele University is bringing in a music production, game design and digital media course, because it realises that growing a pipeline of local talent is important for growing the local creative industry.

[Gareth Snell]

One of the companies looking for that pipeline is Lesniak Swann, an award-winning business-to-business marketing organisation. The company has asked me to point out that the creative industry is one of our best export markets because the work we do in the UK is highly desirable to organisations around the world. Lesniak Swann does wonderful B2B marketing work, which is incredibly creative, from its home in Stoke-on-Trent but for companies based in Norway and America. We need to think about where our creative industries can contribute to UK exports.

All this is part of Made in Stoke, a network of entrepreneurs, philanthropists and individuals who have a connection to our city and who want to come together to make it better. One of the strands they are looking at is how individuals who have gone away from Stoke-on-Trent and done wonderful things in arts, culture and creativity can come back to the city to help to inspire the next generation of new and aspiring creatives.

If people do come to Stoke, one of the best places they can visit is the New Vic Theatre, a purpose-built theatre in the round. Again, it is just over the border in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, but, again, we are one big, happy north Staffordshire family. The work the theatre does is not just about award-winning stage productions that often come down to London's west end. It also does outreach work through Borderlines, which uses creativity and culture to tackle community cohesion issues and community prejudices through art, drama and music. Both as a theatre and through outreach work, the New Vic has been able to demonstrate that, if they want to be involved, there is a role in culture and creativity even for some of the toughest communities that may not immediately have thought about it.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend both on securing this debate and for acknowledging the wonder that is north Staffordshire, and not least for acknowledging the brilliant work that takes place at the New Vic Theatre, which is in Newcastle-under-Lyme but not too far away from the Stoke-on-Trent Central border. Through my hon. Friend, I extend to the Minister an invitation to come and see for himself the wonderful New Vic and the great work it does in the community.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend has stolen my thunder, as I was going to offer the Minister an invitation at the end of my speech. The New Vic is wonderful, and with a creative boundary review it may one day be in Stoke-on-Trent Central—but that is for another debate.

The wonderful and creative heritage of Stoke-on-Trent has produced an Oscar winner. Rachel Shenton, who is currently gracing our screens in “All Creatures Great and Small”, has demonstrated that being from Stoke-on-Trent is not a barrier to creative success or something that should hold people back. I am grateful for the work she does in coming back to the city to talk to young people about the potential for creative careers, be that in acting or theatre.

The process of learning through creativity is something we could all benefit from across the country. That is why I am glad that in my constituency I have a group called the Popcorn Learning Agency, which uses digital

design and animation to create high-spec training and learning videos that go around schools throughout the country. The group is also working with some big-name organisations to create in-house opportunities. That is something thousands of people will see day in, day out, and it is all made in Stoke-on-Trent from a lovely small unit with people who are incredibly dedicated to their craft.

The Minister will be wondering what more questions there are—this is the only way I could fit a Q into this alphabet soup. He will know that I will put lots of questions to him at the end.

First, though, I will tell the Minister about Restoke, a civic arts organisation that has been using art and culture to engage some of our most disengaged communities. Its recent production of “The Lotus Eaters” was done in collaboration with the National Theatre, and saw people from Stoke-on-Trent come down to London and perform theatrics and creative industry work in the National Theatre. That is something people do not often associate with Stoke-on-Trent when they think about what we are and what we do.

There is so much going on that one organisation—Stoke Creates, run by the wonderful Susan Clarke—is taking a lead in trying to pull it all together. It is a cultural compact that is basically sitting in the middle of the sector and thinking, “What can we do to bring organisations together?” One of the challenges we have in north Staffordshire is the splendid isolationism in which people operate. Stoke Creates is teasing out the different aspects of what we can achieve and how we can achieve it. It is making the case that if someone wants to do culture and creative industries well, there are few places better than Stoke-on-Trent.

That was demonstrated recently by the exhibition Stoke on Clay, run by a gentleman called Simon, which brought together new ceramic artists for a wonderful display of creativity, making people rethink the material my city is synonymous with. It was a wonderful exhibition at the old Spode museum, bringing together the old and the new and demonstrating that what was our past and heritage is also our future.

Across north Staffordshire we are blessed with some wonderful theatre companies. I want to give a nod to the work of Claybody Theatre, run by Deborah McAndrew and Conrad Nelson. Claybody Theatre has started to think about the story of who we are in Stoke-on-Trent and what makes us who we are, and then to write plays so we can tell our story better. One of our challenges has always been how we tell our story in a way that is engaging. The theatre has put together “Bright Lights Over Bentilee”, a play currently being shown at the Dipping House in Stoke-on-Trent. It talks about the bizarre array of UFO sightings that happened over one of the largest council estates in my constituency. It is a story that in any other circumstances would be unbelievable, but it has been translated into a wonderful piece of theatre, for which I am grateful.

I need to mention the University of Staffordshire, because it is leading the country on e-gaming and high-quality creative design work. It now has a campus down in London, as well as the work that it is doing up in Staffordshire. It recognises that this is a growth industry and is working incredibly hard with partners, agencies and business—crucially, all this is with business—to ensure that the e-gaming industry in north Staffordshire

is vibrant, buoyant and suitable for growth. A lot of the people trained by the university go on to work for VCCP, which is another organisation that ought to be name-checked. VCCP relocated from London up to Stoke-on-Trent because it knew that the quality of the graduate work it could get in Stoke-on-Trent was equal to, if not better than, anything it could get out of the London universities, but staff would also get the quality of life that comes with living in north Staffordshire.

All of this comes together because we are a craft city. I am happy that we were recently awarded world craft city status to recognise that our ceramic work and our creative approach to industry is in our DNA. It is who we are and it is what we do. Importantly for our younger generation, it is also about how we translate the opportunities that exist now into real opportunity. That is why, having run through all the letters of the alphabet bar two, I will move on to a couple of questions for the Minister.

First, will he visit and meet some of the organisations, so that he can see first hand the excellent work that we are doing not only in pursuit of our own economic development, but in pursuit of the Government's own agenda to ensure that creative industries and culture are available to all? Will he consider recognising north Staffordshire as a cultural cluster—something that the last Government were not able to do, but which would give us the standing we need to demonstrate that we are here for the long run?

Will the Minister speak to his colleagues at the Department for Business and Trade to ensure that any industrial strategy that comes forward to encourage growth in the UK looks seriously at creative industries? The creative industries in Stoke-on-Trent are where our growth can come from. That is where we can make a difference to all the organisations that are currently looking to take the next step to becoming vibrant, big, national groups.

Will the Minister also speak to his friends in the Department for Education to ensure that we keep art and creative subjects on the curriculum at B-tech, higher education, further education and A-level? The pipeline of talent that we need to service the expectations that the Minister has will come from young people who are already in education. I will leave him with those three points. I hope he has enjoyed the little tour around my constituency, and I thank him for listening so diligently.

11.17 am

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): It is a particular joy to see you in the Chair, Dame Caroline, as with one of your many other hats on you have a passionate interest in the creative industries. It is great to have you here.

I will start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) on being elected again, which is a great delight—this is a slightly different debate from the one we might have had if it had been led by his predecessor. It is good to see him return to the House. He says he hopes that I enjoyed his tour; the danger is that I enjoyed the tour so much that I might not need to make the actual tour.

I will answer the specific questions first and then make some other comments. First, on whether I will visit, I am very happy to; it is just a question of when we

can make that work. I am in two Departments, so it would be good if we could try to combine some of the work on tech with some of the work on creative industries, which would follow on from what the council has done locally. I think of tech as a creative industry, but the council has led the way in trying to combine the two.

Secondly, on whether we will look at creating a creative cluster, my hon. Friend makes a very good case. We are looking at what we need to do about creative clusters in the next round of announcements next year, so he has made a good bid and my officials are listening very attentively.

Adam Jogee: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: Oh dear.

Adam Jogee: Just very briefly. It is important to reiterate my hon. Friend's point that there is a groundswell of support in north Staffordshire for such a cluster, so I urge the Minister to take not just his word for it, but mine. The Minister talked about combination. I hope that his visit will be combined with a visit to Stoke-on-Trent Central and indeed Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Chris Bryant: Well, I am also the Minister for tourism, so I feel as if I will be going on a tourism visit. We will see what works as the best kind of visit. I am always a little worried about trying to do too many things in one visit and then nobody gets a proper insight into anything, but we will certainly look at that. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central makes a good point about creative clusters. It is a key way of developing a real levelling-up strategy.

My hon. Friend's third question was whether the creative industries will be a key part of an industrial strategy. The Government are working on this at pace, and I can assure him that we are making a strong case for the creative industries being an absolutely essential part of that strategy. I do not think Britain can have a successful future economically speaking—let alone sociologically, and in many other ways—unless that is the case, so I can assure him that it will be.

My hon. Friend asked a fourth question—I am answering all these questions directly; it won't catch on—about whether we would have conversations with the Department for Education on the curriculum. I will not bother reading out what has been written for me—the answer is yes. We are already having those conversations. We have seen a shocking decline—in the region of 40% to 50%—in the number of students studying music, drama and art over the past 14 years, and we want to reverse that. It is not going to happen overnight, but we have to put all these subjects right back at the heart of the curriculum. That is an essential part of what we have to do.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for responding directly to my points—I do not think that ever happened during the entire time I was last in Parliament, so the novelty is not lost on me. On the curriculum, can the Minister ensure that when that conversation happens, there is emphasis on the communities that should have access to that? I know the Minister will do that, but I want it on the record. While having art on the curriculum works fine, often, in working-class communities like mine, it is not seen as being for those people or for those communities. I know the Minister is a great advocate

[Gareth Snell]

for communities like those we represent. Can he ensure that the DFE understands that it is no good just having art on the curriculum, and that it has to be actively encouraged in communities that ordinarily would not take it up?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It will be a complete failure for this country if the only place a student can study an art A-level is at Eton, because it has a good art teacher and art classroom and all the rest of it, or if the only place a student can throw a pot in a school is in a very middle-class area with lots of middle-class parents. I know this from my own experience: in the Rhondda and Ogmore, a vital part of what we do well for the nation is producing people who have excelled in the creative industries, but those people have often had to do so despite not having those opportunities locally. Artists such as Ernest Zobole and Charles Burton were involved in teaching locally, which is important to ensure there is a pipeline for young people who are thinking about art, drama and so on.

I would also argue, incidentally, that a creative education is a force multiplier for all other aspects of education. What is it that many employers want? They want somebody who will be able to confidently answer the phone. That self-confidence is as likely to come from having done a drama course and learned how to speak publicly, to project and use the voice and to be part of a team, or from having sung in a choir or played in an orchestra, as it is from being really good at maths. That is the kind of attitude that we need to adopt.

I do not want to stray too far into the subject areas of the Department for Education, but it is worth pointing out that what is in the national curriculum needs to be advanced in every school, not just some schools. The structure of education in England is obviously different from that in Wales, but I am conscious that we need to take these issues forward.

The main point of this debate, of course, is that the creative industries are an enormous part of our cultural and economic future. They represent £125 billion of value to the UK. My hon. Friend referred to video games, which are a fast-growing sector. Last week, I visited Ubisoft in Newcastle, which represents significant investment; large numbers of people will be working there. Exactly the same is true in Stoke. The video games industry is worth something like £7 billion in the UK now, which I confidently expect to grow in the years ahead—not least because it builds on things that we have been exceptionally good at in the UK, such as producing books, telling stories, creating characters and music and technological development. I played “Assassin’s Creed” last year, very briefly; I was not very good. However, what was fascinating was that its development used archaeologists and historians to make sure that everything that people see on the screen is perfect. That is a whole nexus of creativity that we want to develop.

Growth in this sector over the last 14 years has been higher than in the rest of the economy and we know that it will continue to be higher in the future, as long as we make the right investments and the right decisions. The creative industries sector is a large employer in the UK, employing some 2 million people.

There is nobody here from the previous Government to defend themselves, but I felt that over the last few years that the creative industries sector was denigrated a bit, as if going into the creative industries was not a proper job; ballerinas were told to retrain and things like that. That is not our attitude. We believe that the creative industries are an absolutely essential part of our future economic growth.

My hon. Friend made the point about levelling up, in a sense, although he did not use the term—maybe we need to ditch it. Nevertheless, it is an important point that there are 55 creative industries clusters and 700 micro-clusters around the UK, and this is an opportunity to ensure that that happens everywhere, because talent is everywhere but opportunity is not. That is what we really need to change and that is what our strategy will be devoted to. It is not a “nice to have”; it is absolutely essential to our economic future.

My hon. Friend referred to Stoke as the crucible of creativity, which I think is a reference to the burning of the pottery at the start of the process, although I now have the title of Arthur Miller’s play going through my head; that play slightly ruined my school days. However, he made a very important point about the World Crafts Council granting world craft city status to Stoke. When Clarice Cliff died in 1972 lots of people probably thought that she would be forgotten, but she has now been brought back, not least because of things such as “Antiques Roadshow”. Again, this is a cycle of creativity, whereby different creative industries feed off and enhance one another.

My hon. Friend also referred to video games; I think that it is Junction 15 Productions that won the Emmy for its work on the Beijing Olympics. He is quite right—the industry is worth £7 billion. As I saw in Leamington Spa, it is essential that there is close working with the local university, to ensure that there are people coming through. The course at the University of Staffordshire is world-renowned. That is a really important part of ensuring that people are coming through into the industry, because it has vacancies; in particular, it has vacancies five and 10 years in. That is an important part of the work that we need to do.

I commend the city on developing a cultural strategy for 2022-28. It has been a cross-party process; the strategy was originally introduced by Conservatives and was carried forward by Labour. I wish that every single local authority in the land—as well as the Mayors, many of whom are advancing such plans—had a similar kind of strategy, because in the end all of this has to be delivered at local level, and it is creating that ferment of excitement that enables these things to happen. I commend Stoke for that. As I said earlier, the combination of culture and tech is important; for example, making sure that there is full fibre roll-out across the whole of the city is an important part of making many modern creative industries flourish.

There was a reference to the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-Under-Lyme. I note that Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” is on at the moment and I also note that the Christmas show is “The Three Musketeers”. Indeed, the publicity for “The Three Musketeers” might be referring to my hon. Friend when it says:

“A spirited country boy arrives in the big city with big dreams”.
There we are; I think that is him to a tee.

I will just make some final points. First, as I have said, creative education is absolutely essential for what we want to achieve, and we also want to reform the apprenticeship levy so that it works much better for creative industries, and so that there is portability and flexibility. Thus far, the levy has not really worked in that regard, but we are working on it.

Secondly, I have an ambition that there should be no impediment for somebody from a working-class, ordinary background from whatever community in the UK, to consider going into the creative industries as a career. All too often, the creative industries have almost become a kind of hereditary industry, because someone can only afford to start in them by taking an unpaid post for a year or two, which is paid for by the bank of mum and dad, or if someone has a parent or another family member who has worked in that creative industry. We need to change that situation completely, so that the full talent of the whole of the UK is embraced.

Finally, we need to ensure that the product of the creative industries is accessible to all, which is about people being able to go to the theatre, going to live art events, see art in their streets and having architecture in their city that is beautiful, and which lifts and inspires. That is the ambition that we have as a Government, and Stoke is beautifully exemplifying it in its crucible.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

SEND Provision: East of England

[SIR MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered SEND provision in the East of England.

Thank you, Sir Mark, for the pleasure of serving under your chairmanship. I thank colleagues from across the region and beyond for attending today's debate.

I have a personal interest in this discussion: one of my children has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and, like other Members, I have first-hand experience of the problems of our system. I am sure that other Members have been contacted by many constituents who continue to be failed by the special educational needs and disabilities system. It is not right that constituents come to me in tears after being unable to get their child into a school that can support them, fearful for their child's future and completely tied down by the need to care for them all day, often without support.

We seem to have a particular problem in the east of England. Nationally, half of all education, health and care plans were issued within the 20-week statutory period in 2023, but in the east the figure was just 34%. That is a low number, but it also masks inequalities in the region: 90% of EHCPs were issued within the time limit in Bedford, but in Suffolk—my county—it was only 4%, and in Essex it was only 1%. It is shameful that two thirds of children in need of support in our region, and 96% in my county, are being left without it, and in many cases are forced out of the education system entirely during some of the most formative years of their lives.

The rate of severe absences for SEND pupils is triple that for other students. Long waits that keep children out of school compound other problems relating to mental health, social development and life outcomes. I have a constituent who is still waiting for a school to send their child to and is extremely concerned about the behavioural changes she has begun to witness due to a lack of structured learning.

Absences further divide those with and without SEND. They isolate the children most in need and hamper their development. I am also concerned about the overly punitive way in which we deal with absences, particularly for parents of SEND children. Given my background of working with vulnerable women and children, I was alarmed to find out from the charity Advance that the majority of parents imprisoned for truancy are women. It is of course hugely important that children are in school, but for that to happen we have to support children and their parents, rather than simply add fines or the threat of prison to the already traumatic situation.

We seem to forget that education is a right, as well as a legal requirement. Where is the right to education for children with SEND? Where is the legal imperative to provide a decent education for all children, particularly our most vulnerable? The delays parents experience serve only as a “how high can you jump?” barrier, and send the signal that children with SEND are second-class citizens.

[Jess Asato]

The SEND system is creaking at the seams: there has been an explosion in demand, and the supply has not caught up. Even for parents and children who have waited and received an EHCP, life does not get much easier. I have a constituent whose daughter experiences a range of health conditions and, despite having an EHCP, is forced by council delays to stay in her mainstream school, where she has been repeatedly held back a year. Another constituent's son's transition from school to college, and from disability living allowance to personal independence payments, was complicated by errors introduced by the county in his EHCP.

The SEND system is broken, but we knew that: it was highlighted by the SEND review published under the previous Government in 2022. Parents and children have been asked their views again and again, but very little has changed. What would first steps look like for the Government? First, delays to the issuance of EHCPs require work to combat the national shortage of educational psychologists. Indeed, solving that issue and being able to invest in those professionals can also save us money. The Association of Educational Psychologists has found that, on average, an EP costs £234 per day, whereas agency and locum staff cost £600. Secondly, preventive programmes are key, which is why I welcome the Government's swift announcement to extend the Nuffield early language intervention into next year. That is particularly important, given that children with speech and language challenges make up the single biggest group within SEND. Thirdly, it is my hope that the Government look to extend the funding for the early years SEND partnership led by the Council for Disabled Children, which comes to an end in March next year. I also hope the Government work to ensure that health visitors have adequate training around the ELIM—the early language identification measure—as part of the two to two-and-a-half-year review.

The Government's new core schools budget grant for special and alternative provision schools and the announcement that the Department is looking into the national funding formula are to be welcomed. After 14 years of Conservative Government cuts, the system needs to be rebalanced towards prevention and early intervention, which is more cost-effective in the long term.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for introducing the debate. The number of people in the Chamber is an indication of the importance of the subject, which is an issue in the hon. Lady's constituency.

I have six grandchildren and three of them are in need of speech therapy. One of those had an early diagnosis and today that young boy has advanced incredibly well. The other two needed that early diagnosis, but the families had to go and get a diagnosis done privately so they could get the assessment and move forward. Does the hon. Lady agree that when it comes to SEND issues, the knock-on effect for SEND provision starts when a child is first diagnosed and that more must be done to ensure children's health services get more children the assessments they need, meeting efficient timescales and thereby giving a child a better life?

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. I ask Members when intervening that they make it much shorter than the intervention we have just heard.

Jess Asato: I agree with the hon. Member that early diagnosis helps that child and their family, and we also save ourselves money in the long term. I also welcome the curriculum review, which I hope will bring about a broader curriculum that allows everyone the opportunity to flourish.

I am glad the Government have made breaking down the barrier to opportunity a key mission, ensuring that all children get the best possible start in life. It is such an important task. I look forward to hearing more from the Minister about the Government's ambitious plans and to hearing contributions from Members from across our region.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, everybody can see the number of Members present, and quite a number have indicated that they wish to speak. We are fairly limited, as we have only half an hour for wind-ups at the end and the right of reply for Jess Asato. I ask Members to keep their comments to about two minutes, then everybody will get in. Where possible, I ask that you try to resist the urge to intervene too often because that takes time away from others and we have to finish on the dot at 4 o'clock. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called.

2.39 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. It has been worrying to hear about many of the challenges faced by constituents across the east of England, particularly in my constituency of Broxbourne. Almost every week since my election, I have seen a constituent and the family of a constituent struggling with SEND issues with the SEND service in Hertfordshire, and I have been contacted by many more.

This issue is close to my heart. I have grown up with a brother and sister living with special educational needs. I saw at first hand how challenging it can be for children and their families when the system does not work. However, I have also witnessed positive differences when high-quality provision is delivered. When we get it right, we can absolutely get it right. For many of my constituents, for far too long, this has not been the case.

Since 2015, the number of children with special educational needs plans in Hertfordshire has grown by a staggering 223%—even more than the national average of 140%. High-needs funding has not kept up. Incredibly, Hertfordshire receives the third-lowest funding per head of every local authority in the country. If it was given the additional funding that the rest of the country, on average, gets, an extra £47 million would be available to kids in my constituency and across Hertfordshire. I urge the Minister to reset the funding formula. It should not matter where someone is born in the United Kingdom; they should have the same access to the funding that would allow us to deliver better SEND services across Hertfordshire and the wider region.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for keeping his comments brief. I call the hon. Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson).

2.41 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Mark. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for introducing the debate. There are 19,000 children in schools in my constituency of Southend West and Leigh, and 1,000 currently have education, health and care plans. It is a figure that has been increasing every year for the past four years. Now, over 5% of all children have a plan. Overall, including all children with special educational needs, the figure rises to 10.3% of pupils. That is over one in 10 children. In addition, there are more than 150 families currently in the system, waiting for their assessments to happen after their applications have been sanctioned. On top of that, another 266 families have requested assessments, but are waiting for approval which, in part, is due to the national shortage of educational psychologists, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft.

There is also a shortage of social workers in Southend, which is above the national average. Almost one in four posts are vacant, which compounds the issue, because social workers help to assess children's needs. I believe my constituency is not particularly unusual, and I suspect the picture is not very different in the constituencies of other hon. Members in the Chamber.

Some schools, however, are not set up or equipped to support children with special educational needs. I have witnessed that as a school governor. Despite the overwhelming desire of teachers to support SEN children, often they cannot be supported in a mainstream classroom. Specialist facilities are at a premium, or a child may be awaiting their assessment, which in turn can lead to their being removed from their mainstream classroom and separated from their schoolmates while not getting the specialist support they need to develop and thrive.

As my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has announced, the Government will take a community-wide approach to SEND provision, with a number of positive measures already announced. It is vital that we address gaps in SEND provision urgently, and the Government have moved quickly since taking office. We need to continue to press forward with this work on behalf of our constituents so that they get the critical help they deserve. We must stop letting our young people down.

2.44 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Mark. I thank the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing this debate, as the issue has a significant impact in the region that we represent. The issue of SEND provision has grown in recent years, and it shows no sign of abating. In the past decade, the number of pupils with SEND requirements in the UK has more than doubled; 1.2 million children in school require SEND support below the level of an education, health and care plan or EHCP.

In my constituency of Huntingdon, there is a growing sense that SEND provision is reaching a critical juncture. I was recently invited to visit one of the outstanding-rated primary schools in my constituency. Somersham Primary School has been transformed under its new leadership within the Meridian Trust. It could also be considered a victim of its own success. Such has been the progress made, and the success in facilitating growth in the number of young children with special needs, those who are non-verbal or need dedicated specialist one-to-one support to meet their needs, the school now has circa 20 children on an EHCP, a significant population within one small school. Speaking with staff there, it is evident that to meet the increased demand these schools must be resourced properly. Although the Government have committed £315 million to universal primary school breakfast clubs, it would surely be more effective to retain free meals for those children who genuinely need them, and make further significant investment in increasing dedicated individual support for children with complex educational needs.

At secondary level, Kimbolton School has a number of children who receive support for either special educational or social, emotional and mental health needs. These are pupils whose parents choose to educate them in the independent sector precisely because of the dearth of places and support in the state sector. These are pupils who may struggle to thrive and fulfil their potential without the benefit of a smaller class size and the more personal support that they require.

Of the 12,400 pupils who receive SEND support in independent schools across the east of England, 80% will not be protected from the application of VAT to fees, as they do not have an EHCP. The only protection announced thus far is for pupils who are funded by local authorities. Councils will be able to reclaim VAT paid, simultaneously increasing demand for EHCPs and costs for councils. The SEND-specific schools in the constituency, within Huntingdon itself, are Spring Common Academy and the newly opened Prestley Wood Academy in Alconbury Weald.

Prestley Wood Academy opened this academic year to its first 70 students, being delivered as part of a wider housing development, and will ultimately cater for 150 pupils aged between four and 19. It is SEND-specific, and it has been designed with specialised facilities, including two sensory rooms, a hydrotherapy pool, trampoline room and soft play. Those are crucial facilities for those who would benefit from them, but it can only cater for a limited number of pupils.

It is not only younger children who are impacted by the lack of provision. I recently visited the Huntingdon campus of Cambridge Regional College in order better to understand the challenges faced by further education providers. Across its two campuses, there are in the region of 4,000 students but, owing to the nature of the college and the courses it provides, there are a staggering 600 students with an EHCP, of whom around 400 require additional assistance. That places significant additional strain on staff and staffing. With the added complexities posed by the needs of young adults, a huge effort is required to ensure that those needs are met. The college has a team of 12 dedicated solely to providing mental health support.

SEND funding in England is part of the dedicated schools grant, not allocated per individual SEND pupil. Local authorities determine the individual school

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

allocations. The safety valve intervention programme was introduced by the Department for Education in 2020, to provide additional funding to local authorities with significant financial challenges. Cambridgeshire County Council entered the dedicated schools grant safety- valve programme in 2022. Despite receiving supplementary funding, as of March 2024, Cambridgeshire County Council failed to meet the conditions of the safety-valve agreement. The council completed only 5% of EHCPs within the 20-week timeframe, while the average in England is 49%. Across Cambridgeshire County Council, 73% of complaints relating to children and young people were over delays in publishing the EHCPs, issues with the plans themselves and poor communication.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. Could I ask the Member speaking to keep his remarks brief and perhaps come to an end? I do not mean instantaneously.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Thank you, Sir Mark.

As one of the fastest-growing regions in the country, the funding allocation formulae for Cambridgeshire desperately need to be reviewed. With thousands—potentially tens of thousands—of homes planned to be built in the constituency over the next decade, it is imperative to look at the underlying calculation that currently fails to recognise the demographic challenge that we face in the region.

2.48 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing the debate on SEND provision in the east of England. Accounts from hon. Members today show acutely that, although we aim to highlight our local situation, there are similarities in issues and themes in SEND provision both regionally and nationally.

For me, this subject has been the most spoken about since I was elected Member of Parliament for Stevenage, and for a good reason. I ran an online campaign in my constituency to encourage residents to tell me their SEND provision stories, an unfiltered account of the frontline reality. I used those accounts to raise awareness of issues faced by SEND students and families in a recent Westminster Hall debate on SEND provision in Hertfordshire. I have used subsequent opportunities in the Chamber to lobby Ministers to help address the situation.

Ultimately, our primary function as MPs is to elevate the voices of those who elected us to this place. As I did in the last SEND debate I participated in, I want to raise an account from the frontline, which I did not get the chance to highlight last time. A distraught mother told me:

“My son was permanently excluded whilst we were awaiting the outcome of his EHCP—which left me to look after a traumatised, out-of-school, six year old, organise a new school, fight for his EHCP, look after my daughter, work my busy job and prepare practically and mentally for a tribunal. With NHS waiting lists for a diagnosis sitting at two years, I eventually funded a diagnosis 10 months later. He was deemed suitable for specialist provision but no places were available.”

That family was left traumatised. Such blatant accounts tell a clear story: the diagnosis and EHCP processes are hard to navigate and too slow, and placement in a suitable school is a postcode lottery, where too many cases can easily fall through the net. The problem cannot be fixed by simply holding our local authorities’ feet to the fire. We have to recognise the position they have been put in over the last 14 years, with soaring demand, plummeting budgetary power and mass reductions in staff.

I want to thank the frontline staff, who work so hard in tough conditions, to get results for children who deserve an education just as much as their fellow pupils. Their lives and their futures matter.

2.51 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I thank my neighbour, the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), for securing this important debate.

Like other Members from around our region, my experience is that special educational needs are one of the biggest issues affecting my constituents. One constituent who came to my surgery recently told me that her young child, who does have an education, health and care plan, has been at home all year after leaving nursery, because there were no places available in a non-mainstream school. She said the system was hard to navigate, with little support given to families.

Another constituent has found that her child must wait two years for an ADHD assessment—two years from the beginning to the end of their GCSE courses; two crucial years in that child’s life. Other constituents have been in touch about the difficulty of getting a place in a specialist school. Even an educational psychologist who works in this area every day and is used to navigating the relevant systems told me she has had a long struggle to get her child a placement in a suitable school and was only offered a placement after her previous MP got involved. The school is a long way from her rural village and her child has to make a long journey each way. In rural areas, long travel distances and the pressure on school transport budgets compound the topics we are discussing.

What would help? We need a focus on faster initial diagnoses and then faster decisions on EHCPs. We need more specialist school places, clearly; better access to mental health and other support provision, whether that is for speech and language delay or ADHD; and more resource for special educational needs co-ordinators, who often have huge numbers of students to support. They need the time to be able to provide that pastoral and wellbeing support. There needs to be a streamlining of the current system, to make it easier and faster for parents and others to navigate. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response on this crucial topic.

2.53 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): As we have heard, the SEND system is in crisis, and Norfolk is emblematic of that crisis. I know that the Government are determined to do all they can to tackle that crisis and I believe they have the backing of all of us, across the House. We have touched on many of the

topline issues affecting SEND provision and I want to focus on the local issues that are affecting people in my constituency and across Norfolk.

First, there is some good news on SEND from Norfolk today. I welcome the announcement of 76 additional places in Norfolk schools. Many of those places will be in schools in my constituency. This is a welcome step, but we need a lot more urgent action. As well as more places in mainstream schools, there is a lack of specialist schools, in Norfolk as in many places. In Norwich North, the Angel Road junior school has sat empty since 2021. We have been campaigning to turn that into a specialist school and we hope that the county council will act urgently to ensure that is the case.

Secondly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) has mentioned, SENCO recruitment and retention is a real issue, which comes up again and again. It would be good to hear what steps will be taken to improve it. Thirdly, there is a feeling, sadly too often borne out, that the system is adversarial. In Norfolk, a huge amount of money has been spent on the tribunal system—£890,000 in one year. Of course it is important that we have legal processes in place, but will the Minister look into how we could address that and minimise the amount of money spent there? As the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) has mentioned, Norfolk is a rural county and children are spending far too much time on buses when they should be in schools. I hope that we can also take steps to address that.

I want to finish by paying tribute to the amazing staff, parents, support staff, in schools across the county of Norfolk and across the country, who are doing so much to support children and families.

2.56 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. May I start by thanking the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for bringing colleagues from both sides of the House together? How we treat our vulnerable children seems to me to be one of those things that goes completely above and beyond party politics; we all see its importance.

My family has never experienced this issue—our two young children were very lucky—but, as the Member of Parliament for Mid-Norfolk, I am lucky to have two great special educational needs schools in my constituency. Chapel Green school and Fred Nicholson school are both institutions the community hugely values and supports and is very proud to have. Under the coalition Government, I was very pleased—and rather surprised, I have to say—that I managed to secure £7 million to relocate Chapel Green into a world-class facility.

Over the past five to 10 years, I have seen a huge rise in demand across rural mid-Norfolk. Data produced by the House of Commons Library shows that 18% of all pupils have serious special educational needs. We are providing support to 1.2 million of those 1.7 million, so half a million children around this country are not getting the support they need. I would suggest that quite a lot of them are in the east and in rural areas because, as one or two colleagues have mentioned, rural areas face a particular challenge.

Every day during the election campaign, I did a school gate visit. Every month I do a heads' forum. Scarning school, Dereham school, Toftwood school

and Yaxham school—all my schools—have reported an increasing surge that is causing chaos. Parents are having to stop work, we see hugely difficult legal processes and the EHCP system is broken. When I talk to teachers, they also highlight that in the past few years we have seen a huge surge in demand caused by the pandemic, by rural poverty and the cost of living crisis, which has hit us hard, by diet—I know the Government have made some announcements about children's diets—and by the wider challenge of mental health.

I particularly want to highlight the rural aspect. I am sure that, at the heart of it, part of the problem is that the formula does not properly compensate for rural costs, or how the cost of living crisis has particularly hit rural families. The Minister is nodding—I know she understands this—and I ask her to put the needs of rural SEN at the heart of her work.

2.58 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing this important debate.

The SEND system is in chaos. It is broken. I am the parent of a disabled child and I have seen first hand the damage and chaos wrought by 14 years of chronic underfunding, understaffing, and a lack of political will to understand the level of need, coupled with the stigmatisation of parents of SEND children when we fight for the educations our children deserve. How do we fix the system? How do we go back to getting what our children need? I believe that an education system that works for SEND children is one that works for all our children. Educational need and disability should not be seen as parallel to the education system; they should be absolutely central to it. If we get it right for our children, we get it right for every child. Secondly, a SEND system built around the lived experience of parents and carers, which comes at it from the perspective of a parent or a carer, has absolute success built in. I do not see my child's journey through education in stages; I do not see early years, primary school, secondary school, further education and beyond as separate. My child's journey is a lifelong one. Similarly, I do not look at the services that she requires in silos, nor do any parents of an SEND child.

To fix the system, we need to come at it from the basis of considering what the child needs from the moment that they enter the education system, whether that is in a pre-school setting or nursery setting, through to the moment that they leave the system. How have we created a successful individual who can go into the world and achieve their full potential?

At the moment, so many parents find themselves at a complete loss and in desperation because of the chaos of the system. They have to be all things to their child and they never get a chance to just be mum or dad. They have to be a speech and language therapist, an advocate, a physiotherapist and an educational psychologist arguing for an education, health and care support plan that is often absolutely impossible to obtain.

Our system needs an awful lot of work. We need to begin this journey and consider how we can properly deliver for children not just in our region—the east of England—or in our individual constituencies, but across the country.

3 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): I thank Jess Asato, whose constituency of Lowestoft neighbours mine, for securing this important debate.

The issue of SEND provision in the east is pertinent, particularly in my constituency of Great Yarmouth. However, I wish to put on the record my concern about the issue of over-diagnosis relating to mental disorders: the rush to label any energetic or active child with a condition is not helpful. That is not to downplay the impact on the many, many children who suffer from a range of challenging issues and needs, but there is a debate to be had about what actually constitutes a mental disorder and how many children are affected. In March 2021, the number of under-18s who had been seen by mental health services in the previous 12 months was 572,912, but in July 2024 the number was 797,238. Are children becoming unhappier or more mentally ill, or is there an issue with over-diagnosis?

Lockdown played a brutal role, stripping millions of young people of what they loved and forcing them in front of televisions and smartphones for months on end. For many, habits have not changed and will not change. Is it a surprise that so many young people are now suffering? I am a huge believer in the importance of physical activity in tackling mental health issues: getting children active; getting them outdoors and competitive; and developing social, emotional and physical skills. Sensible public investment is required to build pools, parks and pitches, to give children the platform they need to get physically active. I fully agree that for many children the necessary facilities are simply not there.

I commend a range of clubs in my constituency that are doing wonderful work for young children, many of which I have had the pleasure of visiting, such as Hopton Harriers Football Club and of course Great Yarmouth Town FC. Such activity providers should be encouraged and, more importantly, funded, so that children have the opportunity to get more active in their communities. Of course, physical activity is not suitable at all, but for many it can and will help.

I would like to directly question Labour Members here about SEND provision. What effect will the removal of VAT exemption on private schools have on access to proper support for SEND children in the east of England? That cruel move will force thousands of students into a state system already buckling under the pressure from uncontrolled mass immigration. Schools are literally crumbling away, yet your callous policy will punish hard-working families who simply want the best for their children. Unlike the NHS, the British private school system is genuinely the envy of the world. We should encourage and foster it, rather than punitively attacking such a British success story.

Kevin Bonavia: The hon. Member appears to be conflating another issue with what we are talking about today. We all already know that if someone has an EHCP, VAT will not be affected in that situation. Does he not accept that?

Rupert Lowe: That is your subjective opinion—I accept that.

In my view, this policy is the politics of envy, pure and simple. This particularly distasteful tweet from the Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, sums up the Labour party's disdain for hard-working, aspirational parents. Our state schools—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. Can the hon. Gentleman sit down a second?

Rupert Lowe: I have not quite finished, Sir Mark.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I am interrupting you. You do not refer to other Members by their name, but by their constituency or position. Actually, you have taken nearly four minutes now; this is taking time away from others. Could you bring your remarks to a close?

Rupert Lowe: I will stop there.

3.5 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Sir Mark, to have you in the Chair today. Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities make up well over one in 10 of all pupils, and that number is growing. In the east, nearly 34,000 children have complex disabilities. Most of those pupils are in mainstream schools, and they need support in mainstream schools.

One of my greatest frustrations with the constant discussions from Opposition Members about our policy of VAT on private schools is this: the majority of children with SEND are not in private schools but mainstream schools. That is where the support is needed. It is not fair in any way to expect parents to send children with a special educational need or disability to a private school, and pay all of the fees associated with that. It is completely unacceptable.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) mentioned earlier, in our region there is a particular problem with education, health and care plans not being issued within statutory guidelines. Nationally, around 50% are; in our region, the figure is much lower so we have a particular regional issue. Demand for support is currently outstripping supply and, as a result, many children with SEND have been forced to leave school altogether. In a SEND debate in March, the issue of non-elective home education was highlighted: parents feel they have no choice but to take their children out of school to meet their needs.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): The report issued last December for SEND provision in Scarborough and Whitby will chime with other Members: a 40% increase in the number of requests for EHCPs compared with the previous year, and an increase of nearly 30% in the number of suspensions. Charities such as Closer Communities in Scarborough are now supporting families looking after children whose needs are not being met in school. Does my hon. Friend agree that as we go forward we must not simply pay lip service to those charities, but actively include them as we make plans to improve provision?

Sam Carling: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I am about to mention a charity in my own constituency that is doing amazing work in this space and encountering some difficulties. We need to support them.

I was speaking about non-elective home education. For years, the Education Committee has criticised the lack of clarity on the numbers of parents taking their children out of school for this reason, or indeed on the number of home-educated children overall. I therefore welcome the Children's Wellbeing Bill, announced in the King's

Speech, that includes provisions to require local authorities to set up and maintain “children not in school” registers. Knowing the scale of the challenge will be critical to addressing it and allow us to provide much needed support to parents.

Family Voice Peterborough, a charity in my constituency that seeks to improve services for young people with disabilities, is having particular problems—it is not just the crisis within the sector, but the crisis around the economy, that is worsening things in many ways. It is having problems with energy bills, for example; it paid about £8,000 before the pandemic, and the figure is now about £40,000. Its work is impacted by the damage there. The needs of such charities are so important for understanding the needs of local areas. Family Voice has revealed concerning SEND trends in Peterborough, a large part of which I represent, with increased strain on the system and a more difficult experience for parent carers.

Like all children, those with SEND have the right to an education provided by the state. That right has been gutted by previous Governments, but we will clean up the mess that has been made and restore certainty and trust in SEND provision, to make education accessible for all.

3.9 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) on securing this debate. I do not want to repeat everything said so far, but by and large the debate has been held in a constructive spirit; I associate myself with the constructive suggestions made by most Members.

We all know of examples from our constituencies where special educational needs provision works. My constituency has small primary schools with specialist provision within a mainstream setting; I am thinking of Exning primary school, and specialist schools such as the excellent Churchill school in Haverhill, from which I welcomed pupils to Parliament just before the conference recess. But we all meet constituents who are suffering agony and anxiety caused by the difficulties of screening, assessing and planning for their children who are in need. I associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who said that the challenge is much greater in rural and semi-rural settings due to issues such as difficulties with the rural transport network.

We all know that provision across the country, including the east of England, has not been good enough for some time. We can talk about the reasons why there is growing demand for special educational needs provision, but the response needs to improve. There was already an improvement plan in place before the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission report on the provision of services in Suffolk was published, but there is now a SEND improvement board, a new strategy and a commitment of £4.4 million for SEND services for the year ahead by Suffolk county council.

We need to be better nationally, as well as locally, on screening and assessment, and we must address the problems with EHCPs that hon. Members have set out. If the Government and the education team come forward with constructive proposals to improve those things—in

particular, the problems with EHCPs—the Minister will receive a constructive and positive response from me and Conservative colleagues.

3.11 pm

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing this important debate on a subject close to my heart.

Although the SEND crisis is a national issue, the devastating testimony from colleagues from across our region shows that hundreds if not thousands of families in Suffolk have been failed by this deep-rooted, unrelenting issue. The failure is not only structural but cultural, and it is not new. I have campaigned alongside families and campaign groups for many years and have battled to get them the support they need. There is nothing as heartbreaking as a parent breaking down in tears as they beg for help for their young child, exhausted and broken by a system that works against them, rather than for them.

In Suffolk, we have seen the same cycle over and over again. There have been multiple versions of the damning Ofsted/CQC report. I say gently to the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) that it was not the first report, but the third in less than a decade. Warm words and hollow promises of change and improvement follow, yet little change ever comes. The lived experiences of families across our county have not improved, and in many cases have worsened.

As I highlighted in my maiden speech, five years ago, after yet another damning report on SEND provision in Suffolk—the one before last—our local newspaper, the *East Anglian Daily Times*, carried a hauntingly memorable front page with the faces of children and families across Suffolk who have been badly let down by a failed system, accompanied by the headline, “We must be heard”. That simple plea has gone unanswered time and again.

I could give many examples to highlight the crisis in SEND provision in Suffolk, but in the short time I have I want to focus on school exclusions. It was absolutely right that the new Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, has made driving up school attendance a priority—if a child is not in school, they cannot learn—but too often our education system fails to meet the needs of many children with SEND, and in the worst cases they are removed entirely.

Over the summer, the Department for Education released the latest school exclusion figures from English schools for school year 2022-23. Once again, they showed an increasingly familiar, and therefore increasingly alarming, trend across the east of England, in particular Suffolk. In our county this year, children with special educational needs received all but one of the primary school permanent exclusions.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I want to reflect what my hon. Friend has said on the amount of school exclusions for SEND pupils, and to state that parents often feel pressured into off-rolling their children—that is, into removing them from the education system—so as not to have what is known as a permanent exclusion on their record. In fact, a permanent record does not exist, and never has in this country; it is a work of fiction. However, a number of parents feel that they have no option other

[Jen Craft]

than to remove their children from the education system so that they do not face further penalties for having absent children when they should be at school.

Jack Abbott: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The statistics I am reading just scratch the surface. We know there are many more families who have had to make the difficult decision to homeschool their children not out of choice, but out of necessity, because they feel they have no other option.

To finish my point, in state-funded primary schools in Suffolk, fixed-term exclusions were 30 times more likely to go to a child with SEND and an EHCP than to a child without. I should add that our county's fixed-term exclusions are, once again, some of the highest in the country—an unwanted and shameful record of inaction and indifference. Across all age groups in Suffolk, permanent exclusions are more than six times as likely, and fixed-term exclusions more than five times as likely, to go to a child with SEND.

While I am encouraged by the intentions of the new Government with respect to SEND provision, I join Members present, along with so many others, in reiterating that the challenge is enormous and must not be underestimated. Like families across Ipswich, I know there is no overnight fix for years of failure. What those families expect is a clear, credible plan with measurable defined goals for SEND provision, and not the half-baked, half-hearted SEND review that was finally dished up after much delay by the previous Government.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. We are running short of time.

Jack Abbott: I am coming to an end. Those families expect Government to work with local authorities, particularly those such as Suffolk county council, to put that into place. It falls to us as part of this new Labour Government to follow through on our promise to do so, working with local authorities and families to make urgent progress. Children who need—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. Can the hon. Member take a seat, please? I remind Members that when they refer to Members of this House, they must refer to them as the Member for their constituency or as their position. They must not name Members of Parliament.

5.17 pm

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for arranging this debate. It is great to see so many MPs from the east of England present to discuss such an important issue. It is something that has come up time and again during my time as a youth mentor, school governor and behavioural mentor. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) referenced school attendance and the issues around punctuality, which is something that is close to my heart, as I also chair a disciplinary board for a local school.

First, I pay tribute to Raw Learning. I had the pleasure of attending the launch event of a new forest school with Raw Learning last week, which was my

second time visiting a forest school. The first time, I did not take the right shoes—I recommend that all Members bring a pair of wellies if they visit a forest school. Raw Learning provides a fantastic service for young people who are not able to conform to traditional learning environments, transforming the lives of young people and their families.

Families should not have to wait more than a year to receive an education, health and care plan. In Southend East and Rochford and across the nation, we have seen a huge increase in demand for EHCPs. It is up to our local authorities to administer EHCPs; by law, the process is supposed to take a maximum of 20 weeks. However, in Southend East and Rochford, 90.4% of decisions took six months or longer. So often it is the children who are most in need who are left out of school while they wait. There are many factors that can exacerbate issues, such as catchment areas, income and social capital.

It is my absolute honour to represent my constituency in Parliament, to debate SEND in the east of England and to be part of Labour's mission-driven Government. I welcome the fact that inclusion will be at the centre of SEND policy moving forward.

Does the Minister agree that more needs to be done to support families, parents and organisations such as Raw Learning, which so often fill the gap where local authorities are stretched, where mainstream schools do not have the resources to sufficiently support children with SEND in the classroom and where the previous Government failed?

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. Because of the time taken by Members who have already spoken, we are now down to two minutes per remaining Member.

3.20 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I am pleased to say that the provision for children with special educational needs in Bedford and Kempston has improved greatly since 2018, following an Ofsted and CQC inspection that found significant areas of weakness in the local area's practice. Next month, the brand new Rivertree Free School in Kempston for 200 children aged two to 19 with special educational needs will be completed, with transitions for students to start in January. It has taken a few years and it has been a frustrating wait for parents and children who are desperate to take up their places. I really hope this will be an improvement and provide the right environment for all the children to thrive; however, there is more to be done.

Families tell me they cannot access the health and mental health services they need. Most parents struggle for years to be heard and to get a diagnosis for their child. Securing an education, health and care plan is difficult and sometimes exhausting. We can trace the cuts to funding for all those services back to Tory austerity, and it will take time to recover and to train and recruit educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and other education specialists to help the most vulnerable children to access the support they need. However, I remain concerned about the waits for EHCPs, especially when the number of children with a SEND diagnosis is rising, as is the discrepancy between having a diagnosis and having an EHCP in place.

Sadly, all across the country, far too many children with a disability are still not having their needs met. I will stop here because of the time limit.

3.22 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing this debate. Despite councils losing about 98% of tribunal cases, there seem to be no real consequences of their failures to act in the first place. Families are left to navigate a tribunal system that is overwhelmed, delaying the help their children desperately need. There seems to be a failure of accountability.

My constituents are frustrated and tired of fighting a system that should be working for them. The time has come for stronger enforcement mechanisms. Local authorities must surely face penalties for failures, particularly when they fall short of their legal duties. The public demand some change. My constituent Thomas Howard led a petition signed by more than 16,000 people calling for mandatory neurodiversity training in universities. That shows the breadth of concern about the lack of support across all levels of education, from primary schools to universities.

The call for accountability is not just about individual cases; it is about making the system work for everyone. This debate is an opportunity for us to push for real change in the east of England. Without stronger accountability, we will continue to let down children and families we are meant to serve. We must ensure that local authorities are not only meeting their obligations but are in some way held responsible when they fail to do so.

3.23 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for giving us all the opportunity to talk about this important issue. I have been a county councillor in Norfolk for the past 11 years. During that time I have helped many families with SEND cases, but nothing could have prepared me for the avalanche of SEND-related casework in my new role as the Member of Parliament for South West Norfolk.

There is an obvious impact on children and their families and that has been ably covered by colleagues today. However, I wanted to highlight the impact on family finances, jobs and the wider economy. It has struck me that in nearly every single family attending one of my surgeries with a SEND case one or both parents have been forced to give up work to care for their child. Most recently, at my Downham Market surgery, a serving member of our armed forces told me how he had had to take a pay cut as he was now undeployable, forced to work from home and care for his child, as I am sure we would all do. There are many similar cases involving lost income and lost jobs. We must recognise the impact on children and families, but also on family finances and the wider economy.

SEND cases are detailed and complex and, unlike the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), I do not have the skills and qualifications to be able to assess

the mental health diagnosis of a child. That is why I have employed a dedicated caseworker specifically for SEND cases, to support families in my area.

3.25 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing this very important debate today. It is my absolute pleasure to represent the Liberal Democrats on this important issue. It is filling up my inbox, and I know that it is filling up the inboxes of other hon. Members, both here and not here today.

I would like to start by expanding on an issue that has been raised in this debate, but I think a bit more information needs to be put out about it. That is the issue of tribunals and what is happening with them. We have talked a lot about how difficult it is for parents to get EHCPs for their children, but having to take a local authority to the first-tier tribunal is such an arduous task that no parent should have to go through it. They have to wait on average a year to get an appointment at a tribunal and it is costing them tens of thousands of pounds, in many instances, to get to that point in the first place. They are employing solicitors who have to battle with the local authorities, and they get to the point where they have given up and have to go to a tribunal. Then they wait their year and get their tribunal date, and then they are often faced with legally representing themselves, because they have exhausted their own resources, but they are battling against local authorities that are not just using solicitors or barristers but King's counsel in many cases, to fight against parents who are just trying to get what their children desperately need.

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

Even worse is the figure that has already come out in this debate but is worth underlining. Despite parents not being legally represented and despite local authorities using barristers and KCs to fight parents—what sort of system is it where that is happening?—local authorities lose 98% of cases. Local authorities are using public money to fight parents and losing. Then even if a judge, through the first-tier tribunal, has made an order about what the EHCP should contain—if a parent is lucky enough to even have an EHCP at that point—in cases in my constituency and, I am sure, in other constituencies, that provision is still not being delivered, even when ordered by the tribunal. We have examples of parents who have to go to judicial review to make the local authorities do what they are legally bound to do but are not doing. We have to strengthen the consequences for local authorities that are not doing what they are supposed to be doing as set out in law, because the system is not working in that situation at the moment. I ask the Minister to address that.

This matters because while we are waiting for judicial review and for tribunals, the children who are affected are growing up. Children have this uncanny knack of getting older, and as they get older, they need more resources and different resources. However, a parent in my constituency said, "But Marie, when I went to the annual review, the officer at the council said to me, 'Every time we meet, you ask for something different.'" And she said, "Well, yes, because my child has grown up, he is now older, and he needs something different from what was in the last review." As much as we may be shocked by comments like that from officers working

[Marie Goldman]

for local councils, there are many, many officers who want to do the very best for children, but they are stuck in such awful situations, in which they are not provided with the resources that they need.

Although a lot has been said about EHCPs, the special educational needs system is not just about EHCPs. There are about 1.6 million children with special educational needs or disabilities in the east of England—we must remember that we are talking about disabilities as well, not just neurological conditions—and only 4.8% of them, or just under 48,000, have EHCPs. The rest of them are living with SEND but do not have EHCPs. We must make sure that we cater for them as well.

I am conscious of the time and want to mention the funding cuts that have happened since 2010. The School Cuts website is instructive on the subject. It tells me, for example, that one high school in my constituency has received a funding cut of £1,201 per pupil since 2010. Another has seen a cut of £1,174 per pupil. It goes on and on. A special school in my constituency takes the biscuit, with a cut of £4,815 per pupil since 2010. Schools are having to do more with less, and we must address that.

I want to bring out the voices of parents. Recently in my constituency I met 24 parents and grandparents who turned up to a meeting to tell me about their problems with the special educational needs system. They told me many things. They told me what could be done to make the system better in ways that would not cost the earth. We know that there are economic challenges ahead, so let us look for solutions that do not necessarily have to focus on money.

One of the things the parents and grandparents raised was the transition when a child goes from primary school to secondary school. We need to make that transition easier for pupils with SEND who need that bit of extra time to settle in and understand the new system. Can we put in place a better system of transition that gives them extra time without all the other children around?

The parents and grandparents told me about the blanket approach to attendance that many schools take. They told me about 100% attendance awards and how cruel they are for children with special educational needs and disabilities, who often have to attend medical appointments during school time. They can never get that 100% attendance rate and never receive the award that they see their fellow pupils getting. It is cruel and discriminatory.

The parents and grandparents told me about schools that are locking toilet doors during class times so that children cannot go to the toilet. That makes it very difficult for someone who has a physical condition that means they have to go to the toilet.

One of the people who came to speak to me was a special educational needs co-ordinator. They told me that it is not mandatory to have SENCOs on the senior leadership team, and how they are often teaching full time while also doing the SENCO role. They told me that they have no protected time to look after children with special educational needs, work out what is best for them and help them. In fact, parents told me that they believe SENCOs are just a name on a piece of paper for local authorities.

How does all this impact children? Children are often demoralised when they leave school. A parent told me that all their child's energy was going into school and it left nothing—no energy afterwards for anything else. One parent said, "SEND shouldn't just be a bolt-on." I echo what other Members have said: SEND should be an integral part of education.

I could go on and on about local authorities not doing annual reviews, not replying to parents when they write to them, or sending encrypted emails that disappear after 40 days so that parents have no permanent record of what they have been told. I could talk about evidence disappearing and about dyslexia not being accepted as a diagnosis—as if that is not a thing—but I want to spend a little time talking about solutions.

One solution, which could be cost-free, is being more transparent. EHCPs should be issued within 20 weeks. In my local authority, Essex, 1% are issued within 20 weeks. When parents are waiting, in week 19, for that email to drop in their inbox, anxious and stressed, after having fought so hard to get to the point where they will finally get the provision their children need, deserve and are thankfully entitled to, and it does not arrive, that is incredibly stressful. Yet the local authority knows that there is no chance of that email arriving in that time. They know that the average wait time is probably 30, 40, 50 weeks, or even longer in some cases. Tell parents that. Alleviate their suffering just a little bit. It will not fix the problem, but it is a free option. Local authorities already know the figures—make them publish them.

The Liberal Democrats want to see a centralised national body for SEND, which would end the postcode lottery of funding. Lots more can be done, but there are things we can do without having to provide funds.

3.35 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) on securing such an important debate for children and parents across the east of England.

As shown by the attendance at this debate, SEND provision is a priority for all of us throughout the House. Since my election in 2019, I have visited over 40 of the schools in my constituency and I have great admiration for all those working to deliver SEND support to children. This is the 10th debate on this topic in Parliament this year, reflecting its interest for constituents—the Minister is smiling; I am sure she will respond to many more, and I look forward to attending them—and the challenges that we face from increasing demand, increasing costs and inconsistent support and outcomes.

The need for change, on which we all agree, is why I welcomed the previous, Conservative Government's SEND and AP improvement plan. I encourage the current Government to pursue those reforms, which took far too long to come forward but were developed with the sector. Parents, children, local authorities and others are looking forward to some much-needed clarity from the Government on their plans and how they will bring forward reform.

As we have heard, demand for SEND services has increased significantly, with over 1.6 million pupils having educational special needs. As the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) said, nearly 5% of pupils

in England have an EHCP, and a further 1.2 million are identified as having support that is below that level. The prevalence of SEND varies across the east of England, from the lowest rates in Peterborough at 11.1% to the highest in my county of Norfolk—and the county of other Members present—of 14.3%.

All local authorities have seen increases in the rates of pupils with EHCPs over the last five years, but the size of those increases has varied, with prevalence highest in Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. Behind all the figures are individual children and families. We heard a powerful speech from the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), and my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) referred to his own personal experience. That underlines the need for change.

We know what the challenges are. I want to reflect on three areas in which change is needed so that we can provide the right support, at the right time, in the right place, for every child. First, we need a national framework and standards that will address the inconsistency of support. The previous Government's plan set out a blueprint for a unified SEND and AP system, driven by new national standards. The first one we were due to bring forward was on speech and language therapy, given the high demand for that support.

We also need to improve the EHCP process because, as we all know from constituents, many parents are battling against the very system that is there to support them. We had proposals to bring forward a standardised and digitised approach, which is much needed when less than half of EHCPs were issued within the statutory deadline of 20 weeks. As the hon. Member for Lowestoft said, the variation is striking, from 90% in Bedford to only 43% in Norfolk, and far worse in Essex, as mentioned. Will the Government confirm whether the plan is to continue with the national standards and to bring forward a standardised approach to EHCP plans and the process?

The second area in which we need reform is building capacity and expertise in mainstream schools and a focus on early help. That means improving training and skills in the SEND workforce, with a particular emphasis on early years and early intervention. I declare an interest as a number of my family members are teachers. It is important that teaching is seen as a valued profession—it is spoken of as a valued profession by everyone in the House—and ongoing training in SEND and other areas is very important to that, as well as to tackling the retention and recruitment problems that we have seen in recent years.

There is much knowledge and expertise in the system and we need to share it more effectively. Just a week ago, I was at Fen Rivers academy in King's Lynn in my constituency. It is a specialist social, emotional and mental health therapeutic school where the headteacher is passionate about sharing her skills and those of her staff—who have turned the school around—with mainstream settings. That view was echoed in the recent report by the County Councils Network and the Local Government Association, which spoke about sharing expertise better and moving children between settings.

Primary SENCOs can be helped to identify support for children, but to do so they need access to speech therapists and psychologists. What are the Government's plans to better share expertise and have more provision in the mainstream system? Mainstream will obviously not be appropriate for everyone, so it is important that

we continue the expansion of places. The hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) referred to the new places in her constituency, and there are other projects. The hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), who has a special school coming in his constituency, is nodding, and I think there is one in Great Yarmouth too. There is a lot more provision coming and we need to continue that.

Lewis Cocking: I should have declared earlier that I am a Hertfordshire county councillor; I apologise for not doing so.

My hon. Friend is making valid points. Does he agree that it should not matter where a person is born or lives in the United Kingdom, as councils should receive the same extra funding to provide for children with additional SEND needs? That will make all the difference to residents across the eastern region.

James Wild: I agree. I will come to funding shortly, so I will address that point then.

The third issue is partnerships: we must get education and health groups working together. Currently, the system holds some bodies accountable for things they do not have responsibility for and does not hold other bodies accountable for things they do have control over, so collaboration between key partners is required. The previous Government proposed to create local SEND and alternative provision partnerships to lead change and commission provision, and to improve accountability with refocused Ofsted and CQC inspections. Speech and Language UK, the County Councils Network and the LGA endorsed those recommendations, so will the Minister tell us how the Government plan to pursue the partnership approach and embed it in the system?

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne and others discussed funding. In the previous debate on this subject, I spoke about the increase in the high-needs budget to £10.5 billion this year—a 60% increase from 2020. Some £2.6 billion was invested in new places and in improving the existing provision.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): We have heard today about the fantastic work that SEND schools are doing in our constituencies. Does my hon. Friend believe that some form of ringfenced funding with tracked impact measures could help very good SEND schools, such as Five Acre Wood in my constituency, to flourish further?

James Wild: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. We need to track the outcomes and the support that children get, so that is a thoughtful comment.

When I spoke on a panel at the Conservative party conference in Birmingham last week, a representative of the Association of School and College Leaders said that there is enough money in the system, but the problem is that there is too much bureaucracy. Clearly, demand continues to rise and funding is a challenge. Council expenditure has tripled over the past decade. Councils are looking for more clarity on the statutory override, which the previous Government put in place to help local authorities to deal with deficits—I think they are now above £3 billion. Only last week, the NASUWT urged the Chancellor in a letter to extend the period that local authorities have to address their

[James Wild]

SEND deficits. Perhaps the Minister will be able to give a bit more clarity on that very pressing issue for local authorities.

The hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) referred to the pressures in respect of school transport. In Norfolk alone, that budget is £60 million, of which 80% is used to move pupils with SEN around and outside the county. That is money spent on journeys, not education.

I will touch briefly on VAT on independent schools, although a debate about that is going on in the main Chamber. It is clear that this tax on learning will disrupt children's education. Reference was made to pupils with EHCPs, but 10,000 pupils with special educational needs at independent schools in the east of England will be hit by those fees, and their education will be disrupted. The Government have not even published an impact assessment, even though the Minister in the earlier debate referred to analysis that had been done. It is extraordinary that that has not been shared with the House. I hope the Minister, even at this point, will listen to parents, pupils, local authorities and others, and will delay those plans. I look forward to having an opportunity shortly to vote to do exactly that.

Sam Carling: Is the shadow Minister suggesting that it is fair that parents who have children with special educational needs or a disability should have to send their children to a private school and pay all the associated fees? Is that really the best solution we can come up with?

James Wild: No; the point I am making is that there are children in schools who will be hit with a very unfair tax of 20%—a charge that their parents will have to pay. That seems to be completely disregarded by the Labour party, which is disappointing, to say the least.

To conclude, the last Government set out a comprehensive package of reform, after a lot of work with the sector. During a debate here in September, the Minister said that the Labour Government were determined to fix the SEND system—alleluia to that. I hope that we will hear much more today about the Minister's plans for practical action to be taken, rather than her talking about the last 14 years.

The Minister also referred on that occasion to the importance of working together. I will abuse my position to remind her of an invitation that has gone to her and the Education Secretary to join Norfolk MPs and members of Norfolk County Council who are coming to Westminster tomorrow, specifically to talk about SEND. I helped to push for that meeting and I hope that the Minister might be able to come along, even briefly, to hear about some of the challenges that we face. Ultimately, every Member here wants to ensure that children and families in their constituency get the support to realise their potential. I look forward to hearing her comments.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I would like to call the mover of the motion at two minutes to 4. If you can remember that, Minister, you will do me a big favour.

3.47 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) on securing a debate on this incredibly important and timely issue. I know that she was a champion for vulnerable young people long before entering this place, and that she shares the Government's vision for ensuring that all young people receive the right support to succeed in their education and lead healthy, happy and productive lives.

Improving the special educational needs and disabilities system across the country is a priority for all of us in this debate. I am regularly struck by the level of cross-party consensus on this issue, from Broxbourne to Southend West and Leigh, and from Huntingdon to Stevenage and Waveney Valley. So many Members have spoken powerfully on behalf of the children and families in their areas.

I appreciate specifically the hand of collaboration offered by the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), because this is a priority for the Government, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), referenced. We are determined to improve services for children and young people with special educational needs across the country, including in the east of England.

More than 1.6 million children and young people in England have special educational needs. For too long, too many families have been let down by a system that is not working. The former Secretary of State described it as “lose, lose, lose” and she was right, because despite the high-needs funding for children and young people with complex special educational needs and disabilities rising to higher and higher levels, confidence in the system remains incredibly low. Tribunal rates—as referred to by the Liberal Democrat Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman)—are increasing, and there are increasingly long waits for support. Far too many children with special educational needs are falling behind their peers, and they do not reach the expected levels in fundamental reading, writing and maths skills, with just one in four pupils achieving the expected standard by the end of primary school. We know that families are struggling to get their child the support they need and, more importantly, deserve. That must change.

Helen Grant: My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), the shadow Minister, did not quite answer my question on this, and I would love to hear the Minister's response, bearing in mind what she is saying about the need and the work of special schools. Does she believe that the ringfencing of funding for SEND schools, with tracked impact measures, could help some of these amazing schools that go above and beyond in helping children who are highly vulnerable with their education and care, as well as supporting their families to flourish further?

Catherine McKinnell: I will take away the hon. Lady's suggestion. I want to set out today how we want to improve our whole education system to serve children in the best way possible regardless of their needs, and

especially, given the subject of this debate, children with special educational needs and disabilities. We want to reform the system to achieve that across the board.

We know that for many years, parents have been frustrated, but we are determined to fix the system, and I will repeat and reiterate that. However, this starts with being honest with families about the challenges in the system. We urgently need to improve inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, and we need to make sure that there are special schools that can cater for those with complex needs. We are determined to restore parents' trust that their child will get the support that they need to flourish, no matter their additional need or disability. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) spoke powerfully about these issues.

We know that effective early identification and intervention is key to reducing the impact of a special educational need or disability in the long term. That is why we announced the extended funding for the Nuffield Early Language Intervention programme to continue it into next year, so that we make sure that children get the extra support they need to find their voice and to give them the best start to their education.

But there are no quick fixes for these deep-rooted issues. After 14 years, we know that the system is really struggling. It is in desperate need of reform and it is vital that we fix it. That is why we have started this work already; it is a priority for us, but it will take time. We are clear that we cannot do this alone, which is why we will work with those in the sector as essential and valued partners to ensure that our approach is fully planned and delivered together with parents, schools, councils and the expert staff who go above and beyond every day to look after the children in their care.

We are acting as quickly as we can to respond to the urgent cost pressures in the SEND system, which are causing real financial problems across the east of England and nationally. Many hon. Members have referred to those problems today. Before the parliamentary recess, we announced a new core schools budget grant, which will provide special and alternative provision schools with an extra £140 million of funding this financial year. Some £13.6 million of that has been allocated to local authorities in the east of England region. That is in addition to the high needs funding allocations for children and young people with complex special educational needs and disabilities, and the existing teachers' pay and pensions grants.

The Department for Education's budgets for the next financial year have not yet been decided. How much high-needs funding is distributed to local authorities, schools and colleges will depend on the Government's spending review, which is due to be announced at the end of the month. That means that next year's high allocation funding to local authorities has not been published to the normal timescales, but we are working across Government to announce next year's allocations for local authorities as soon as we can. I take on board the comments in that regard from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk.

Resolving the problems with the SEND system—I repeat this point—will not be easy or quick, and it will not happen as quickly as we or any families who need it want it to happen. But I am keen that we deliver

long-term solutions together, and I am grateful for the contributions from across the House on these important issues, because I know that we all want the same thing.

As well as making sure that we have better outcomes from the investment made in young people, it is important that there is a fair education funding system and that it directs funding to where it is needed. The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) raised this issue, and we want to make sure that we have a system that allocates funding in the fairest and most appropriate way possible. However, it will take time to look at that formula, and we will consider carefully the impacts of any changes on local authorities.

Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission jointly inspect local area SEND provision to ensure that there is joined-up support for children and young people. Those inspections enable the Department for Education to intervene in cases of significant concern and to work with local authorities and professional advisers to address areas of weakness. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) raised this issue, and I, too, am concerned that the SEND inspections in central Bedfordshire and Peterborough in 2019, and in Hertfordshire and Suffolk in 2023, found significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children with SEND. The issues raised in the inspection reports are serious. The Government need to be confident that the right actions to secure sustainable and rapid improvement are being taken in these areas. The 2023 inspection report for Southend-on-Sea is also notable. While not being found to have serious concerns, the judgment by Ofsted and the CQC relating to the partnership's

“inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people”

highlights the need to work closely with local area partnerships to support and help to drive crucial improvements.

It is essential that rapid action is taken to improve SEND services in areas where they are not meeting the need, and that leaders accept collective responsibility and accountability for delivering on agreed actions. That will require a relentless focus on improvement across all service providers so that children, young people and families can access the support they need. Department for Education officials will continue to work closely with these local areas over the coming months to ensure that the necessary progress is being made. For local area partnerships that have yet to be inspected under the new framework, meetings will also continue with SEND leads to keep abreast of emerging issues and concerns, as well as gathering evidence of good practice. Areas that do this well can share that with other local authorities, other regions and nationally.

Specialist place sufficiency was raised by a number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald). Local authorities can use their high needs capital funding to deliver new places in mainstream and special schools, as well as in other specialist settings. It can also be used to improve the suitability and accessibility of existing buildings. Suffolk, for example, has been allocated £23 million in high needs capital funding between 2022 and 2025, and the east of England region as a whole received £236 million. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) mentioned, in addition

[Catherine McKinnell]

to specialist places, it is right that this Government are committed to working with councils, school leaders and other sector partners nationally, and in the east of England, to develop a more inclusive education system within mainstream settings. To ensure the high and rising standards that we want to see in our schools, we have to deliver the right places at the right time and in the right sufficiency.

Hon. Members have raised the issue of exclusions—I am very conscious of the time, but I take on board the concerns. A framework is in place that must be followed to ensure that these decisions are made correctly.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft again for bringing these matters forward. We recognise that the SEND system needs to improve. We acknowledge the difficulties faced too often in securing the right support for children with SEND. I am determined that that will change. My final word must go to all those working in education, health and care, in the interests of our children and young people with special educational needs, both in the east of England and across the country. Together, we will deliver the best for all our children and young people, no matter their special educational needs or disabilities.

3.58 pm

Jess Asato: I thank the Chair, the Minister, the shadow Minister and all hon. Members for their contributions. I cannot do them justice in such a short time, but I hope that this issue will continue to command cross-party and cross-regional support.

I just want to talk about the so-called “over-energetic” child, who faces exclusion for consistent poor behaviour. I want to see that child get access to the diagnosis and support that they need to stay in school and flourish, and to support our struggling families. As one mum told me:

“I didn’t want to have to become a lawyer; I just wanted to be a loving mum”.

I thank hon. Members very much for the debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered SEND provision in the east of England.

Chalk Streams: Sewage Discharge

4 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling sewage discharges in chalk streams.

One Friday evening, I received a text and photos from a desperate resident, Maz, as the numbers cranked up on the sewage discharge map, asking:

“Surely something can be done about our precious chalk stream!”

I had been following the situation, but as soon as I saw the photos of sewage-filled water flooding the roads, I called her straight away, saying:

“I am coming down—can you meet me there?”

Twenty minutes later and my Friday evening started by checking sewage and seeing trails of toilet paper and algae float by the side of the road next to one of the world’s rare chalk streams. The River Ver, one of the four chalk streams in Harpenden and Berkhamsted, had seen more than 1,000 hours of pollution through the sewage discharge overflow. To date, that number has reached more than 2,500 hours. That is just not good enough.

Chalk streams, long described as England’s rainforest, provide a unique environment. The stable temperature from running through chalk, combined with a high mineral content, means that chalk streams are the ideal environment for vegetation to grow and wildlife to flourish. As havens for the natural environment, chalk streams attract a diverse array of flora and fauna. From the green drake mayfly to the kingfisher, the brown trout to the endangered water vole, those precious rivers are home to a whole host of wildlife.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing the matter forward. We are unfortunate not to have chalk streams in Northern Ireland, but we do have limestone rivers, which are equal in the aqua life they have and the health of the land. Does the hon. Lady agree that when it comes to ensuring that aqua life and the environment are sustained, we need to have short-term action and long-term protection?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely. The English chalk downland houses 85% of the world’s total. It is a privilege to say that in my constituency we are home to four of those rare and precious habitats: the River Bulbourne, the River Gade, the River Lea and the River Ver.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I, too, thank the hon. Member for securing a debate on this crucial issue. My constituency of Reading West and Mid Berkshire boasts several beautiful chalk streams. The Pang is one and it is said to have inspired “The Wind in the Willows”. I recently tested the water quality there with campaigners from the Angling Trust and found phosphate levels were three times what they should be. We would not find Ratty or Mole there any more, sadly, because that is a dangerous level of phosphate.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Olivia Bailey: I apologise. Does the hon. Lady agree that the previous Government let our chalk streams down when they abandoned their chalk stream plan? Will she join me in calling for urgent action to protect our chalk streams?

Victoria Collins: We have absolutely been let down by the last Conservative Government and we need to turn that around. Chalk streams and their catchment areas, such as the one in Harpenden and Berkhamsted, have been a lifeline around which our towns and villages have flourished, using the chalk streams to power thriving mill communities and supply the watercress industry. Even today, chalk streams form an important part of everyday life. Batford Springs and Redbournbury Mill are prime locations for families to paddle and play, especially on warm, sunny days. However, those precious habitats are under continued threat from pollution, from road run-off and sewage. Not one is in good overall river health.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Victoria Collins: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Clive Jones.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) on securing the debate, and I thank her for giving way—as I do my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon).

My constituency of Wokingham is blessed with the River Loddon, which flows across its boundaries. It is a rich, biodiverse environment and a reminder of the beauty in our natural world, yet the scourge of sewage discharges persists. Thames Water must make the necessary infrastructure investments to halt its appalling record, but the company's future is far from certain and those plans may be undermined.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Can you bring your comments to a conclusion? This is a very short debate, but there are long interventions.

Clive Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must ensure that these investments proceed, no matter the financial position of Thames Water?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely. These are vital investments that have to go ahead.

Locally, many organisations have worked tirelessly for many years to highlight the importance of precious catchment areas and protect them. From the Chiltern Society, the Ver Valley Society, the Chilterns Chalk Streams Project, the River Colne Catchment Action Network and the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust to local volunteers at Batford springs, Friends of the Bulbourne and the Not Bourne Yesterday project—

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on securing the debate today. In Epsom and Ewell, we have two chalk streams, which are important not only ecologically, but for our cultural heritage. The Hogsmill

river is a chalk stream so serene that it provided the perfect setting for John Millais's painting, "Ophelia". Knowing the ecological and cultural significance of Hogsmill, it has been sad to see its water quality worsen due to pollution. In September alone, sewage overflowed into Hogsmill for over 30 hours. Does my hon. Friend agree that our chalk streams, including the Hogsmill, are not just local treasures, but part of our national heritage, and that swift action is needed to protect them against degradation from sewage discharges?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely. Many of my constituents are horrified at the local state of rivers and frustrated by the lack of progress, and feel compelled to attend the march for clean water on Sunday 3 November. Sewage pumping in our rivers is hugely damaging for the local environment, contaminating the water with unacceptably high levels of phosphates and nitrates, and poses a major health risk.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Does she agree with me, and with Action for the River Kennet, that the requirement for sewage treatment works should be based not only on the population size they support, but the importance of the waterways they protect, such as the Lambourn and Kennet chalk streams that flow through my constituency of Newbury?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely. We have to do all we can.

After the thousands of hours of pollution into the River Ver, the Ver Valley Society found worrying levels of *E. coli* in the water. This has been blamed on high groundwater levels, but it still contains sewage and the fine sediment can lay in the river bed. That incident has been raised with Thames Water and their planned scheme to resolve the issue by upgrading the overflow will not be complete until 2026. We need action sooner. In the meantime, the rapid polluting of this waterway and the threat to public health and the local environment continues. That is, of course, by no means an isolated incident.

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this important debate. My constituency of Eastleigh has the precious chalk stream, the River Itchen, running through it. Earlier this year, Southern Water was found to be negligent by the Southampton Magistrates Court for dumping sewage into the Shawford lake stream that flowed into the YMCA Fairthorne Manor in Fair Oak in my constituency. Over 1,000 schoolchildren missed out on summer activities as a result. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should introduce a sewage tax on water company profits?¹

Victoria Collins: I will be calling for a lot in holding water companies to account.

Analysis completed by the Liberal Democrats found that almost 50,000 hours of sewage was discharged into chalk streams in 2023. That is more than double the previous year. The dire situation speaks to the 2022 report, which found that only 14% of England's rivers had "good" ecological status. Compared with several other countries such as Austria, Greece and Malta, where 95% of bathing sites are classified as excellent, it is clear that we are letting down our rivers and streams.

1.[*Official Report*, 9 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 6WC.](Correction)

[*Victoria Collins*]

That must change. Despite the situation, the Conservatives stood by and let us down again and again, failing to regulate water companies properly.

Mr Dillon: Where are they?

Victoria Collins: Exactly.

I call on the Minister to provide proper protection, regulation and enforcement. Although Ofwat has finally taken action, ordering water companies to return £158 million to customers via lower bills, that is just a drop in the ocean—or, should I say, a drop in the chalk stream. We must go further. I call on the Minister for a blue flag status to protect our precious waterways, such as chalk streams, to replace Ofwat with a stronger regulator—a clean water authority—and to enforce tougher restrictions on water companies. A blue flag status for rivers and lakes would enshrine their protection, and our precious chalk streams would be ripe contenders to get such a status. Indeed, given their rarity in this world, it is worrying to know that only a dozen have sites of special scientific interest status that currently protects them.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Given that one has to go through quite an onerous process to get the SSSI status and that we recognise that chalk streams are rare, does my hon. Friend agree that a recognised special status and designation for chalk streams is needed, so that they can get the protections they actually need?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely. As my hon. Friend says, chalk streams are extremely rare. There are almost 200 in the world—not many at all. As for regulating our water, Ofwat simply is not fit for purpose, and we ask the Minister to replace it with a new clean water authority that takes relevant powers from the Environment Agency. We ask her to strengthen the regulatory powers and resources and set legally binding targets to prevent sewage discharge in our highly sensitive nature sites.

The clean water authority should have the power to revoke the licence of poorly performing water companies swiftly, fine top executives of water companies and initiate prosecution. It should increase water monitoring with new sewage inspectors, including unannounced inspections, with the aim of ending the self-monitoring of water companies. When it comes to water companies, we must hold them to account and reform the way in which they work. We must ask for meaningful targets and deadlines to be set for water companies to end sewage discharges, with local environmental experts on water company boards. Water companies should publish 25-year investment plans to encourage sound investment and promote the use of nature-based solutions.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): My constituency suffered quite considerably from flooding in the past month. One reason is that chalk streams can be over-engineered, culverted and canalised through villages. Nature-based solutions offer a really good solution to improve the flow of rivers. Does my hon. Friend agree with me on that point?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely. We must also see a ban on bonuses for water company executives until sewage spills end and leaks are fixed. Ultimately, we need to transform water companies into public benefit companies.

Our precious chalk streams are of rare, global ecological importance and the backdrop to our towns, villages and daily lives. We must protect them for our future generations and for today's generation. We cannot squander the opportunity to protect them under our watch.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I am grateful to be part of this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) for securing it. Is this the first debate that she has secured in the House?

Victoria Collins: It is my first Westminster Hall debate.

Emma Hardy: I am very pleased that one of the hon. Member's first debates is on such an important issue. I do not want to get into a competition over who has the best chalk stream, but I must mention that the one near to where I live featured in "Mortimer & Whitehouse: Gone Fishing" the other day. They were at Driffeld beck. We get not only to share stories here about who has the most beautiful chalk streams, but to see them on national television. I share the hon. Member's love of them: they are England's equivalent of the Great Barrier Reef. They are amazing things to have and to be able to say are held within our own country. They are so precious to us. They are the rarest freshwater habitat on earth, and in England we are home to 85% of them. That is a remarkable achievement.

The hon. Member is absolutely right to feel outraged and upset about the levels of river pollution. I am sure there are more enjoyable things that she would like to do on a Friday night than go and examine a sewage discharge into the water, but it is good that she was there and able to document it, because where we have evidence of illegal sewage discharges, of course we wish to prosecute.

Mr Dillon: The Minister mentioned in her opening remarks the fishing programme. I wonder whether she would support an 8-metre buffer zone around rivers to stop the run-off of topsoil into chalk streams, which stops wild brown trout, for example, from being able to spawn.

Emma Hardy: I will move on to talk a little bit about run-off and other issues involved. I join the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted in praising her local community groups and organisations. One of the pleasures I have had since taking on this brief is meeting many committed environmentalists, environmental non-governmental organisations and people who care so much about the area. I liked the tale of people going picnicking by the edge of her chalk stream; I am tempted now to go and visit it when I am next on holiday. However, she is also right to point out that England's chalk streams face pressure on their water quality, with pollution coming from different point sources—especially from sewage treatment works, as she discovered on that Friday evening—and diffuse sources such as phosphorus and road run-off mean that chalk streams suffer from higher levels of nutrients, sediment and toxic chemicals such as pesticides.

I will go on to explain some of the actions that the Government are taking with regard to addressing those concerns. However, as has been mentioned by the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon), it is not water quality alone that affects the chalk streams flowing in the constituency of the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted, as they face pressures affecting the quantity and physical habitat quality too. On the quantity, we have seen excessive removal of water from its original source, which can lower the natural river flow of these streams.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): In the Chichester constituency, we have two crucial chalk streams: the River Ems and the River Lavant. Portsmouth Water has been abstracting from the River Ems since the 1960s, which has moved the flow two kilometres downstream at the point of flow. Does the Minister agree that water companies that rely on our chalk streams to supplement their water supply need to come up with some sustainable water solutions to ensure our water supply for the future? [*Interruption.*]

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House, so we must suspend the sitting for 15 minutes.

4.16 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.31 pm

On resuming—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. I think that the debate will finish at 4.46 pm.

Emma Hardy: I had just taken an intervention from the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), who talked about the excessive removal of water and the situation that she finds herself in with the water company. I agree that we need to look for a long-term solution.

When we abstract too much water, that increases the concentration of pollutants and the water temperature, and decreases oxygen levels, leading to increased silt and loss of habitat. As the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) mentioned, the physical habitat of our chalk streams has also been altered. They have been modified by people over recent decades, limiting the naturally varied habitats that plants and animals rely on and exacerbating the negative impacts of abstraction and pollution. Taken together, along with the sewage incidents, these pressures are placing our chalk streams under increasing strain and environmental stress.

In the constituency of the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted, where chalk streams including the River Lea and River Ver flow, these pressures are no different. That is why this Government are continuing to ensure the conservation of chalk streams. Under the Government's water industry national environment programme, improvements have been agreed for three waste water treatment works in the Harpenden and Berkhamsted constituency. They include stricter phosphorus limits for the discharge of fully treated sewage effluent and improved waste water flow monitoring to ensure that the required volumes of sewage receive full treatment

before any storm overflow can occur. The capacity of the Berkhamsted waste water treatment works to fully treat sewage has also been increased from 247 litres to 316 litres per second, providing for a higher and larger quality of treated effluent.

The Environment Agency is investigating the cause of a prolonged storm discharge from the Markyate sewage treatment works into the River Ver. Unfortunately, as it is a live investigation, I cannot go into more detail now, but I greatly encourage the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted to speak to the director of the Environment Agency about that and, of course, when the investigation is concluded, we can have a more detailed conversation about the issue and about what enforcement action can be taken.

I should also note that the Environment Agency has been working with Affinity Water and local partners to revitalise chalk rivers by leaving more water in the environment, addressing the issue of over-abstraction of our chalk rivers, and improving the physical habitat and water flow. Water abstractions across the catchment have been reduced by 33.3 megalitres per day, with a further reduction of 23.5 megalitres per day to be delivered by spring 2025. This is ongoing work in progress to address over-abstraction from chalk streams, which we rightly recognise is a concern.

Sarah Green: The Minister is making the point, rightly, about individual projects that water companies such as Affinity Water have invested in. What is missing is a strategy across the country for all chalk streams. That is why I am calling on her, in her position as a Minister, to give chalk streams the designation and special status they need so that this is not treated in a piecemeal way.

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I was addressing the specific chalk stream raised by the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted. However, I completely agree with the wider point about having an overall strategy to deal with the problems faced by water.

There is also the Spring Clean for Colne project, covering the River Ver and River Bulbourne. This partnership project is identifying, logging and mapping the outfalls, channels and ditches that could be a source of pollution in the Colne catchment. By first identifying the sources of pollution, we can then work on providing the solutions.

On a broader scale, which I think is the question that the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) wanted me to consider, the Government are continuing to take action to ensure the recovery and preservation of chalk streams. Earlier this year, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs launched its species survival fund, which aims to bolster conservation efforts across the country. Through this fund, 20 conservation projects will collectively receive a share of £25 million, with the goal of restoring 3,300 hectares of vital habitat for wildlife.

Notably, two of these projects will specifically benefit our chalk streams. These are the partnerships for nature in the north Wessex downs area of outstanding national beauty, which will restore over three kilometres of chalk stream habitat, and the riparian habitat improvements in Hertfordshire's chalk rivers from the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, which will restore

[*Emma Hardy*]

chalk river habitats across 11.15 kilometres of the River Lea catchment. We are also contributing £1 million to chalk river initiatives in 2024-25, collaborating with partners on 30 projects aimed at safeguarding these rare and irreplaceable habitats. That effort is crucial to our commitment to protect these habitats as part of the water resources chalk partnership fund.

Taken together, those points demonstrate that this Government are continuing to view chalk stream recovery as a key, important issue. Although money has previously been invested in their conservation, I am aware—very aware—that more work needs to be done and that recovery is not a quick fix.

Jess Brown-Fuller: Southern Water, working with Portsmouth Water, is making plans to reduce chalk stream abstraction by introducing effluent recycling at the Havant Thicket reservoir. Does the Minister think that this scheme—turning effluent into drinking water—is a good idea?

Emma Hardy: I think, as with all schemes, it needs to be looked at and considered carefully. Nothing will be signed off if it presents any danger to the general public. As she knows, we have one of the highest levels of drinking water quality in the world. That is not changing under this watch. There is no way that we would allow drinking water that was not completely safe for everyone to use.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Emma Hardy: Of course—I feel very popular this afternoon.

Dr Chambers: On the earlier point about nature restoration around chalk streams, in Winchester we have the River Itchen going right through the heart of the city. A lot of farming clusters around the edge are looking at protecting nature on the side of the chalk streams. One specific issue we have is flea and worm treatments that are used to treat parasites in cats and dogs. They are overprescribed—they are used within routine health plans, which is not really necessary—and they contain neonicotinoids which can contaminate the chalk streams and damage the ecosystems and the insects that live in them. Would the Minister look at how we can put pressure on the veterinary industry to allow vets to make clinical decisions on whether treatment is needed rather than customers having a blanket treatment every month, whether it is needed or not?

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Interventions have to be short; this is a half-hour debate.

Emma Hardy: I will go on to talk about agriculture and some of those other issues.

To turn to sewage, which I know is on the minds of many people, we have undoubtedly inherited a deeply flawed system and one that is now discharging record levels of sewage into our lakes and streams, and into our chalk streams. This is a public health crisis, demanding our immediate and decisive action to rectify decades of neglect and mismanagement.

We have committed to a rapid review of the environment improvement plan, to be completed by the end of the year, which will set out how DEFRA will deliver the Government's legally binding targets. The Government will develop a new statutory plan to protect and restore our natural environment, with delivery plans to meet each of our ambitious targets under the Environment Act 2021, including cleaning up our waterways.

This Government require water companies to publish sewage discharge monitoring data online in near real time and in an accessible format. The Environment Agency independently monitors and scrutinises all the data submitted by water companies as part of its requirements for the monitoring of sewage outlets.

All that activity must be seen in the wider context of the actions that this Government are taking to demonstrate our commitment to prioritising the clean-up of all our waterways. In the first weeks of this Labour Government, the Secretary of State met water companies to make it clear to them that under this Government they will be answerable for their performance for customers and the environment. We have secured an agreement from all companies to amend their articles of association, which are the governing rules of each entity, placing customers and the environment at the heart of their objectives, thereby reinforcing the inherent social and moral responsibilities that come with operating a public utility.

The Secretary of State has also written to Ofwat, securing agreement that vital funding for infrastructure is ring-fenced and can only be spent on upgrades that benefit customers and the environment. Ofwat will also ensure that when money for investment is not spent, companies will refund customers, with money never being allowed to be diverted for bonuses, dividends or salary increases.

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I thank her and the Government for the decisive action they are taking to clean up our rivers and streams. Will she reassure us that chalk streams will very much be a part of that plan?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and she is absolutely right—chalk streams are a precious, beautiful habit that mean a lot to this Government and to the people of this country.

Ofwat has set out a record £88 billion in proposed expenditure to deliver cleaner rivers and seas, and better services for customers through price review 2024. On 4 September, we introduced the Water (Special Measures) Bill to Parliament, which is a key step towards fulfilling our commitment to put water companies under special measures. Through this legislation, we will drive meaningful improvements in performance and the culture of the water industry.

Although the Bill marks a significant first step towards a transformative change across the sector, this Government are clear that the Bill alone will not be sufficient to fix our broken water system. However, it represents an immediate downpayment on the comprehensive reforms that are needed after years of failure and environmental degradation. We need to reform the whole water system to tackle the deep-rooted problems, which is why this Government will carry out a review to fundamentally transform how our water system works. We are bringing in expertise from a range of people who cover specific

areas such as the environment, public health, consumers, investors, engineers and economics, including a public consultation to test these proposals and bring in a diverse range of views.

This Government also want to work across the House to fix our broken system. The hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted is very welcome—indeed, like all hon. Members—to consult key stakeholders in her constituency and to feed their thoughts into the review, because we want to reset the water system for decades to come and we want to involve as many people as possible in that consultation.

That work will culminate in further legislation to fundamentally transform our water industry and restore our rivers, lakes and seas for good. I will provide more details on that as soon as possible, including on how each Member of Parliament can take part in the process. Also, because this question came up, I will just add that there is a regulatory review at the moment of all of the regulators involved in DEFRA.

This Government are committed to the protection and restoration of our cherished chalk streams. We recognise that these unique rivers are not just vital ecosystems but a symbol of our national heritage. The measures that I have outlined today are just the beginning. They represent the crucial first steps towards a comprehensive reset of the water industry. By implementing these strategies alongside a broader range of initiatives, we can drive long-term, transformative change through the entire water sector. Our goal is to rehabilitate and protect these invaluable resources while effectively regulating against adverse impact, including sewage discharge.

Together we can restore these rivers, not just for our own benefit but for that of the generations that will follow us. Let us stand united in this mission, ensuring that our chalk streams continue to flow clearly and vibrantly, reflecting the beauty and richness of our natural landscape for years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Edinburgh Festivals: Cultural and Economic Contribution

4.45 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, and I am very grateful to the House for allowing me to have this debate today.

I have three purposes for calling the debate. First, I want to draw attention to the economic and cultural phenomenon that has developed in Edinburgh. Secondly, I want to talk about the challenges and opportunities that the Edinburgh festivals face, and how there is a clear role for public policy. Thirdly, I will argue that it is not just about what the Government can do to support the Edinburgh festivals, but what the Edinburgh festivals can do to help the Government achieve their goals for the country at large of economic growth, breaking down barriers to opportunity and establishing Britain's place in the world.

The Edinburgh festivals and Fringe are not simply a highlight in my city's annual calendar, or an attraction to lure some tourists for the month of August. In August, Edinburgh becomes the cultural capital of the world. The gathering of creative talent and cultural wealth is truly unique. The Edinburgh festivals and Fringe did not happen by accident. Years, indeed decades, of painstaking commitment have led to the phenomenon we see today—not least in recent years, with a pandemic, Brexit uncertainty, and a cost of living crisis, which is also a cost of putting on a show crisis.

The Edinburgh international festival started in 1947, when Europe was emerging from the shadow of war. The German venues that had previously played host to opera and classical music festivals were closed. Edinburgh, undamaged by bombing, with stunning scenery and spectacular venues, was a perfect location to bring people together. Indeed, in the years after the war, the international festival was twice nominated for the Nobel peace prize for its work bringing people together. At the same time, a group of acts that were uninvited to the official festival pitched up anyway and performed in the city. They were described as performing “on the fringe”, so the Edinburgh Fringe was born. We politicians have just come from our party conferences, with a hive of activity on the conference fringe, but the very concept of a fringe event comes from Edinburgh. Ours, I have to say, is more glamorous than the political version.

But that was then. Today, the Edinburgh festivals and Fringe are the third biggest ticketed event in the world. Edinburgh puts on an event on the scale of the FIFA world cup or the Olympic games every year. I think we have become numb, through familiarity, to the scale of what has been achieved. We are talking about 4,000 shows that attract an audience of 3.5 million and over 300 venues across the city, ranging from the Usher Hall to basement comedy clubs. It is a phenomenon, truly unique and exceptional in scale.

What started in the 1940s as the international festival and Fringe has now grown into the biggest cultural gathering in the world. It includes the Edinburgh book festival, the world's largest literature festival; the Edinburgh film festival, the world's longest-running film festival; the Edinburgh military tattoo, an iconic celebration of one of Scotland's biggest cultural brands; the jazz festival,

[Chris Murray]

the biggest of its kind in the UK; the television festival, with its agenda-setting Mactaggart lecture; and the arts, children's, storytelling, and science festivals.

Other countries take years to plan, and millions in public money, to put on events at such a scale. The Paris Olympics this year attracted 20,000 participants to its one-off event. The Edinburgh festivals attracted double that—and we do it every year. The scale is impressive, but I argue it is important for two reasons. The first is economic. It not only generates £400 million in economic impact, creates a supply chain of £15 million for 800 businesses, of which 97% are based in the UK and 80% are small and medium-sized enterprises, and represents incredible public investment, with £33 generated for every £1 invested by the public purse—it also creates an economic ecosystem. We may not get that one emblematic, televised moment of an Olympic opening ceremony, but that moment is attenuated throughout the year, every time we watch a comedy show, drama or talent that was incubated in Edinburgh.

Think of the Fringe: it is not just an attraction for audiences to watch shows, but the global trade fair for comedy and the arts. New shows, new materials and new acts show off their wares and get snapped up. We just get to watch. The UK is a cultural powerhouse, and our cultural and creative sectors can thrive in the way that they do because we have the Edinburgh festivals and Fringe operating at this capacity in our country. On that note, I am sad to see that today the Fringe's chief executive, Shona McCarthy, is stepping down after nine years. She has done an incredible job in Edinburgh, and we wish her well.

Secondly, the festivals put Edinburgh on the global plane, and Britain needs cities operating at that level. Edinburgh has the raw material to thrive in the 21st century: we have a thriving university sector, with world-class clusters in research and development, IT and biotech; we have the energy transition on our doorstep; we have a dynamic financial services sector; and we have a world-class tourism offer. When we add the festivals and Fringe, Edinburgh's potential moves to that of the top tier of global cities, ranking like a British San Francisco.

I have not secured this debate to extol the benefits of my city, although, as I think you can tell, Mr Efford, I could do that at length. My argument today is that there is a role for Government, and I want to make five points about the role of public policy.

First: funding. I am not asking for more money, per se—although that would be welcome—but I do argue that the Edinburgh festivals need economic stability and the ability to plan. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said that she plans to move to multi-annual budgeting; no sector would benefit more from that than the creative sector. Will the new Government be exploring how to leverage economic stability and multi-annual financial planning to support the arts?

Secondly: recognition. I have tried to set out how the Edinburgh festivals are a national jewel. We value our cultural sector in Britain and we know how much institutions such as Wimbledon, the premier league, the Proms and the Edinburgh festivals set us apart. No Government would let those fail, so is it right that we

make the Edinburgh festivals compete for funding like any and all creative ventures? Is it fair on any arts project, big or small?

Thirdly: cross-UK engagement. Cultural policy is devolved, quite properly, and you will find no greater defender of devolution and the importance of respecting the status of the Scottish Parliament than I, but, with the election of a UK Labour Government, I hope that we are moving to a less antagonistic, more constructive relationship. There have been some failings in Scottish Government policy on culture in recent years, such as the ongoing debacle in Creative Scotland and the fact that, in just nine months, the Scottish Government published an absurd 10 strategies on culture, but I hope that the new Government will work as constructively as they can with the Scottish Government to support the festivals.

I would also say that to see the festivals thrive we need a constructive relationship between UK, Scottish and local governments. Edinburgh puts on a show of this size every year, yet, per capita, it is the poorest-funded local authority in Scotland. Council budgets are severely overstretched, as disproportionate cuts are passed from Holyrood to the city chambers. That means that the People's Story Museum in my constituency, which tells the story of working class history, is currently temporarily closed, and it means that the Brunton theatre in the Musselburgh part of my seat is also closed. I know that the Minister has no responsibility for that, but it is important to set it on the record when we talk about culture in Edinburgh.

Fourthly: visas. The festivals depend on artists and technicians coming from overseas, but the process is cumbersome, expensive and, most dangerous of all, unpredictable. Can the Department for Culture, Media and Sport work with the Home Office to explore ideas, such as those set out by the festivals visa working group, to navigate that?

Finally: crisis support. This year the Edinburgh book festival, the world's biggest book festival, lost its funding from Baillie Gifford, the investment firm, after a campaign by Fossil Free Books. I do not wish to rehash that affair here, save to say that although I fully support tackling climate change, I am unconvinced that defunding a book festival is the way to go about it. Is there something we can learn from that episode? In this country, the cultural sector depends on philanthropy as well as public investment. Is there a way that DCMS can help book festivals, or indeed any festival, navigate the controversies that can abruptly arise in the social media age? I know that the new Government are fully committed to seeing the cultural and creative sectors thrive, so I would be grateful if they could undertake to give these issues some consideration.

It is important that Parliament recognises that other countries would give their eye teeth to have what Edinburgh has established in the past 75 years. We fail to polish the cultural jewels in our crown at our peril. We have an opportunity. The potential for the festivals to thrive is right in front of us. The Fringe is opening a new home in the Old Infirmary and the Dunard Centre will add a new modern concert hall to the city's venues, but the support of public policy is necessary to achieve that.

Think back to the 18th century. Some argue that the reason Edinburgh became a leading city of the enlightenment was the structure of the old town. Nobles,

artisans, middle-class professionals, skilled and unskilled workers lived cheek by jowl on top of each other in the old town's tenements. That created the incubator where debates and ideas could thrive, and that is how the enlightenment took hold there. Today we have a similar phenomenon, from the most avant-garde and edgy Fringe performances trying something new to the international festival and the best classical music performances in the world, with the world's biggest literature festival discussing the most salient ideas of our time in the same place at the same time. It is in this petri dish that humanity hatches and nurtures the creativity that can drive our economy and our society in the years ahead. That is why I called this debate to discuss the power of the Edinburgh festivals.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should stand if they intend to contribute to a debate.

4.58 pm

Dame Caroline Dinéage (Gosport) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) on securing the debate and on the excellent way in which he championed his city. As someone who has visited the festivals during August many, many times over the years, he has made a fine case for the value of them and makes me want to go back again.

Anyone who has visited Edinburgh at any time of the year will say what a wonderful, vibrant and historic city it is. I was not at all surprised to find out that of all the cities in the UK, Edinburgh receives the highest proportion of international visitors to the UK: 68% of the total. The challenge for policymakers is how to grasp the strong pull factors and turn them into gold dust that benefits not only Edinburgh but the rest of Scotland and indeed the rest of the UK. The festivals play a massive part in that.

How can we best use our cultural heritage to further our soft power abroad and promote prosperity at home? The 11 major festivals that comprise the Edinburgh festival are a perfect tool to do it. The international festival, the Fringe and the tattoo always get the limelight, but of course 11 festivals make up the complement. The Edinburgh international book festival, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, remains the biggest in the world, with more than 900 authors in attendance.

However, the reports that have been released by the festivals lay bare some of the significant challenges, including the rise in the cost of living accommodation and security expenses, and the costs are being exacerbated by the frustrating, restrictive and punitive bureaucracy that has been imposed on Edinburgh's landlords by the Scottish Government. I also have concerns about the future of funding for acts at festivals such as the Fringe. Both those issues tie into the all-important question of how and why the Government should and could be stimulating cultural activity, specifically to develop artists, actors and creators.

This issue is too big for Edinburgh council to deal with alone: it has an impact on the whole of Scotland and the whole of the UK. In short, it is for all of us to work out how the various festivals can continue to play

a role as the incubator—a sort of research and development department for world-class artistic talent—and a role in tourism, expanding the horizons of those who come along and see them. That is why, despite the fact that both culture and tourism are devolved, the previous Government spent £1 million supporting the festivals with their digital offer.

It is the talent that brings visitors in their hundreds of thousands. There were 700,000 unique visitors last year alone, and that number does not account for the many artists who require somewhere to live. They are the up-and-comers who are looking for their big break. They are young, not well off and looking for somewhere cheap to stay, but for many the heavy-handed licensing and prohibitive legislation around short-term lets is destroying any chance of their being put up for the night. Gone are those days when a well-meaning, friendly person who wanted to support aspiring artists could just give over their spare bedroom for a few weeks.

New regulations require landlords to be compliant with rigorous safety rules, fit and proper person tests and assurances that the let will not adversely affect the community. The measures have adversely impacted the availability of short-term lets, which is especially ironic considering the fact that 72% of locals say that the festivals make Edinburgh a better place to live. If my local city was inundated with people every year and I could not find a table to go out and eat, I am not sure whether I would feel the same way, but people do feel the benefit of the festivals.

I urge anyone with a stake in the future of Edinburgh festivals to engage with Edinburgh council's consultation on the scheme, which closes on Monday. The Scottish Government would do well to review the 2022 regulation and ask themselves why they have decided to restrict access to one of our most successful cities and festival programmes at a time when the events are inevitably finding it more expensive and difficult to operate.

I hope the Minister will have a conversation with his counterpart in Holyrood and emphasise the benefits not just to Scotland but to the nation as a whole, and the need to cut through the bureaucracy and enable the market to work a lot more effectively. I am worried about the effect of the Scottish Government's budget cut to Creative Scotland. The almost £700,000 fund was a vital resource for participants in the festivals. It was already extremely over-subscribed, so it is difficult to rationalise the decision by both the Scottish Government and Creative Scotland. Artists cannot rely on pots of money such as Phoebe Waller-Bridge's "Keep it Fringe" fund. We need artists whose careers have started at the festivals to pay into support to help others coming up behind them, but we also need all the authorities to feed in and support them.

Festivals such as the Fringe are often the first big test for an emerging artist. They are a way for people to have the most amazing experiences, and the cultural contribution is second to none. They also bring the world and its cultural wonders to Scotland, whether that is through the Tattoo or the international festival. It is vital that the Scottish Government recognise the part that they can play, and I hope the Minister will do his bit to encourage co-operation with the festivals in future years.

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front Benchers at 5.26 pm. A number of Members did not indicate to the Chair before the debate that they wanted to speak. We will get everybody in, but I will have to impose a four-minute time limit.

5.4 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Mr Efford.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) on securing time for this important debate. Edinburgh—Scotland's beloved capital and my home—is renowned worldwide not just for its historic beauty and ancient heritage but for its vibrant cultural scene. This goes beyond grand shows with expensive tickets. It includes things like Big Noise Wester Hailes, Forget Me Notes, Edinburgh Printmakers and the Filmhouse, which I hope will reopen soon. All four of those organisations operate in my constituency. Edinburgh's festivals are a beacon of cultural expression, showcasing the very best of literature and all varieties of performing and creative arts. But more than that, the festivals serve as a cornerstone of the city's economy and underpin the wellbeing of its citizens.

I welcome the progress made by the Dunard Centre and the redevelopment of the Royal High School. These venues will extend the tourist season in Edinburgh and enable it to compete with the great European cultural centres—places like Hamburg, Vienna and Paris. I have no doubt that the Dunard Centre will be world-class. That will be not just because it is a fantastic building but because of its values. I not only expect people from the most deprived parts of my constituency to be working in the Dunard Centre; I expect them to have places in the audience, and I also expect Big Noise Wester Hailes to be on the stage. This reflects the Edinburgh International Festival's mission statement, which is

“to provide the deepest experience of the highest quality art for the broadest possible audience.”

For countless businesses across Edinburgh, the festival season throws a lifeline of increased footfall, which provides income that sustains them right through the year. The associated demand for staff is invaluable in providing local young people and students with the opportunity for summer work. The festivals provide many people in Edinburgh with their first paying job. We in this place have a responsibility to ensure that staff are supported by legislation and that they are well treated at work. That is why I will support the Deputy Prime Minister's new deal for working people, which will help to enable that.

Investing in the breadth and depth of the festival offering in Edinburgh also helps to spread the tourist economy to the quieter parts of the year. It will help Edinburgh to move upmarket, with visitors staying for longer and spending more. This will mean that working in the tourist economy will be a career for more people—rather than just a summer job—with better pay and better conditions.

The economic contributions of the festivals do not stop at employment opportunities and turnover for local businesses. They also provide a wholly unique opportunity to show off and sell not just Brand Scotland

but Brand Edinburgh to the world. Culture lets us connect with our international partners on an emotional level that no sales pitch can compete with. We should not forget that Rudolf Bing, a Jew who escaped Nazi Germany, established the Edinburgh international festival in 1947 as a way of bringing people together in post-war Europe.

I am proud that people come to Edinburgh from all over the world, but too often I am ashamed of what they see. Edinburgh's position as Scotland's worst-funded local authority comes with consequences, not least where homelessness is concerned. To address the point about why Airbnb is being regulated, it is a key driver for that in Edinburgh. The indifference that our capital is shown means that hardly a year goes by without a council-owned cultural venue being put at risk. Last year it was the King's Theatre; this year it is the People's Story Museum. Edinburgh needs fair funding, and the importance of its ecosystem—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. I call Jim Shannon.

5.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) on leading today's debate and on setting the scene and giving us a flavour of the Edinburgh festival. It certainly seems exciting. For all our constituencies, we have things to be proud of. I have heard so much from others about the Edinburgh festivals and what they bring to Scotland, so it was fantastic to hear the hon. Member speak so highly of that.

Similarly, if we look to Northern Ireland, there is so much to highlight, so it is great to be here to discuss some of the things that we do, with the inspiration of the Edinburgh festival. The hon. Member set out the role for Government that could and should be the plan for other parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. He referred to it as a UK public project and UK engagement. Bearing those things in mind, and looking at what the hon. Member said, gives us an idea of what we need to do elsewhere and what we have tried to do.

It is fantastic to hear of the variety of cultural entertainment that Edinburgh has to offer, including the science and the jazz festivals, the Edinburgh Fringe, the arts and the book celebrations. It is the biggest book show in the world. I did not know that but, again, it shows how important it is. In my Strangford constituency we have numerous events, some of which are private and some of which are run by the council, to celebrate the true essence of what Northern Ireland and Strangford are about. We can take a lead—if I may say this gently to all our people back home—from the Edinburgh festival. We can all learn from it and get ideas for the way forward.

The coastal peninsula where I live has recently had some other events, including a kite festival, which has been held for a number of years, and the Portaferry gala. A few months ago, we celebrated the Comber Earlies; hundreds came along to that festival in Comber to celebrate its famous, EU-designated farm potato. Chefs showcased their culinary skills and talents, and there was live music and an artisan bar. Mount Stewart in my constituency also holds dozens of festivals, and

some of the ideas are taken from the Edinburgh festival, including jazz Sundays for jazz lovers.

One thing that sticks out is how loved the Edinburgh Fringe festival is—especially the comedy. That is an example of some of the good things we see. It ripples across the United Kingdom: some of the people who perform there are from Northern Ireland, and they take those skills, that entertainment and that value back home to my country. Comedy is on the rise across the UK. Especially in Northern Ireland, the wealth of comedy is outstanding. Events at comedy clubs and festivals are important for the local economy, as they truly have the means to bring everyone together to have a laugh. We sometimes forget about the fun that we have; perhaps we need to focus on that more.

In North Down, the constituency neighbouring mine, the Open House music and arts festival takes place each summer in Bangor. I know dozens of constituents who would not miss the events it has to offer. That highlights how instrumental these examples are to our local economies. One of the thrusts of argument of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh is that we can grow the economy and do more. He is right to pursue that; we should be doing it. Our constituents rely on such events and festivals to boost our local economies and bring communities together. The mark they make on local tourism is phenomenal, so it is important that we give them the means they need to succeed.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place; he takes his responsibilities incredibly seriously. I look forward to his comments, which will give us some ideas about how the Government can help more. I gently ask him whether he will consider engaging with local councils and the Northern Ireland Assembly back home to ascertain what more the Government can do to support and celebrate culture across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

5.12 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) on securing this debate, which is important not just for the city of Edinburgh but for the whole country and beyond.

The Edinburgh festivals make a tremendous contribution to the UK economy. They bring people from around the world to perform and experience music, dance, drama, comedy, literature and culture more generally, and I have been lucky to enjoy them on many occasions. We are lucky to have many arts, music, theatre and cultural festivals across the country offering similar opportunities. The International Gilbert and Sullivan festival, which takes place each August in Buxton, near my constituency of Mid Derbyshire, is one such example.

In 2022, it was estimated that the creative industries contributed about £126 billion in gross added value to the UK economy and employed 2.4 million people, but they are so much more than an item on a balance sheet. They are a vital catalyst that enables people to express and explore ideas, and they bring communities together.

The arts are common to every culture since the earliest times; music, the visual arts, dance and drama provide an opportunity to walk in somebody else's shoes. They build a more inquiring society, and help us to understand who we are and what it is to have somebody

else's experience. They are also a vital educational tool,

[Jonathan Davies]

but far too often they are not a staple in schools and are not something that people have the opportunity to adequately engage with throughout their lives.

One of the most important roles of festivals such as those that take place in Edinburgh each summer—especially the Fringe—is to be an incubator for young performers, who can test new ideas, grow their confidence and build their profile in front of a truly international audience. But the future of cultural festivals across the country, and all they offer, is being undermined, because increasingly young people do not have the opportunities they should have to benefit from a creative education.

There has been an overall decline of almost 50% in the number of arts GCSE entries since 2010, and some schools no longer offer some arts subjects at GCSE level at all: 42% of schools no longer enter any pupils for GCSE music, 41% no longer enter any pupils for drama GCSE and 84% enter no pupils for dance GCSE.

Increasingly, the creative subjects are becoming the preserve of those with the ability to pay. However, talent has no postcode and every young person should have the right to a creative education. That decline matters—for our economy and the UK's standing around the world, but also for who we are as people and how we understand the world and interact with each other.

I am delighted that the Labour manifesto commits the new Government to supporting children to study a creative subject until they are 16, and that it will integrate a creative industries sector plan as part of its industrial strategy, creating good jobs and accelerating growth in film, music, gaming and other creative sectors. The new Government are also committed to launching a new national music education network—a one-stop shop with information on courses and classes for parents, teachers and children.

The new Government face huge challenges, and they have inherited an appalling legacy from their predecessor. I urge them to keep the creative industries and arts education at the forefront of their thinking as they undertake their work of national renewal.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Just to warn the two last Members: I will have to drop their time to three minutes after the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine).

5.16 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh on securing this debate. We cannot talk about the festival too often—I have loved it since I was a child. I learned the story of Rudolf Bing for the first time from Allan Little at the book festival that went ahead this summer. Rudolf Bing was an Austrian-born opera impresario, a Jewish refugee from the Nazis, who set up the Edinburgh festival in 1947 to heal, he said, the wounds of war through the arts. The very first performance was the Vienna Philharmonic orchestra, and they performed Mahler. Since then, it has become the massive event that it is today.

Growing up in Glasgow, we were slightly jealous because all those famous people were going to Edinburgh,

and that city had all the publicity, but actually, we got to benefit, too. I went with my school to see “Hamlet” as part of our higher English. We saw Derek Jacobi, and my love of the theatre was born that night—I love Shakespeare. The festival provides a valuable educational tool for children throughout Scotland, and I have grown up with it. My husband, an Aberdonian, spent one August working on a show at the festival. My daughter, a Glaswegian, spent a summer working there, and I got to “headline” at the political festival this year. It is part of people's lives.

In Edinburgh, we have a strange relationship with the festival. We love it—it is the world's window on us and our chance to show off. However, there is also an underlying tension, which the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) referred to, between the influx of tourists every year—we have also seen that tension in Vienna and Barcelona—and the cost to the city, which has the most underfunded council in the country; the mess when we have strikes which coincide with it; the pressure on our public transport; and the cost of accommodation in Edinburgh, which is now outrageous. However, looking at what the festivals bring to the city, I do not think the tensions can be compared with the benefits. Think about where we would be without the £400 million that it brings to the city itself, and the other £300 million it brings to the rest of Scotland when it acts as a tourism gateway. It is a jewel in our cultural crown and we need to preserve it.

It suffered during the pandemic and lots of venues only just survived. We need to help it to extend the level of tax reliefs for small businesses, many of whom make a massive contribution to the festival, and to address the barriers to financial support that they face. We need to do more to support small venues, which do not have the massive events. Let us say, £1 on tickets for Murrayfield stadium would help—but do not tell Murrayfield I said that! It also provides a stage for new talent—the incubator that has been talked about. In any comedy programme on British television on any weekend of the year, there will be someone who learned their trade at the Edinburgh festival.

In short, over the past 75 years, it has enriched our city, its reputation across the globe and our national reputation, for music, theatre, comedy, books, television—you name it. It has enriched our reputation. I believe that we can say with some confidence that it has played a part, particularly this year, in fulfilling that original vision of fostering international understanding through the arts.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. We move on to the next speaker.

5.20 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) on securing this debate. From the early days, it has been the people of Edinburgh who have pushed for the best. At the inaugural festival in 1947, the Minister for fuel and power banned the floodlighting of Edinburgh Castle, as coal rationing was still in place. However, the people of Edinburgh would not stand for that and generously donated their coal rations so that the castle could be lit from dusk to midnight during the festivals.

There is no doubt that the festivals are an economic success for Edinburgh and Scotland. The economic impact study published by BOP Consulting showed that the gross economic impact of the festivals in 2022 was £492 million for Edinburgh's economy and £620 million to Scotland. However, a worrying development highlighted by that study showed that between 2010 and 2022, visitors spent more money on accommodation and less money on local public transport, entertainment and food and drink.

In 2010, visitors spent 37% on accommodation, which jumped to 51% by 2022. With the expansion of the short-term let market and the increasing numbers of hotels, that spend does not benefit our communities but rather industries that are ripe with insecure and low-paid work. Similarly, in 2010, visitors spent £11.4 million on transport, which tumbled to £4.1 million in 2022, reducing the ability of Lothian Buses and train companies to increase stretched local services, but also, crucially, indicating that the wealth of the festival delivery remains concentrated in the very localised area of the city centre.

I was lucky. At my state school, we were all given a recorder. I say lucky; I am not sure my parents felt the same. We had a school orchestra and our teachers ran theatre productions and our school trips took us to galleries and museums, so we knew that those places were for us. That must be everyone's experience.

That is why I am impressed with projects such as the new Dunard music centre that I visited over the summer, a new venue in the constituency that is committed to delivering a model to enable up-and-coming amateur talent from Edinburgh to perform there, as well as having a ticketing system that will enable people to enjoy what is on offer. Similarly, I look forward to supporting impressive plans at Customs House in Leith for a community and creative hub that will bring Leith's rich history and culture to life, and also long-established projects such as North Edinburgh Arts, which since 1998 has been based in the heart of the community in Muirhouse, supporting local people to access high quality arts and cultural opportunities. Its new purpose-built centre will open later this year.

Affordability is key to delivering arts for all—affordability of tickets, but also of studio and hire space. That is evident in the private sector, too, where Wasps Studios, whose ethos was to provide affordable studio spaces, have sadly moved—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. I call Patricia Ferguson.

5.23 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray)—I hope he does not mind this interloper from Glasgow West coming into the debate. The importance of the book festival is well worth recognising, particularly as Edinburgh is the first UNESCO city of literature, something that we sometimes forget.

As we have heard, the Edinburgh festivals make an important contribution to the economy of Edinburgh and Scotland and provide a showcase for Scotland and a venue for art and artists from around the world. Every year, hundreds of thousands of tourists and art lovers

fill up the city as they make their way from one venue to another, to enjoy one of the 40,000 performances on offer.

Many artists come to Scotland to showcase their work, but I want to focus briefly today on a homegrown artist who is synonymous with the Edinburgh festival, my old friend Richard Demarco. Richard was born in Edinburgh in 1930 to parents who had come to Scotland from Italy. Now aged 94, Richard Demarco has attended every Edinburgh festival, which is really quite something, and he has organised arts programmes at most of them. Since its inception, he has also been heavily involved with the Fringe festival.

Over the years, Ricky Demarco has hosted hundreds of artists and staged more than 1,000 art exhibitions, featuring artists from over 60 countries. He has challenged the boundaries of the Fringe by staging performances outside Edinburgh, including a production of "Macbeth" on Inchcolm island. He has also been a critical friend of the Fringe, speaking publicly about what he saw as the over-emphasis on commercial considerations and also the increase in the prominence of the comedy festival, which was something he did not quite approve of.

Ricky has won many awards over the years from Governments and arts organisations around the world, because of his own artistic excellence and his devotion to internationalism. He has a CBE and in 2013 was the European Citizen of the Year. During the cold war, Demarco crossed the iron curtain 100 times. He often went to eastern Europe to bring back artists and groups to perform at the Edinburgh festival. That emphasis on internationalism is, of course, no accident; it is underpinned by the founding principles of the Edinburgh festival, which have already been remarked upon today. When it was founded in 1947, the idea was that the festival would be about healing the wounds of war through the language of the arts, which is something that Ricky Demarco did not just talk about but actively participated in, as he does to this day and encourages others to do the same. That alone is quite a legacy, but it also emphasises the so-called "soft power" of the arts, and I offer that "soft power" as a third reason for supporting the Edinburgh festivals and the arts more generally.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Apologies, but I have to call the Front-Bench spokespersons.

5.26 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure, Mr Efford, to serve under your chairmanship and I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) on securing this important debate.

We have heard many inspiring stories today about Edinburgh. I regret that my most recent cultural experience in Edinburgh was bellowing out Proclaimers songs in Fingers piano bar at my stag party. That was a great day out, but it does not match up to some of the other stories that we have heard—

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): It does not sound like it would. [*Laughter.*]

Max Wilkinson: It was a lovely evening out as well, Minister.

[Max Wilkinson]

Our challenge is that we must build a creative environment that showcases the best of British talent—bringing together British culture and creativity, and showcasing it for the world—and that we use that to foster a thriving and informed democracy. The impact of cultural festivals in achieving those aims is substantial.

In the case of the Edinburgh festival, we have already heard that it benefits Edinburgh itself by more than £400 million; the wider impacts on the rest of Scotland and the UK are much, much bigger. The festival opens the door to tourism for the rest of our nation, which is a really important aspect that we must not miss out when speaking about cultural events.

That is why it is very worrying to hear the concerns of festival organisers, which have been highlighted in recent news coverage. Regardless of funding pressures, it is our opinion that it is extremely important that the Scottish Government do what they can to meet their past funding pledges. For appropriate balance, I will add that such responsibility extends to other public funders of cultural activities across the rest of the UK, whether those are devolved nations or local government.

Festivals, such as the festivals in Edinburgh that we are debating today or the Cheltenham festivals in my own constituency, play a key role in our cultural life. It is vital that they receive the support necessary to continue to flourish. This week, my constituency is celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Cheltenham Literature Festival, which continues to flourish. However, despite large ticket sales, reductions in funding and in-kind support mean that the organisers of the Cheltenham Literature Festival have had to make some really tough choices in the past few years. Nevertheless, they still engage youngsters in reading to the tune of around 23,000 children every year. Of course, reading for pleasure is one of the single biggest indicators of a child's future success.

At the launch event for the Cheltenham Literature Festival last Friday evening, supporters—including me—were reminded that the UK spends just 0.46% of its GDP on culture; that is based on the latest figures, which are from 2022. According to the University of Warwick's "The State of the Arts" report, the UK is not alone in Europe in cutting its cultural budgets in recent years, but that does not make it right and we remain towards the bottom of the European league table, lagging behind our neighbours. If we are to remain a cultural superpower, that situation needs to be addressed.

Cultural funding extends to local festivals, theatres, cinemas, museums, art galleries, music and dance venues, libraries and public spaces. These are all vital to communities the length and breadth of our country. They are spaces devoted to creative endeavour. They not only fuel local economies; they also stimulate community participation across a whole range of creative activities.

In addition, we must not ignore the positive impact of the cultural sector on another great challenge facing our nation: deteriorating mental health. As we seek to reduce pressure on the NHS, we should look to the arts and culture as part of the non-medical therapy available. While few in the Chamber would dispute the difficult economic inheritance of this Government, we cannot look past the positive economic and social impact of investment in culture. It generates incomes and helps

communities to thrive in non-monetary measures, too, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out.

What can we do to help our cultural sector boost the economy and increase happiness and wellbeing? Central Government can make a difference in many ways, although at heart it often comes down to money. However, Westminster and devolved Governments can make other important contributions. The promise made by the new Government for the restoration of multi-year funding settlements for local government will provide an important route to that. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) mentioned creative subjects, and we agree on that.

Planning reform offers another opportunity. Engaging the cultural sector in that will be important. We can beef up powers for local areas to protect cherished cultural venues. The cultural sector, too, would benefit from the abolition of business rates and the introduction of a commercial landowner levy.

A more sensitive subject is freedom of expression in the cultural sector. We all need to remember that sometimes we will see and hear things that we do not agree with. If art is not there to stimulate debate, it is nothing.

Finally, Chair—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order.

Max Wilkinson: I appeal to the Government to make a small re-prioritisation: appoint a Minister for tourism and hospitality.

5.31 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Efford. I hope you do not mind that I have taken off my collar to allow a bit of movement. If my head starts to wobble, please do intervene. Congratulations to the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) on securing this debate. It is fantastic to have a discussion on this. Looking through *Hansard*, I note there has not been a debate on this topic since 1992. He brings a wealth of knowledge and passion that clearly came through, as it did in speeches by a variety of MPs whom I do not have time to thank. That was our own MP fringe event happening right here.

I admit I have never been to the fringe festival, although strangely I, too, have been to a stag do in Edinburgh. I always like to look what the best joke was each year. This year's was from Mark Simmons:

"I was going to sail around the globe in the world's smallest ship but I bottled it."

I first saw him on TikTok, which shows the power of how these artists can spread. Have I stolen the Minister's line?

Chris Bryant: Yes.

Dr Evans: I was also interested to hear that another major Scottish city—Glasgow—has been successful in getting the Commonwealth games. I believe the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh moved to Edinburgh from his home town of Glasgow. It is great to see that success in both those cities is supporting

the UK as a cultural destination. I wish the city of Edinburgh well as it prepares for its international storytelling festival, with Hogmanay on the horizon.

The previous Government provided significant support to the sector, including the then Chancellor's spring Budget, in which he announced £8.6 million of support to festivals, to help boost Scotland's status as a destination for creative industries, as we have heard. I also understand that the Edinburgh and South East Scotland city regional deal, agreed under the previous Government, is giving the city the chance to unlock opportunities for economic and cultural growth.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh is well aware of the successes of the festivals. I thought I would add a couple more bits of data: more than 2.6 million tickets issued, more than 3,746 shows registered, and more than 60 different countries represented on stage. That shows the appeal, not only locally but internationally. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) said, the R&D incubator for the creative industries is something we must cherish.

I noted that the Edinburgh fringe app was downloaded 124,000 times, which shows that a traditional festival can move with the times, and work with others to be creative and engage more people. The extent of the data on the impact of this year's festival has not been fully quantified or produced yet. In 2022, the Edinburgh fringe festival was on a par with the FIFA World cup. In 2022, BOP Consulting was commissioned by the Edinburgh festival to undertake an economic impact of the previous 11 Edinburgh festivals. The festival in 2022 generated an economic impact of £407 million—a significant increase from £280 million in 2015—not to mention the 7,000 direct jobs and 8,500 jobs across Scotland.

As the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh said in his maiden speech just a couple of months ago,

“culture, hospitality and tourism form the economic backbone of my constituency, not least in August, when it plays host to the Edinburgh international festival and fringe.” —[*Official Report*, 25 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 883.]

With that, and turning to the Minister, I am interested in understanding whether he believes the visitor levy being proposed in Scotland will benefit the Edinburgh festivals. Will it benefit the city of Edinburgh and Scottish tourism as a whole? I understand that Edinburgh City Council, as well as Glasgow and Aberdeen, are looking at using the legislation. Does the Minister feel that Scotland has got this right and is he considering that across his Department in Westminster?

The Minister has a jam-packed portfolio, and I would hate tourism and the creative industries to become a fringe, as they are too valuable for that. Will he ensure that the creative industry budget is maintained in the upcoming Budget? Has he spoken directly to the Chancellor about tourism and creative industries? What assurances has he received that the creative industries will be protected, with tax reliefs maintained?

That being said, we are all here to celebrate a fantastic event. I again put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh for bringing this forward, from 1992 all the way to 2024.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Minister, I wish to call the mover of the debate at 5.45 pm, so I ask that you give him a minute at the end of your speech.

5.36 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I should point hon. Members to the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I was paid by the Edinburgh book festival a year ago. I note that nobody else has had that to point out.

I will start by paying tribute, as many others have, to Shona McCarthy. She has done a phenomenal job over nine years. She has taken the festival through some of its most difficult moments, and it is striking that 2.6 million people bought tickets this year, which is the fourth highest number in its 77 years. That is absolutely brilliant, and we wish her well.

The Minister—I am sorry, I meant the shadow Minister. We keep on doing this because we are not used to it. I do not think the shadow Minister said that the joke he told was by Mark Simmons—he should attribute jokes. Simmons also had the no. 5 joke, which was:

“I love the Olympics. My friend and I invented a new type of relay baton: well, he came up with the idea, I ran with it.”

[*Laughter.*] Yes, it was terrible, wasn't it?

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray). It is great to have a lot of new friends, especially from Scotland, and we are delighted to see Edinburgh so well represented. I will try an innovative thing, which is to answer the questions that have been asked as much as I can.

My hon. Friend asked about multi-annual financial planning. In so far as we possibly can, we want to be able to give economic stability to arts organisations, just as we do to local authorities in many other parts of the economy. That is one of the things we are driving towards in the spending review. However, I am afraid I must point him to the fact that there will be a Budget at the end of the month, and I can hear my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the back of my ear already saying, “That's far enough, Bryant!”

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh asked about cross-UK engagement. I want to make this absolutely clear: I do not want to engage in any kind of cultural battles with Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales. We should be seeing this as a joint venture. The creative industries are a part of what defines this nation across the world, and we will only do well if we work together to achieve the best outcomes for performers, people who might become performers and the industry as a whole.

My hon. Friend makes a good point about visas. I will take that away and think about how we could work most creatively with the Home Office to make sure we get this right. It is not just about people coming into the UK; I also argue that it is about UK acts being able to tour in Europe. I was absolutely delighted earlier this year to go and see Depeche Mode in Cologne. I have never seen Germans so excited; they just can't get enough. [*Laughter.*] Thank you.

My hon. Friend made an important point about crisis support. I am worried about the situation that arose, in particular, for the book festival and Baillie Gifford. He makes a fair point about whether that is the right way to go about making important points about climate change. One of the things we need to do as a

[Chris Bryant]

Department is look at the whole package of the whole funding of all the arts and creative industries, which used to come from five or six different segments, including local government, which was prominent in that when we were in power before 2010. Most of that funding has completely gone, and philanthropy is struggling outside London and the south-east. We need to look at this in the round.

It is great to see the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), in her place, as she always is—she was in your place earlier for a previous debate, Mr Efford. She makes very good points about short lets. The legislation already in place for England and Wales, for which we are now considering how we will implement and take forward secondary legislation, would not apply in Scotland. However, we want to learn some of the lessons of what has happened in Scotland so that we can apply sensible legislation in England and Wales. I thought her point about co-operation was very well made—my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh made that point as well. It is not just about us: there is a Government in Scotland, and it is also about local government across the whole of the UK. In England, I would argue that it is also about regional mayors, who play a very important part in the creative industries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) referred to quieter parts of the year. It is a very well-made point. I would also argue that there is an issue about quieter parts of the country. It is all very well getting all the tourists to come to London, Oxford, Cambridge, Stratford, Bath and Edinburgh, but if they do not also go to other places—Stirling, I know, has a very fine castle, because I danced the Highland fling in it when I was 12, I think. Making sure that the benefits accrue to the whole of Scotland and to the wider economy is a really important part of what we need in our tourism strategy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West also made a good point about a tourism career. That is something we need to take far more seriously as a country. Why is it that somebody who works in a bar in Paris, or in a restaurant in France, Spain, or wherever, thinks that is a career for life, whereas we think it is somehow a demeaning job, which it is not? We need to completely transform that if we are to transform our tourism opportunities so that we get more than 32 million people coming to the UK.

The omnipresent hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made important points about Northern Ireland performers—some of the best comedians we have known over the years—coming to Edinburgh and getting an opportunity, and about other festivals. Trying to get the economic possibility for festivals to flourish goes back to the point I was trying to make about the whole package of finances available.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies)—a former music teacher, no less—made very good points about other festivals. I am not sure about the Gilbert and Sullivan festival—I am worried

now that I might get into trouble. I just remember that line from “Trial by Jury”: “She might very well pass for 42, in the dark, with the light behind her”—

Jonathan Davies: “In the dusk”.

Chris Bryant: There we are—I have been corrected. The most important point my hon. Friend made was about creative education. We need to make sure that every single child in this country gets a proper creative education. It is a force multiplier for other forms of education and means that children will prosper better in the work market. We are determined to transform that.

My hon. Friend—sorry, the hon. Member—for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine)—she is a friend as well; she is a very friendly person—is from my mother’s part of the world: Glasgow. She made a very important point about the world’s window on us. That element of soft power, which several Members have referred to, is important. The Edinburgh festivals as a whole are an important part of that. For instance, the film festival and the television festival are world-renowned moments when people look to the UK. She talked about the cost of accommodation in Edinburgh, which goes back to some of our discussions about short lets. It is a significant concern, and one of the things that we want to learn lessons from.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) also referred to accommodation costs. I am conscious that some people think we are going to be looking at dynamic pricing in relation to those costs: we are not; we are looking at dynamic pricing in relation to tickets. It is very interesting that the Edinburgh festivals do not use dynamic pricing. That is a really important part of making the whole package affordable and more accessible to more people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) referred to the book festival—it is not just because Walter Scott gets a great big statue; so many literary figures have come from Edinburgh. She also referred to the importance of Edinburgh being a UNESCO city of literature.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) talked about the Cheltenham festival. I welcome him to his place and look forward to working with him. I am going to answer the questions from the shadow Minister, who I think sings in a barbershop quartet or chorus—

Dr Evans: Not quite yet.

Chris Bryant: Not yet—all right. He asked about the levy in Scotland, which is of interest to lots of people. Lots of other countries do it; it is not something that we are pursuing at the moment. He asked about the creative industries in the Budget—well, he will have to wait for the Budget, won’t he? He asked about tax reliefs—he can wait until tomorrow morning.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cultural and economic contribution of the Edinburgh festivals.

5.45 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 8 October 2024

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Resident Doctors Agreement

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I am pleased to be able to inform the House that on 16 September 2024, the Government and the British Medical Association's Resident Doctors Committee (BMA RDC), formerly known as the BMA Junior Doctors Committee, agreed a deal on pay for resident doctors—this includes those previously referred to as doctors and dentists in training. This follows BMA RDC agreeing to put the offer to its members.

We will now move to implement the deal, putting an end to strikes which have had a catastrophic impact not just on the country's economy—with NHS strikes costing the taxpayer almost £1.7 billion in the 2023-24 financial year—but to patients and the nation's health, with over 1.5 million appointments cancelled.

Resident doctors are a vital part of our NHS and go on to become the consultants and GPs we need tomorrow. This deal is the first step in rebuilding trust between the Government and the profession. This is a Government that cares for those who care for others.

In the deal, resident doctors will receive:

an average investment of 4.05% into 2023-24 pay scales effective from 1 April 2023 with a payment to reflect backpay. This is on top of the average 8.8% uplift they have already received for 2023-24; and

a further consolidated uplift of 6% plus £1,000 in 2024-25, in line with the recommendations of the Review Body on Doctors and Dentists Remuneration (DDRB).

This deal will increase the base salary for a full-time doctor starting foundation training in the NHS to over £36,600 compared to around £32,400 before this deal. A full-time doctor entering specialty training will see their basic pay rise to over £49,900 from around £43,900 before this deal. On average, resident doctors earn around one third additional to their base salary in overtime and out-of-hours payments.

As agreed in the deal, we have now instructed the DDRB to consider, as part of its pay recommendations, the overall reward package and a career progression for resident doctors to ensure that medicine is an attractive and rewarding career choice to deliver our consultants and GPs of the future.

The Government have also committed to improve the current exception reporting process and to work in partnership with the BMA RDC and other health organisations to review the current system of training and rotational placements.

The BMA RDC will withdraw the rate card for doctors and dentists in training in England with immediate effect.

The Government recognise the significant challenges that affect resident doctors. While this deal has agreed to review parts of the training system, we are also committed to addressing challenges, for example through initiatives under NHS England's Working Lives programme,

to improve the working and learning experience of resident doctors in the NHS. We continue to encourage local employers to engage with these policies to address these issues better locally.

This deal marks a significant step forward in fixing the NHS, rebuilding a relationship of trust with doctors and delivering better patient care.

[HCWS113]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

New Towns

The Government's vision for a new generation of new towns

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The post-war new towns programme was the most ambitious town-building effort ever undertaken in the UK. It transformed the lives of millions of working people by giving them affordable and well designed homes in well planned and beautiful surroundings. The 32 communities it created are now home to millions of people. This Government will continue to invest in their regeneration, but we are also committed to bringing forward the next generation of new towns.

This Government's new towns programme will include large-scale stand-alone new communities, but also a larger number of urban extensions and urban regeneration schemes that will work with the grain of development in any given area. The unifying principle will be that each of the new settlements will contain at least 10,000 homes, although we expect a number to be far larger in size. Collectively, we expect they could provide hundreds of thousands more homes in the decades to come.

This Government believe that sustained economic growth is the only route to improving the prosperity of our country and the living standards of working people. Getting Britain building again is integral to kick-starting that growth. Our new towns programme will not just make a significant contribution to meeting housing demand and housing need across England, but will also support economic growth by releasing the productive potential of constrained towns and cities across England and ensuring that our house building drive is aligned with our industrial strategy and national infrastructure plans.

We have been clear that we want exemplary development to be the norm, not the exception. The next generation of new towns must be well connected, well designed, sustainable and attractive places where people want to live, and must have all the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving communities. The new towns code will ensure that they deliver to the highest standards and help meet housing need by targeting rates of 40% affordable housing, with a focus on genuinely affordable social rented homes.

The new towns taskforce

We have established an independent new towns taskforce to support this mission. The role of the taskforce is to advise Ministers on appropriate locations for significant housing growth. It will deliver a final shortlist of recommendations by summer 2025, but will have the freedom to share conclusions in respect of specific sites

earlier, if beneficial to the Government's house building drive. The taskforce will work in partnership with local leaders and communities wherever possible, but its selection of sites will be made in the national interest.

The taskforce is chaired by Sir Michael Lyons. Sir Michael has had a distinguished career in public service, including over 26 years in local government, and 17 years as the chief executive of three major UK local authorities. He has a detailed knowledge of the housing sector, not least through the Lyons housing review, commissioned by the then Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband). He was also a former chairman of the BBC. Sir Michael is the current non-executive chairman of the English Cities Fund, which is a joint venture with large-scale regeneration developments in London, Liverpool, Plymouth, Salford and Wakefield.

Sir Michael is supported in his role by Dame Kate Barker as deputy chair, a former non-executive director at Taylor Wimpey. Dame Kate is experienced in working with the Government on housing policy, and has previously been commissioned by the Government to conduct a major independent policy review of UK housing supply, and subsequently a review of land use planning. Alongside her experience in housing policy, Dame Kate also chairs the trustees of the universities superannuation scheme and has previously been an external member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee.

We have appointed a further eight members of the taskforce, who have a wealth of expertise across housing, local government, planning and house building. Full details on the taskforces membership can be found here https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66eaab18732be801e5501664/New_Towns_Taskforce_Membership.odt

The taskforce has met twice, in Milton Keynes in September and Cambridge in October. At both meetings, they met with local partners to understand the key lessons learnt from previous large-site delivery. They will continue their work to deliver a final report by summer 2025, and consider key matters including: the strategic case for new towns; location identification and selection; place making; design and standards; funding, risk and institutional investment; and unlocking delivery and innovation. We will continue to update Parliament on the work of the taskforce.

[HCWS112]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Regulatory Innovation Office

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): British innovators and businesses are developing world-leading products and services powered by technologies such as artificial intelligence. However, they often encounter barriers and delays from red tape when trying to get started. This is why the Government pledged in our manifesto to establish a new Regulatory Innovation Office—a priority for ensuring innovation and promoting new opportunities for technologies through focused collaboration in the regulatory environment.

The RIO will help position Britain as the best place in the world to innovate by ensuring safety, speeding up regulatory decisions and providing clear direction in line with our modern industrial strategy. Today, I am

pleased to update you on the early progress we have made to establish the RIO and foster safe innovation through regulation.

We are setting up the RIO as an office within DSIT, expanding existing functions such as the Regulatory Horizons Council and introducing new programmes to match our increased ambitions to support innovation. Consistent with our mission-driven approach, the RIO will work closely with other Departments to unlock change, including the Department for Business and Trade, which will continue to oversee wider cross-cutting work on regulator performance.

The new office will have three core pillars of activity: knowledge, strategy and capability building. The knowledge pillar will enhance our understanding of regulatory barriers to innovation, drawing on the work of the Regulatory Horizons Council. To address the most critical barriers, the strategy pillar will set clear priorities for regulatory innovation, aligning with our missions and industrial strategy, while ensuring safety. Through the capability building pillar, the RIO will work with regulators to ensure they have the necessary tools to achieve our shared goals. For example, it will build on the work of the regulators' pioneer fund to provide strategic grant funding to regulators supporting the responsible development of novel or experimental regulatory approaches and on the work of the Regulators' Innovation Network to share skills and disseminate best practice among regulators.

The RIO's immediate focus will be on priority areas: drones and other autonomous technology, engineering biology, space, artificial intelligence and digital in healthcare. These four areas hold significant potential to drive innovation in support of the Government's missions, particularly our mission to grow the economy. For example, the UK drone economy is projected to be worth up to £45 billion by 2030, if fully adopted. The cross-cutting nature of these emerging technologies, which do not fit neatly into existing regulatory frameworks can mean a slower process in getting them on to the market. The new office will work closely with Departments, including the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, ensuring that while the RIO actively collaborates on addressing regulatory barriers, regulatory responsibility remains with the relevant Department. The new office will also bring regulators together and work to remove unnecessary obstacles and outdated regulations to the benefit of businesses and the public, unlocking the power of innovation from these sectors to generate tens of billions of pounds for the UK economy in the coming years.

We will also shortly be progressing a campaign to appoint a chair. The chair will offer trusted advice and challenge to both officials and regulators, helping to shape the design of the new office and supporting its successful delivery.

In the coming months, we will work in partnership with industry and regulators to address barriers in these critical sectors and unlock new opportunities.

Alongside the RIO, I am pleased to share our wider progress in supporting regulatory innovation. These advancements demonstrate how we can foster an environment where innovation thrives by adapting our regulatory approach:

We are publishing on gov.uk our response to the Regulatory Horizon Council's quantum report, accepting 11 of the 14 recommendations (and accepting in principle the remaining 3). This will see the UK become the first nation to outline its regulatory approach to quantum technologies, providing certainty to businesses and encouraging the responsible development of the sector. A copy of this report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

We are announcing the winners of the first round of the engineering biology sandbox fund. The sandbox will accelerate regulatory reforms for engineering biology-derived products and improve the quality of decision-making when assessing these products.

Working closely with the Cabinet Office, we are publishing voluntary screening guidance for the providers and users of synthetic nucleic acid. The guidance contributes to the UK's vision of unlocking the societal and economic benefits of engineering biology research and innovation, while mitigating associated risks. The guidance keeps the UK at the forefront internationally of fostering responsible innovation in this transformative technology.

I am confident that together we can unlock Britain's dynamism and innovation, and kick-start economic growth.

[HCWS111]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Fraud, Error and Debt Bill

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): I would like to advise the House that the Government will bring forward a new Fraud, Error and Debt Bill in this Parliamentary session to be tough on criminals, fair for claimants and provide confidence to the taxpayer.

Fraud and error in the social security system currently costs the taxpayer almost £10 billion a year and, since the pandemic, a total of £35 billion of taxpayers' money has been incorrectly paid to those not entitled to the money—including to criminal gangs. Just as we do not tolerate tax evasion, this Government will not tolerate those who defraud the social security system. We will ensure that every pound of taxpayers' money is spent with the same care with which working people spend their own money.

The measures in this Bill are expected to save up to £1.6 billion over the next five years and will extend and modernise the DWP's powers to stop fraud in its tracks, recover money lost to fraud and, crucially, help protect claimants who may already be on the edge financially from racking up debt.

The Government are determined to prevent incorrect payments where we can, so the DWP will be given new powers to better identify and prevent potential overpayments. These will help officials to ensure eligibility criteria are being met—including being able to see sooner where they are not—which will mean fewer claimants accruing debts and getting into financial difficulty. This will also serve to ensure every claimant is treated fairly.

We will ensure that these powers are proportionate. We will introduce safeguarding, reporting mechanisms and independent oversight, to give greater confidence to claimants that the powers are being used fairly and effectively. DWP staff will receive training on the use of any new powers. We will rely on codes of practice where they already exist and, where they do not, we will consult on and produce new codes of practice to provide further reassurance on the safe use of the powers.

Some of the DWP's fraud powers have not been updated for over 20 years and we are currently misaligned with other Government Departments and public bodies such as HMRC.

The measures in this Bill will remedy that, giving the DWP powers to:

Better investigate suspected fraud and new powers of search and seizure, so the DWP can take greater control of investigations into criminal gangs defrauding the taxpayer.

Make changes to the penalties system, so that no one found to have committed fraud against the social security system avoids punishment, bringing increased fairness for claimants who do the right thing.

Allow the DWP to recover debts from individuals who can pay money back but have avoided doing so, bringing greater fairness to debt recoveries.

Through our eligibility verification measure, require banks and financial institutions to examine their own datasets to highlight where someone may not be eligible for the benefits they are being paid. This will help the DWP identify incorrect payments, prevent debts from accruing for the claimant and help identify where there may be fraudulent activity. Banks will only share very minimal information, and this will only be used by the DWP to support further inquiry, if needed, into a potential overpayment.

The powers in this Bill will be legal, proportionate and targeted to reduce overpayments, detect and prevent fraud, ensure prompter investigations and bring greater fairness to the system.

The eligibility verification measure will not give the DWP access to any bank accounts, nor any information on how claimants spend their money. The proposed new power instead helps verify benefit eligibility, using very limited information from banks and financial institutions. A human being will always be involved in any investigations and any decisions taken afterwards that affect eligibility or benefit awards, as they do now. This measure will not be used on the state pension.

This legislation will support the delivery of the Government's manifesto commitment to safeguard taxpayers' money and demonstrates the Government's commitment that they will not tolerate fraud or waste anywhere in public services, including the social security system.

Further details on the legislation will be set out when the Bill is introduced to Parliament shortly.

[HCWS114]

Written Corrections

Tuesday 8 October 2024

Ministerial Corrections

WORK AND PENSIONS

Winter Fuel Payment

The following extracts are from the Westminster Hall debate on Winter Fuel Payment on 10 September 2024.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: Does the Minister agree that the problem is that wherever we draw the line, there will always be those just above who end up being poorer because they do not gain the benefit and do not get the passported access that gaining the benefit gives? Those individuals end up being worse off than the people who do claim. That is one of the problems with the means-tested system.

Emma Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. For those just above the threshold, we have extended the household support fund. I urge hon. Members to work with me, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Deputy Prime Minister,

who have written to local authorities to encourage them to ensure that those just above the threshold who are struggling get the support they need with bills.

[*Official Report*, 10 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 243WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds):

Emma Reynolds:...I urge hon. Members to work with me, **and with** the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Deputy Prime Minister, who have written to local authorities **on the issue**.

Emma Reynolds: We will write to all pensioners about housing benefit; this is a question that one of my hon. Friends asked me yesterday. He had a constituent on housing benefit who was concerned that that would be taken into account as a form of income when the Government looked at his eligibility for pension credit. I confirm that that is not the case: housing benefit is not taken into account with regard to income.

[*Official Report*, 10 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 244WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

Emma Reynolds: We will write to all pensioners **on housing benefit who may be eligible for, but are not claiming, pension credit**; this is a question that one of my hon. Friends asked me yesterday.

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