Wednesday
9 October 2024

Volume 754
No. 25

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 9 October 2024

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2024
This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

House of Commons

Wednesday 9 October 2024

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Impact of Energy Costs on Disabled People

1. **Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the cost of energy on disabled people. [900443]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): We understand that energy bills are a concern for many people. We believe that the only way to protect bill payers permanently, including disabled people, is to accelerate the green transition to home-grown clean energy. We continue to work closely with energy suppliers to ensure that vulnerable customers are supported.

Bobby Dean: In my constituency of Carshalton and Wallington, Scope research estimates that disabled households face bills of up to £1,500 a month more than the average household. We also know that disabled households are much less likely to claim the benefits that they are entitled to. Has the Government Equalities Office made any assessment of the potential disproportionate impact on disabled households of cutting the winter fuel allowance?

Bridget Phillipson: Equality analysis was released in September, and the Government carried out our statutory duties in doing so, but I recognise the wider concerns that the hon. Member raises, especially around the additional costs faced by many disabled people. That is why the Minister for Energy Consumers, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh) recently met suppliers to address some of these issues. I encourage all those who need extra support to sign up to the priority services register.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Disabled people are also concerned about the use of artificial intelligence in Departments under the previous Government, including within the Department for Work and Pensions. Given the recent United Nations report on AI governance, what discussions has the Minister had with other colleagues across different Departments on the equity principles that will be integrated in the Government's use of AI?

Bridget Phillipson: Discussions are ongoing across government, including with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology. There are wider opportunities and challenges that technology presents us, and we want to ensure we get the balance right.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Further to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) asked, DWP statistics show that 45% of people over the state pension age have a disability. As we have already heard, they can face hugely inflated energy costs because of the need for equipment such as stair lifts, extra fridges or oxygen tanks, all of which demand electricity. In the discussions that the Minister has outlined, have the Government given any consideration to the introduction of a social tariff to help mitigate the extra costs that disabled people face in this country?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady will recognise the difficult state of the public finances that we inherited and the tough choices that were necessary to stabilise our economy. Those decisions were not easy. My hon. Friend the Minister for Energy Consumers is leading on much of this work to ensure we secure a fairer deal for all consumers, because we want to ensure that all support is targeted at the most vulnerable groups who need support this winter.

Violence against Women and Girls

2. **Jo White** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [900444]

8. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on violence against women and girls. [900450]

11. **Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on violence against women and girls. [900454]

12. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [900455]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Anneliese Dodds): My colleagues and I are working closely together to tackle the national emergency of violence against women and girls and to deliver our mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. We have begun our work to make streets, homes and workplaces safer for women by announcing that domestic abuse specialists will be placed in emergency control rooms and that adult victims of rape in England and Wales will get access to free legal advocates.

Jo White: I, like many mothers, had to bring up my daughters to be cautious of men and their motives, language and behaviour. Sadly, many of our daughters still have to learn the hard way, with one of mine taking years to recover from the assault she experienced as a schoolchild. Misogynistic attitudes and behaviours are often learned, tolerated and reinforced while in school. In recent times, social media influencers are driving that, embedding women hatred into our culture. How are the Government tackling this rising challenge in schools, and will that be embedded into the curriculum across all ages?

Anneliese Dodds: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that misogyny must be tackled, and I know the whole House will want to say how deeply concerned we are to hear about her daughter's experience. It is clear that statutory relationships, sex and health education is essential to tackling misogyny. There must be clear guidance on teaching it, which is why we are carefully considering consultation responses and evidence to ensure that new guidance meets the needs of students and teachers. The independent curriculum and assessment review will carefully consider how RSHE fits in with the wider curriculum as part of its work. We must tackle misogyny from the start. That means in schools, online and across society.

Caroline Voaden: Given the recent high-profile allegations of appalling abuse that many women suffered in their —*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, the Member is asking a question. You should not walk in front of her.

Caroline Voaden: Given the recent high profile allegations of appalling abuse of women in their workplaces that have been all over the news, what steps are the Government planning to protect women who come forward with allegations of such abuse in future, particularly in the workplace?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for asking that incredibly important question. Many of us have been deeply concerned by some of the stories that have come to public light. We are determined as a new Government to strengthen the legal duty around sexual harassment so that employers take all reasonable steps to stop it before it starts. We will also require employers to create and maintain workplaces and working conditions free from harassment, including by third parties.

Mike Martin: My predecessor Greg Clark brought a Bill before the House to make it illegal to harass women in public. The Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Bill received Royal Assent in September last year, but the Act is not in force because the Secretary of State needs to pass a statutory instrument to make regulations to allow that to happen; it is legal plumbing. Will the Minister undertake to write to me and update me when that work will be done and when this important Act will come into force?

Anneliese Dodds: I am happy to write to the hon. Member when the Act does indeed come into force. To be absolutely clear, the new Government are determined to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, which includes on the street as well as in workplaces and homes. I know that the Home Secretary takes that incredibly seriously, so she is working with us on it.

Dr Huq: Women welcome this Government finally implementing buffer zones around abortion clinics, as repeatedly voted for by MPs in the House. Will the Minister tell me when that will happen and whether it will apply to those who, knowingly or not, silently intimidate at the clinic gates? The Tories were trying to scrap that bit on the sly.

Anneliese Dodds: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. I pay tribute to her, the Home Secretary and the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention along with others across the House who have campaigned on this issue for years. The new Government have been able finally to take urgent steps to address this issue. Protection zones around abortion clinics will be in force from 31 October—the end of this month. The Government are determined that anyone exercising their legal right to access abortion services should be free from harassment and intimidation. The police will now have the power to deal with anyone they reasonably suspect to be obstructing, causing harassment or distress, or influencing within a buffer zone.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): I welcome the ministerial team to their places. The Conservative Government launched the £100 million violence against women and girls strategy in our determination to make our streets safer for women and girls. It involved creating a new 24/7 sexual assault helpline, transport safety champions and a £5 million safety of women at night fund. Why does this Labour Government feel that setting a target of merely halving violence against women and girls is a suitable ambition? Surely nothing but targeting the total eradication of this horrific criminality, whether in the home or on the streets, is enough.

Anneliese Dodds: The reality is that we saw reported rates of different forms of violence against women and girls rise repeatedly under the previous Government, and charge rates fell shamefully low. The Government will not stand by in the face of that national emergency. We will act. That is why we have set a cross-Government mission—no more talk but action—and we are determined to deliver it for the sake of women and girls.

Impact of Socio-economic Disadvantage on Future Earnings

3. **Gill German** (Clwyd North) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on future earnings.

[900445]

13. **Dr Beccy Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on future earnings.

[900456]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): The Government are committed to breaking the link between young people's backgrounds and their future success. I am proud to lead our opportunity mission across government, through which we will ensure that every child thrives in education and achieves their ambitions in work and later life, no matter what their background.

Gill German: In Wales, breaking down barriers to opportunity has long been an area of work, but with so many levers of change having been in the hands of a UK Tory Government, success over the past 14 years has been greatly hampered. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that Cabinet colleagues in this Government will work closely with Welsh Government partners, so that future earnings in Clwyd North reflect the huge potential that I see in our children and young people every day?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, I give my hon. Friend that assurance. We will work closely with devolved Governments to make sure that we are all pulling together to break down the barriers that too many of our young people face. That is why the work on child poverty that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and I are leading on is so crucial. We know that child poverty is an issue that blights too many lives across the UK.

Dr Cooper: Coastal areas, including my constituency of Worthing West, experience lower life expectancy and higher preventable ill health than many non-coastal areas. That is directly related to the fact that they often have higher levels of socioeconomic deprivation. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to address the specific inequalities in coastal communities?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is a real champion for her constituents and for coastal communities, and I recognise that different communities have distinct challenges. Work is already under way to ensure that where someone is from does not determine whether they can succeed, but I would be happy to discuss that further with my hon. Friend.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Young people in my community with care experience are campaigning for care and care experience to be classified as a protected characteristic. Will the Minister meet them and me to discuss whether the Government plan to do that?

Bridget Phillipson: We are looking carefully at what more we need to do to ensure that all care-experienced young people receive the support they need. We know that outcomes are often incredibly poor, and we recognise the disadvantage that care-experienced young people face. We are looking at what more we can do through legislation and beyond to ensure that all young people get the support they deserve. I will ensure that my colleague from the Department for Education, the Minister for Children and Families, is in touch with the hon. Lady.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her answer to that important question. What discussions has she had with the Department for Communities back home in Northern Ireland to ensure that individuals from all socioeconomic backgrounds have equal opportunities in relation to pay, regardless of where they grew up?

Bridget Phillipson: I am afraid I did not catch all of the hon. Gentleman's question, but I am happy to discuss it with him further. I have met my counterparts in Northern Ireland. I recognise our shared challenges and want to ensure that we work constructively across the devolved Governments on areas of concern.

Discrimination against Disabled People

4. **Mr Connor Rand** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help end discrimination against disabled people. [900446]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We want a more inclusive society with less discrimination, and our election manifesto committed us to putting the views and voices of disabled people at the heart of all we do. As a first step, we are legislating to deliver equal pay for disabled people, with disability pay gap monitoring for larger employers.

Mr Rand: A huge part of tackling discrimination against disabled people is challenging preconceptions about what people can achieve. Will the Minister therefore join me in congratulating the phenomenal Joseph Adams, a 21-year-old with Down's syndrome in my constituency, who recently ran ten 10 km races in ten different countries in just five days as part of his "no limits" challenge? He has raised a staggering £400,000 for a disability sports and employment programme in my community.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am delighted to congratulate Joseph, and I welcome my hon. Friend's drawing his achievements to our attention. I spent an inspiring few days at the Paralympics in Paris not long ago. It was partly inspiring because we came second behind only China—ahead of the USA, and ahead of all the other European countries as well. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of this issue. We are going to work with disabled people and their organisations to make sport more accessible and to remove the barriers that are too often in place.

Cass Review

5. **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the recommendations of the Cass review. [900447]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The Cass review is a robust report backed by clinicians and firmly grounded in evidence. The Government and NHS England will be implementing Dr Cass's recommendations in full, so that children and young people get the safe, holistic care and support they need.

Mr Holden: Dr Cass's review was an important moment for services for young people in this country. Will the Minister restate the Government's commitment to ensuring that all the review's findings, which are based on evidence ahead of ideology, are implemented? Does the Minister also reject calls from various vested interest groups to

pause implementation, and press ahead as quickly as possible to protect vulnerable young people in our country?

Karin Smyth: As I said in my original answer, the Government are absolutely committed to implementing all of Dr Cass's evidence-based review in full.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her response and the robust response from this Labour Government to support the Cass review. Will she confirm that she is having robust conversations with devolved Governments about its implementation across the United Kingdom?

Karin Smyth: The Secretary of State has met the leaders of all the devolved Administrations to discuss our intention to work with them very closely across all issues that come under our sphere, including the Cass recommendations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I thank the Minister for taking up the recommendations of the Cass review. Children struggling with their gender identity deserve our protection and a holistic, understanding approach via our new NHS centres, rather than irreversible medical and surgical intervention. Will the Minister confirm that the British Medical Association's original position that the Cass review contained unsubstantiated recommendations will not delay that protection being put in place for vulnerable children?

Karin Smyth: I cannot reiterate any more strongly than I have that this Government are absolutely committed to implementing the Cass review's evidence-based recommendations in full.

Women in the Workplace

6. **Becky Gittins** (Clwyd East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support women in the workplace. [900448]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Anneliese Dodds): As part of our mission to make work pay, we will provide protections from maternity discrimination and sexual harassment. We will speed up progress on the gender pay gap and strengthen equal pay protections. The steps we will take will enable women everywhere to thrive and transform their working lives for the better.

Becky Gittins: Does the Minister agree that, unlike some of the incredibly worrying comments we have heard from Opposition leadership contenders this week, in order to grow our economy we need to create the conditions to encourage and support more women back into the workplace?

Anneliese Dodds: I strongly agree. Supporting women to return and to progress at work is a crucial part of securing economic growth. It was very surprising that that was even in doubt. This Labour Government are on the side of new mothers, which is why our plan to make work pay commits to strengthening their workplace protections, improving access to flexible working and creating the conditions for all parents to balance work and care.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Four women have been brutally killed in the past six weeks in Northern Ireland, bringing the total to 24 since 2020. Many of these young women were professional women working and contributing to society. Does the Minister agree that we need to do more than just pay lip service to supporting women, whether in the home or in the workplace, to punish these perpetrators?

Anneliese Dodds: I absolutely agree. It is extremely concerning whenever we hear of what happens to women in the home, in the workplace or on the streets. Women deserve to be safe, as do girls. That is why this Government are acting at pace to ensure that, for example, we have domestic abuse specialists in emergency rooms and specialist rape crisis centres. We are working across the whole of the United Kingdom on these shared concerns for the sake of women and girls.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Today marks the start of Baby Loss Awareness Week. It is a difficult but important time for many of our constituents and those of us who have experienced baby loss or miscarriage. Many private sector employers, and now the NHS—the largest public sector employer of women—have led the way in offering paid bereavement leave for those who miscarry. Does the Minister agree that all workers could and should benefit from the right to bereavement leave following baby loss?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question, and I congratulate her on her election as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. She has campaigned for many months—indeed, years—on the issue of baby loss, as have other Members across the House. I am very pleased to see that progress among some major employers, and I know that she will want to work with us on ensuring that those who experience baby loss are supported and protected, particularly at the most difficult times.

Topical Questions

T1. [900458] **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): This Black History Month, I would like to reiterate that people's race or ethnicity should never be a barrier to opportunity. We are enhancing rights through upcoming legislation on race and disability, equality, employment rights and banning conversion practices. To deliver that important work, we are reforming the Equality Hub to create the office for equality and opportunity in the Cabinet Office. There is much to do, working within and beyond Government, to create opportunity and promote equality across the UK.

Dame Meg Hillier: We have had some progress since the Government were elected on issues relating to black and minority ethnic women and domestic violence. However, Valerie Forde, who was my constituent, was

brutally murdered by her partner, and Valerie's law—named for her and campaigned for by her daughter and the charity Sistah Space in my constituency—has not yet hit the statute book. Will the Minister reconsider and examine the support needed for women because of their ethnic, and racial or cultural background?

Bridget Phillipson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the campaigning work that she has done in this crucial area in the face of the tragic loss of Valerie Forde. We must do everything we can to ensure that all victims of violence against women and girls receive the support that they need. I will make arrangements for her to discuss further with a Home Office Minister what more we need to do, particularly around police training and standards.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): The Conservative Government introduced the hugely successful opt-out HIV and hepatitis testing programme for A&Es in London, Brighton, Blackpool and Manchester, with a £20 million commitment to expand the programme to 33 more, diagnosing more than 1,300 people with HIV in the first two years and tackling health inequalities. This has meant, crucially, that more LGBT+ people, women, people of black African ethnicity and older people have been diagnosed and supported. Will the Minister assure the House that the funding and commitment will remain?

Bridget Phillipson: I thank the hon. Lady for raising such an important issue, on which all Members across the House want to make progress. Officials are working on further plans, which we will set out very shortly, but we will be keen to work with her and colleagues across the House to make sure that we eradicate new HIV and AIDS infections.

T2. [900459] **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Exeter benefit from maternity pay, which supports women while they spend precious time with their new-born children. Is the Minister of the view that maternity pay, in the words of one Tory leadership candidate, has "gone too far"?

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Anneliese Dodds): Absolutely not, and my hon. Friend is right to mention the fact that that kind of assessment flies in the face of not only common sense, but all the economic evidence. When we support women to return to work and to progress at work, while being able to spend time with their families, we grow our economy—something that this Government are determined to do.

T8. [900465] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Across Aldridge-Brownhills, we have some fabulous girls' football teams and the excellent Walsall Wood ladies football club at Oak Park active living centre, no doubt inspired by the Lionesses. The last Government committed funding to support women's and girls' football. Can the Minister confirm that that funding will continue?

Bridget Phillipson: I assure the right hon. Lady that we are absolutely determined to encourage our women and girls to take part in sport and physical activity—something that falls off all too often as girls reach their teenage years. In my work in the Department for Education, through the curriculum and assessment review, we are looking at what more schools can do, and going beyond that, we are working with sporting bodies to deliver more.

T3. [900460] **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): Accessible transport is a major challenge for my constituents, especially accessing rail stations on the Tyne valley railway line. Will the Minister work with the Department for Transport to ensure that Great British Railways puts disabled access at the heart of its plans?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Yes, we will. Accessibility is at the heart of the Government's passenger-focused approach, and with a unified rail network, we will be able to meet accessibility needs more reliably and consistently and plan how best to improve accessibility across the entire network.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Government have made a number of commitments on the implementation of the Cass review. Will they commit themselves to ensuring that trans people do have access to the healthcare that they need, and to ensuring that waiting lists are brought down as soon as possible?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Member is right to draw attention to the very long waiting lists currently experienced by many people. I know that the Health Secretary is focusing on the issue, as well as on LGBT health more broadly—indeed, on health for everyone—as part of our mission to get the NHS off the floor and off its knees and working for everyone in the country.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900571] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 October.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Earlier this week, the House marked the first anniversary of the horrific attacks on 7 October, and I take this opportunity to reiterate that the hostages must be released. I also reiterate our call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and Lebanon.

This week, the Government will deliver on our promise to the British people of the biggest upgrade of workers' rights in a generation. The employment rights Bill will ensure that work pays; it will forge a new partnership with business, and reset the dreadful industrial relations that have cost our economy and our national health service so much in recent years. We are also preparing for the international investment summit next week, which will bring hundreds of global chief executive officers to the United Kingdom and unlock billions of pounds of investment.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr Mohindra: The commitment of £400 million for a new hospital at Watford General was one of the many brilliant things that the last Conservative Government did, along with my good friend Dean Russell, the former Member of Parliament for Watford. It would have been life-changing as well as lifesaving for so many of my constituents. Why is the Prime Minister cancelling that funding commitment, and spending billions of pounds on giving pay rises to train drivers instead?

The Prime Minister: Because the promise of 40 new hospitals did not involve 40 and did not involve hospitals, they were not new, and they were not funded.

Q2. [900572] **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): One of the biggest issues in my constituency is poor access to GP services. Our GP satisfaction rate is 15% below the national average. I thank the Government for their focus on improving the situation. What are they doing to ensure that everyone in West Bromwich can actually see their GP?

The Prime Minister: The most visible sign of the failure of the last Government was the NHS. We are going to expand the role of community pharmacies and accelerate the roll-out of independent prescribers. We need much more care to be delivered in local communities so that problems can be spotted earlier, and we will train thousands more GPs. We were elected to change the country, and that means getting the NHS back on its feet. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will have much more to say about that in the Budget—about fixing the foundations of our economy so that we can put money in people's pockets, fix our public services and rebuild Britain.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): Tomorrow, the Government will publish their anticipated changes to employment law. Given the weekend's events, when did the Prime Minister first become a convert to fire and rehire?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased and proud that tomorrow we will publish the Bill that will mean the biggest upgrade of workers' rights in a generation. That will do two things: first it will give people basic dignity at work, and secondly it will help to grow our economy—something on which the last Government absolutely failed for 14 long years.

Rishi Sunak: When the Prime Minister talks about security at work, once again it is one rule for him and another rule for everyone else. I know that not everything or everyone has survived his first 100 days in government, so can he confirm that when he promised not to raise income tax, national insurance or VAT, that commitment applies to both employer and employee national insurance contributions?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman well knows, I am not going to get drawn on decisions that will be set out. We made an absolute commitment to not raise tax on working people. He, of course, was the expert's expert on raising taxes, and what did we get in return for it? We got a broken economy, broken public services and a £22 billion black hole in the economy. We are here to stabilise the economy, and we will do so.

Rishi Sunak: I don't think that even Lord Alli is buying any of that nonsense. I am not asking about the Budget; I am asking specifically about the promise that the Prime Minister made to the British people. So let me ask him again just to clarify his own promise: does his commitment not to raise national insurance apply to both employee and employer national insurance contributions?

The Prime Minister: We set out our promises in our manifesto. We were returned with a huge majority to change the country for the better, and I stick to my promises in the manifesto. But I notice that the right hon. Gentleman is on question three, and he has not yet welcomed the investment into this country. We have had in recent months £8 billion from Amazon for jobs across the country, £10 billion from Blackstone for jobs across the north-east, £22 billion on carbon capture for jobs in the north-east and north-west, and £500 million for UK buses in Northern Ireland. While we are investing in our economy, what are Conservative Members doing? They are arguing about whether to scrap maternity pay.

Rishi Sunak: I am very happy to welcome investments that my Government negotiated, but when it comes to the Prime Minister's answer on tax, businesses across the country would have found his answer just about as reassuring as Sue Gray found it when he promised to protect her job. It is no wonder that confidence is plummeting on his watch, which he did not mention. Turning to another commitment, before the election his Chancellor said that changing the debt target in the fiscal rules would be tantamount to "fiddling the figures". Does he still agree with the Chancellor?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is literally the man who was in charge of the economy. Over 14 years, the Conservatives crashed the economy. What did they leave? A £22 billion black hole in the economy. Unlike them, we will not walk past it. We will fix it, and it is only because we are stabilising the economy that we are getting investment into this country. I notice that he has still not really talked about that investment. We are powering ahead with clean British energy, changing the rules to build 1.5 million homes and returning railways to public ownership, and the Conservatives have nothing to say about any of it.

Rishi Sunak: On debt, we left the Government the second lowest debt in the G7. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I will hear the Leader of the Opposition.

Rishi Sunak: As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said, it is

"hard to escape the suspicion"

that the Government are attracted to this change because

"it would allow for significantly more borrowing".

The Chancellor previously said that this change would be "fiddling the figures", so I have a simple question: does the Prime Minister still agree with the Chancellor?

The Prime Minister: I see the right hon. Gentleman is back to his old script of, "They've never had it so good." It did not work so well at the election, so it might be time to change that. I am not going to get drawn on issues for the Budget, just as he would not when he stood at this Dispatch Box. Meanwhile, we are investing and we are building the NHS so that it is fit for the future and back on its feet, with better opportunities for young people and protections at work. After 14 years of Tory failure, we are giving the country its future back, and that is the difference that Labour delivers.

Rishi Sunak: It is clear that the Prime Minister has opened the door to raising employer national insurance contributions, including on pensions, and fiddling the figures so that he can borrow more. He talks about what he has achieved, but economic confidence is plummeting, growth is now stalling and the UK's borrowing costs are rising on his watch.

Can I close on another important topic? Yesterday's intervention from the head of MI5 will have been sobering for the whole House, not least his warning that Britain faces the most complex and interconnected threats in our country's history. I know the Prime Minister will agree that our security services are owed a debt of gratitude for what they do to keep us safe, but can he confirm that the forthcoming terrorism Bill will give our security services the powers they need to tackle evolving threats? I can assure him of our constructive support on these vital questions of national security, in the same spirit that he provided that support to me.

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that we will give the security forces and services the powers that they need, and I hope that that is a shared objective across the House. They do an incredibly important job for us. But the right hon. Gentleman talks about the economy, and it is a real shame that the Opposition cannot simply —*[Interruption.]* Well, he did at the beginning of his question a moment ago. Listen on! It is a shame the Opposition cannot celebrate Britain's success under this Government. Of course we have to take tough decisions, but when investment is pouring in as it has been in recent weeks, when the NHS strikes are coming to an end, when houses are getting built and when we are delivering the biggest upgrade of workers' rights in a generation, it is time for them to accept that we are fixing the foundations. While they fight among themselves in the comfort zone of unfunded promises, threatening to scrap the minimum wage, we are going to get on with the job of clearing up the mess they made and creating the better country that people are crying out for.

Q4. [900574] **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Cancer is hard on the patient and on their family, as my family knows all too well this year. Will the Prime Minister commit to doing all he can to improve research, early diagnosis and patient care for those with cancer? Will he join me in thanking the NHS staff who have looked after my dad in recent weeks and the thousands of cancer patients like him in Newcastle-under-Lyme and up and down our United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I was sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's father, and I think we would all pass him our best wishes. Cancer is another example of the dreadful state the last Government left the NHS in. The Darzi report, published just a few weeks ago, showed that some cancer standards have not been met since 2015 and that no progress was made in diagnosing cancer at stage 1 and stage 2 between 2013 and 2021. I am really pleased that we have just announced a £6.4 million research network, developing new AI software to identify cancer early. We will get the NHS catching cancer on time, diagnosing it earlier and treating it faster.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Sir Ed Davey.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Across this House, we all agree that we need to get our economy growing strongly again so that we can improve people's lives and raise the money for our public services. The Liberal Democrats believe that one of the best ways of doing that is to improve our relationship with our European neighbours on things like trade, and I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has made that a priority in his first few weeks, but what I just do not understand is that he has ruled out negotiating a youth mobility scheme with our European partners. This could be so good for young people, for businesses and for re-establishing that relationship. Will he reconsider?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right: we do need a better deal with the EU than the bad deal we got under the last Government. That is why I was pleased to meet the President of the Commission last week to talk about how we can improve on the deal. In our manifesto we had clear red lines about the single market, the customs union and freedom of movement, and we will negotiate with those red lines in place.

Ed Davey: I am disappointed about the youth mobility scheme—maybe we can come back to that—but the Prime Minister is right to say that one of the many problems for our economy coming from the dreadful Brexit deal is the red tape that has been put on businesses. There are many examples of that, but a new example came to me earlier this week. It affects fishermen in the Falklands, who are having to pay huge amounts in tariffs to be able to sell their produce into the European market, or sail under a Spanish flag. When the Prime Minister renegotiates the trade deal, can he remember the overseas territories and ensure that British citizens fishing off the Falklands can sail proudly under the Union Jack?

The Prime Minister: My uncle nearly lost his life when his ship was torpedoed defending the Falklands. They are British, and they will remain British. The sovereignty of Gibraltar is equally not to be negotiated. Of course, we will do everything we can to make it easier for all businesses to trade more freely so that we can grow our economy, but I have been very clear about the Falklands. It is personal to me.

Q5. [900575] **Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): Conservative-led Derbyshire county council is proposing to cut adult day centres and care homes across Derbyshire. My constituent Pat was diagnosed with dementia in 2016.

The Jubilee centre in New Mills is a lifeline for her and her family. She always returns happier, less confused and less anxious. For David, her partner and main carer, it provides vital respite. Pat and David do not know how they will survive without it. Will the Prime Minister join me in asking the Conservatives on Derbyshire county council to think again and to oppose these devastating cuts to older people and their families?

The Prime Minister: I am shocked to hear of the impact on Derbyshire county council, which is proposing cutbacks to adult social care. Councils across the country were on the frontline of the last Government's ruinous economic failure, which has left people who rely on services counting the cost. There is no quick fix, but we will provide councils with more stability and certainty through multi-year funding settlements, ensuring that councils can properly plan their finances for the future. We will work with local leaders to deliver this.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Does the Prime Minister have any sense of unease that, although he is Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, there are more than 300 areas of law in Northern Ireland in which legislation is made in a foreign Parliament? Has he any ambition to recover UK sovereignty over those 300 areas of law, thereby restoring the equal citizenship of my constituents and ending their disenfranchising in respect of making laws that govern much of their economy?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important issue. The Windsor framework was negotiated by the last Government. We supported it, and we continue to support it. We will work to make sure it is implemented properly and fully.

Q7. [900577] **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): One in two children in my constituency lives in poverty after housing costs are taken into account, so I welcome the Government's commitment to tackling child poverty, but we all know that every year of poverty has a long-term impact. When does the Prime Minister expect the welcome child poverty taskforce to report so that we can see action?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. It is appalling that child poverty has gone up by 700,000 since 2010, after the last Labour Government did so much to bring it down. Tackling this is at the heart of our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity. The taskforce is developing a strategy to reduce child poverty, and it will be published in the spring of next year.

Q3. [900573] **Shivani Raja** (Leicester East) (Con): The Prime Minister's decision to impose VAT on independent schools strips hard-working families of the ability to choose what is best for their children, while risking job losses for teachers, increasing class sizes and squeezing state school resources to their absolute limit. What action is he taking to mitigate these impending threats if he is not undertaking an impact assessment to understand them?

The Prime Minister: I do understand that many parents across the country save hard to be able to send their children to private school because they have aspiration for their children, but so does every parent who sends their children to a state school. The problem is that we do not have enough teachers in key subjects in our state secondary schools. The Conservative party may be prepared to tolerate that, but I am not. That is why we have made this change to fund 6,500 teachers. *[Interruption.]* They chunter on, but they have to answer the question that none of them is answering. If they are not going to make this change, are they going to leave our state secondaries without the teachers they need? Or are they going to cut the education budget by £1.5 billion? Which is it?

Q8. [900578] **Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): Gloucester has a proud military history, from the battle of the Imjin river to RAF Quedgeley and the Glorious Glosters. In fact, almost 10% of Gloucester households are home to a veteran, so can the Prime Minister update the House on what this Government are doing to support veterans, in particular how he will meet his promise to ensure every veteran in Gloucester has a roof over their head?

The Prime Minister: We owe an enormous debt to all our veterans. It was a great honour to announce at our party conference that our plans to build new homes across the country will ensure that homeless veterans are at the front of the queue for new social housing, recognising their incredible sacrifice and contribution. We will repay all those who served us and house all veterans in housing need, ensuring homes are there for heroes. We are also ensuring veterans have access to support, including with mental health and employment.

Q6. [900576] **Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Special educational needs budgets in North Yorkshire and across the UK are under huge pressure. As they prepare for the Budget, will the Prime Minister and the Chancellor look carefully at how increased funding and changes to the funding formula could make a massive difference to the lives of thousands of children across the country?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for raising this issue, which is of real concern across the country for many parents who are concerned about provision. I agree that children with special educational needs and disabilities are being failed, with parents struggling to get their children the support they need and deserve. We have to change that. I am determined to raise standards for every child, so they succeed in education. We will work with the sector, and across the House where we can, to deliver on that mission, which is very important to many parents who will be watching today.

Q11. [900581] **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's focus on economic growth and I look forward to the international investment summit next week. Constituents across the country want to see their local high streets thrive. From his own visit, the Prime Minister will know that Basingstoke's Top of the Town has huge potential, but it is not what it could be. What support will this Government give to ensure high streets across the country are able to grow and thrive?

The Prime Minister: I remember that visit. Here is the new political vibe: invest with Labour or decline with the Tories. That is why I am so pleased to read out the investments we have had in the last few weeks. We have a big summit coming up on Monday, with hundreds of CEOs coming, and I am confident we will be making further such investment announcements in weeks to come. That is what will fix and stabilise our economy. Because we are taking the tough decisions, the investment is now coming flowing into this country, to fulfil our obligation to raise living standards across the country.

Q9. [900579] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): The A483 runs through my constituency from Llanymynech to Oswestry. It is one of the busiest and most dangerous roads in the constituency, and National Highways says the crossroads at Llynclys is the worst accident blackspot in the midlands. It has a proposal to improve the situation, but Treasury rules place a higher value on road speed than on the lives of North Shropshire's residents. Will the Prime Minister look at flexing those rules to back National Highways and my residents, to give them the safe road they deserve?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this. It is obviously a big and important issue in her constituency. It is vital that as we invest we improve safety and deliver better journeys for drivers. National Highways continues to study the case for safety improvements to the A483 and will continue to do so. As she probably knows, decisions will be set out under the third road investment strategy. I know that the Roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), will have heard her representations and will agree to a meeting, if that is what she would like.

Q12. [900582] **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): Bolton Hospice provides vital services to individuals with life-limiting conditions yet, like hospices across the country, it faces a difficult financial future and is reliant on fundraising, including the kind donations I was able to raise when I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro last year and from the campaign run by *The Bolton News*. What steps is the Prime Minister taking to ensure hospices, like the one in Bolton, are put on a sustainable financial footing?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his efforts in relation to his local hospice. We want everyone to have access to high-quality care, including end of life care. That is why we require all local NHS bodies to commission services from hospices to meet the needs of their local populations. Most hospices are charitable, independent organisations that also receive funding for providing NHS services. We have inherited a huge problem with the £22 billion black hole, but we are determined to move forward on this none the less.

Q10. [900580] **Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): Since the signing of the Belfast agreement in 1998, more people in Northern Ireland have now sadly lost their lives to suicide than those who were killed during the 30 years of the troubles. Does the Prime Minister agree that the challenges with poor mental health in Northern Ireland, some of which are directly related to the violence of our past, are a unique and pressing legacy of the troubles? Will he therefore commit to tasking his Government to work collaboratively with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland to explore how these issues can be properly recognised and resolved?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising that important matter. I do know at first hand the deep impact that the troubles have had on so many in Northern Ireland. We must ensure that those with mental health issues receive the support and the care that they need. Public services are obviously devolved in Northern Ireland, but we will work with the Executive and leaders to support them in delivering better outcomes. That is why my Secretary of State for Health and Social Care spoke to the Health Minister in Northern Ireland in the first week that he was in the Department. I am sure that he will be prepared to follow up on the matter should the hon. Member wish him to do so.

Q13. [900583] **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): In my constituency of Hexham, frightened parents and families are having to fight tooth and nail and to travel extremely long distances to secure fair treatment and full education for their children. Will the Prime Minister outline steps that the Government will take to improve outcomes and results for children with special educational needs and disabilities, particularly those in the most rural parts of the north-east?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. This reinforces the point that the SEND provisions were a failure of the previous Government, particularly in rural communities. The issue is felt by Members on both sides of the House. It is really important and we have a duty now to pick it up and ensure that all children with SEND receive the right support to succeed in their education, and we will continue to do so.

Sir David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): On the assisted dying Bill, which is a private Member's Bill, the Government are quite rightly staying neutral, but the real issue with the Bill is that the time constraints of private legislation make it difficult to get it right first time. If we get this wrong first time, the consequences are too terrible to contemplate. In 1967, the Government of the day gave time to allow David Steel's Abortion Bill to go through. Will the Prime Minister commit to giving extra time—Government time—to the Bill to ensure that we get this right first time?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for raising this question on a really important issue. I do understand that there are strongly held views across the House—on both sides and within both sides, if I can put it in that way. I do agree with him that it is important that we ensure that any change to the law—if there is to be one—is effective. If this House gives the Bill a Second Reading, it will of course then go to Committee as usual, which will allow that more detailed scrutiny, but we do need the discussion more broadly on this important issue.

Q14. [900584] **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): With shared prosperity funding drawing to a close, and Cornwall having some of the greatest potential in Europe in critical minerals and renewable energy, it is time for

our aspiring Celtic tiger to identify much more strategic sources of investment funding, which take us away from the short-termist begging-bowl politics of the previous decade. Will the Prime Minister meet Cornish MPs to discuss the future of industrial and social funding in Cornwall?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a proud Cornish MP. He is absolutely right that economic growth must be spread across the country; it cannot simply be focused in the south-east and London. He will no doubt have seen today the floating offshore wind taskforce report, which sets out that the UK's industry can support tens of thousands of jobs, including huge job opportunities in the south-west. I will ensure that a meeting is arranged for him with the appropriate Minister.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Today is PANS PANDAS Awareness Day, which is about a paediatric condition affecting potentially thousands of children across the UK. I first raised the condition in the Chamber 18 months ago, when I heard about its devastating impact from a constituent. Does the Prime Minister agree that it should not be for a charity to fund the pathway analysis and research needed to ensure that people and children get the support they need? Will he help facilitate a meeting for me with the charity and the Department of Health and Social Care?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue and reminding the House of the impact that it has. I can certainly arrange that meeting so that we can take it further forward.

Q15. [900585] **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): My constituents are anxious about the financial situation at Durham county council. The Tories' unfair funding formula has hollowed out essential public services such as social care, while demand has been increasing. What assurances can the Prime Minister give me that essential services will be restored and that a new funding formula will be genuinely fair, focusing on the needs of my constituents, especially the most vulnerable?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend highlights yet another failing of the last Government. Successive years of underfunding have left councils experiencing significant budget pressures, and that is felt by constituents, residents and individuals across the country. This Government will clear up the mess and get councils back on their feet. Multi-year funding settlements will partly help to allow longer-term work to be done. But we recognise the importance of councils, which know their communities best. With greater stability, we can support them in ensuring that the services that they provide get to the people who need them.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): In April, more than 50 homes and businesses in Gosport found themselves underwater when Storm Pierrick hit; some people have still not been able to return to their properties. This has now been upgraded to a one-in-20-year risk. We have still not had a decision from the Environment Agency about flood and coastal erosion risk management funding, for which we have applied. Despite requests, I have still been unable to secure a meeting with the Prime Minister's DEFRA team. Winter is coming and my constituents are worried. When is he going to grip this?

The Prime Minister: This is a really important issue in terms—*[Interruption.]* Look, we are not going to take lessons from the Conservative party. Year after year, we visited constituencies and areas that were flooded because there had been a failure to take adequate protection. What I said in the election campaign was that we would set up a flood resilience taskforce to get ahead of the issue. We will do that, and I will ensure that the hon. Lady can get such further information as she needs.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): October is Black History Month, and the theme this year is "Reclaiming Narratives". I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the event that you are putting on in your apartments with The Temptations, and the Prime Minister—*[Laughter.]* The Temptations tribute band. The Prime Minister will be having an event at No.10 this evening. Does he agree that it is important that we continue to have a debate on the Floor of the House in Government time on Black History Month?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure that something labelled "Temptations" is quite where I need to go at the moment—*[Laughter.]* But this is a really important initiative. It is important that it is being marked and I am very pleased to be hosting the event this evening, to which I think my hon. Friend is coming.

Northern Ireland City Deals

12.34 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the Northern Ireland city deals.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): As the Chancellor set out in July, the Government have inherited a £22 billion black hole in the public finances. As a result, the Treasury is having to consider a range of measures to deal with this significant problem. Last month, the Treasury informed the Northern Ireland Department of Finance that the UK Government's contributions to the Mid South West deal and the Causeway Coast and Glens deal would now be considered as part of the spending review. The Belfast regional city deal and the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane city deal are unaffected and proceeding as planned. Since the announcement of the pause on those two deals, I have met with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Northern Ireland Finance Minister. I will also be meeting the chief executives of those two deals shortly.

Everyone in Northern Ireland understands the importance of the city deals to economic growth and encouraging investment, and this Government are committed to working with the Northern Ireland Executive and businesses to make the most of the huge economic opportunities that now lie ahead. That is shown by the progress being made on the Belfast region city deal and the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane city deal. I attended the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane city deal signing on 18 September. The UK Government's £105 million investment will help to progress transformative innovation, digital and health projects, which will build on the region's well-established research excellence. The Chancellor will set out the results of the first phase of the spending review on 30 October, which will include an update on the two outstanding city deals.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart: As the House will know, on the evening of Friday 13 September—the day after we went into recess—the Government took it upon themselves to make a number of announcements affecting Northern Ireland: the cancellation of the Casement Park project; the decision that Sean Brown's family will not be given a public inquiry into his murder; and the subject of this urgent question, the pausing of four Northern Ireland city deals. It is quite something to instantaneously unite all the political parties in Northern Ireland, but that was the feat achieved by the Government on the evening of Friday the 13th.

The House will be aware of how crucial the city deals are, providing significant investment to boost economic growth, create jobs and enhance infrastructure and bringing together Westminster, Belfast, local councils and private investment. We are pleased that the following day, after considerable confusion, the Government U-turned and announced that the Belfast region city deal and the Derry and Strabane city deal would go ahead, but the other two regional growth deals—the Causeway Coast and Glens deal and the Mid South West deal—now sit in limbo.

Critically, those deals cover areas that have not had the same levels of investment in recent years as big cities. One need only look at the empty shops in Enniskillen and Armagh to understand that these deals are badly needed. Can the Secretary of State tell the House why was the decision to pause taken at such a time and why was it announced in such a way? Following that announcement, why was there then a U-turn on two of the deals but not the other two? What criteria were used to make that decision?

The Secretary of State has referred to money. He knows that the so-called black hole, for which the Government have provided no breakdown, is partially of Labour's making, given the above-inflation pay rise that it has chosen to award to the unions. He will know that the money involved is, in the world of the Exchequer, not that significant and, crucially, will deliver major returns to Northern Ireland and to the UK.

I ask the Secretary of State for two things. The first is an apology for how the matter was handled; I know he would not have wanted it to happen in the way it did, but someone should take responsibility for how the House and the people of Northern Ireland have been treated. The second is that, in negotiating with the Treasury in the run-up to the Budget, he will be the lead advocate for un-pausing those city deals.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his response. On the matter of Casement Park, since he raised it, I will say that we took the decision for the reason we set out, and I think it is one that he supports. On the question of Sean Brown, I set out in my letter to the family why I had reached the conclusion that I did.

I would just correct the hon. Gentleman: the Belfast city deal was never affected at all—it is roaring ahead and is a great success. In the case of Derry, I was pleased to attend the signing of the deal, which will now progress to its next stage.

I would also simply say to the hon. Gentleman that the public finances inheritance the last Government left us—*[Interruption.]* Well, the last Government made a load of promises but never identified where the money to pay for them would come from, and then they were turfed out and left this Government to deal with the problem. That is the reason for the situation with these two city deals. He can rest assured that I, as Secretary of State, will continue to make the case for the two city deals, which is why I said in my opening answer to him that everybody in Northern Ireland, including me, understands their importance, and I will continue to make that case. But in those circumstances, the Chancellor has found it necessary to look at a whole range of commitments that were made by the last Government for which no funding had been identified, and the fault for that does not lie with us, and if any apologies are required, a belated apology from the other side for the mess they left us would be much appreciated.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Cities and towns in Northern Ireland have already missed out on levelling-up funding under the previous Government, as I saw at

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

first hand as shadow Minister, so the uncertainty regarding the city deals has been quite a hard hit on the people in Northern Ireland. I seek further reassurances from the Secretary of State that the people of Northern Ireland will not be overlooked in the Budget.

Hilary Benn: I absolutely recognise the uncertainty that this has created and, as I have indicated, I will be meeting the chief executives of the two deals very shortly. Given the uncertainty while we await the outcome of the first phase of the spending review, the particular problem that they face is that a lot of effort goes into progressing these deals with the private partners, because the money comes from the Government and from the Northern Ireland Executive in the form of match funding, and then other partners, including the local councils, and they do find themselves in a difficult position—I will not hide from that.

The only other thing I would say is that those two deals are much further back in the process than those for Belfast and Derry; for the Causeway Coast and Glens deal the heads of terms had been signed in April of this year, and for the Mid South West deal the terms had yet to be signed—I think they were due last month. Then there is a further process under which the programme of the deal itself is developed to then get to the stage that Derry reached on 18 September, when the financial agreement is signed and then the business case and the projects are unlocked. So I recognise that it is difficult and, as I have already indicated to the councils, I will continue to argue for the cause of these deals.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): The four city and growth deals for Northern Ireland are critical mechanisms in revitalising industries and creating new economic opportunities across key regions in Northern Ireland. The pause in UK Government funding has caused, by the Secretary of State's own admission, uncertainty, anxiety and lost impetus in key investment projects under the city and growth deals framework. The Mid South West deal represents over £250 million of investment across the region. The decision to allow projects in Belfast and Derry to proceed while pausing those in the Mid South West and Causeway regions risks reproducing the very imbalances that these deals were designed to tackle, widening inequities and inequalities across Northern Ireland. I have had the opportunity to speak to the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), who brought to my attention the risks posed to the agri-bio innovation centre in Dromore by the Government's withdrawal of secure funding.

Therefore, on behalf of Northern Irish businesses, councils and residents, especially those in the poorest regions, I ask the Secretary of State the following questions. What actions are the Government taking to mitigate those regional economic imbalances and to tackle inequalities, especially in the Mid South West, and what assurances can be provided that rural areas will not be forgotten, again especially in the Mid South West and the Causeway Coast?

Mr Speaker: Order. You are allowed one minute and you are now well over that, so I am sure you are coming to the end this very second.

Dr Pinkerton: Sorry, Mr Speaker. I will end there, with thanks.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, whom I welcome to his post—this is, I think, the first time we have faced each other. He makes a fair point about the areas covered by the two deals that have been paused, and the contrast between them and Derry and Strabane, and Belfast. It is important that, in the end, we see economic growth right across Northern Ireland, so I do not dissent from his proposition, but the reason we are in this difficulty is the legacy that this Government have found. Any responsible Chancellor must, in the circumstances, find a way of straightening out the public finances, which were left to us in a really bad state.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is not the sort of person who would make this announcement unless there were huge pressure to do so, but I am aware that pausing a project, especially when people are in post, is not completely cost-free. Will he reassure the House and people in Northern Ireland that there will be some way of maintaining a degree of momentum on the projects that have been paused? If he could give us any costings on that, it would be helpful.

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The House may have seen that yesterday, the Northern Ireland Executive—whose funding is secure because of the deal that was offered, including the financial deal that was part of the restoration of the institution, which the whole House welcomes—announced that they are proceeding with their share of the contribution, which I hope will offer some comfort to those in the two city deal areas who are working out what this means. It is important that clarity on the future is delivered as quickly as possible, which is why I set out that we will learn more on 30 October.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): May I speak up for the city deals, which have been subject to a significant amount of work in communities across Northern Ireland? The city deals were reviewed earlier in the year under the previous Government, at the time of the "Safeguarding the Union" agreement, and the decisions made then were part of that deal. The Secretary of State is making representations on the deals, but I urge him to bear in mind that this was discussed earlier in the year and was part of the overall agreement made to get Stormont back up and running.

Hilary Benn: I absolutely take the right hon. Gentleman's point, given his long experience in these matters and the role that he and others have played in assisting with the restoration of the institution, but I would very gently observe that if the matter was reviewed then, what was decided did not quite make its way into the fiscal inheritance that we have found ourselves left with. That fiscal inheritance—rather than a lack of support for the deals; I think the whole House supports them—is the cause of the problem.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): City deals are a serious tool for economic growth. That is why the Social Democratic and Labour party initially proposed them, and why we continue to be their champion.

They support skills and employability, create decent jobs and, crucially, leverage private and foreign direct investment, driving much-needed regeneration in infrastructure in parts of Northern Ireland that have been overlooked. I am pleased that the Government are honouring their commitments to Belfast and Derry, but they should know that the decision, and its announcement on a Friday night, caused very serious frustration and a loss of public trust in Northern Ireland—although the Tories still have a thing or two to teach about uniting the parties in revulsion at announcements. Will the Secretary of State clarify the reasons for the pause in the Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid South West region deals, and can he assure us that he will be a champion for the deals with the Treasury?

Hilary Benn: I will indeed be that champion. May I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on assuming the leadership of her party? We all wish her well in that endeavour. I also express our appreciation of the former leader of the SDLP, my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), who is sat next to her. Let us be frank: the truth is that when bad news is forced on the Government, it is unwelcome, whenever it is announced.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that city deals were talked of for a long time, but it was in 2017 that the Democratic Unionist party got a commitment from Government—a commitment that would not just impact us but be of benefit to everyone in Northern Ireland, creating opportunities for growth in cities and regions throughout Northern Ireland in a phased, programmed, sensible and strategic way. The decision to pause both the Causeway Coast and Glens and the Mid South West region deals was unnecessary, and I think the Secretary of State accepts that. Given that no arrangements were in place to agree the necessary financial requirements, there was no need to pause the deals because of a lack of finance.

As I think the Secretary of State acknowledges, this decision places in jeopardy the matched funding from private investors, as well as the ability to proceed with the food and drug development centre in Coleraine, the Enniskillen bypass, and myriad other important and strategically significant proposals. As we wait until 30 October, it would inject confidence if this Government were to say that they recognise the importance and value of city deals; are determined to deliver on these aspirations, which will be key regional economic drivers in Northern Ireland; and recognise, as I think the Secretary of State does, that pausing these proposals was foolish.

Hilary Benn: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman's last proposition. As I have already indicated to the House, given the fiscal inheritance, the prudent thing is for the Government to say, "We need to look at a range of things in the round." I entirely recognise that this decision is unwelcome to many people. The best thing we can do is give certainty as quickly as possible, which would assist, but I entirely understand the practical difficulties that this decision creates in the meantime. I will learn more about that when I meet the chief executives of the deal areas.

The House is united, though, on our shared desire to maximise economic growth in Northern Ireland. This week, we have had a really good example of that with the announcement of the very significant order that has gone to Wrightbus. This is a company that nearly went bust; then investment came in, and it is now helping to deliver the bus transportation of the future from a factory that I and many other Members have had the chance to visit. There are a lot of good things happening in Northern Ireland, and we need to build on them.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): What representations has the Secretary of State made to the Treasury about the continuation of these two city deals?

Hilary Benn: As I am sure my hon. Friend understands, anyone holding my office, including me, will argue the corner of Northern Ireland. I will continue to do so.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): As the Secretary of State who secured funding from the Treasury for the first two deals—the Belfast city deal and the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane deal—I am very pleased that they are going ahead, but I have concerns, because I remember the impact that that announcement had on business confidence across Northern Ireland. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with businesses involved in the private sector element of these deals, to make sure they know that there is a commitment to them?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Member is very generous and kind to me, but I cannot claim credit for the Belfast city deal—it was unaffected by the announcement that the Treasury made—and the signing of the full financial deal for the Derry and Strabane city deal was scheduled anyway. After clarification, that deal is going ahead, but when I meet the chief executives shortly, I hope to learn more about the point she raised about the practical impact. It is important that we understand the impact; that will inform the representations that are made.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): It seems to me that these questions would be better directed at the Treasury, because that is where the decision was made. I thank the Secretary of State for the work he did over the weekend after the 17th to secure the much-needed Derry city deal. He has said that there will be an update in the Budget about the other two deals that have been paused. Can he confirm whether that will be an update or a decision?

Hilary Benn: Although my hon. Friend encourages me to, I will not speak for the Chancellor. She will tell us what is in the Budget when she stands up on 30 October.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State will remember that when he and I were at the signing of the Londonderry deal in September, I lobbied him strongly to get the other two deals over the line. He has outlined the meetings he has held, but given what he has just said about not meeting and talking with the Chancellor about this, will he be meeting the Prime Minister? He has met other people, and we need to get these deals up and running—over the line—to get much-needed investment into areas such as mine and the Mid South West.

Hilary Benn: I very much enjoyed seeing the hon. Gentleman at the signing of the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane city deal—it was a great event. It is the

[Hilary Benn]

responsibility of all of us in the House who have the interests of these two deals at heart to make representations to everyone who can influence the final decision.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked about his engagement. Local authorities have a really important role to play in stimulating and facilitating growth, so can he keep local authorities in mind as he seeks to keep engaging, and as he ultimately gets us the solution that people want?

Hilary Benn: I certainly will do that, which is precisely why my next meeting on this matter will be with the chief executives of the two deal areas. They will no doubt tell me about the challenges they face at the moment, but it is the partnership that makes these deals so successful, as Belfast and Derry/Londonderry and Strabane demonstrate. By bringing together the United Kingdom, the Northern Ireland Executive, the local authorities and private investors, we get a synergy that results in extraordinary things.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I assume that the Secretary of State has done an impact assessment on the uncertainty costs of this decision, and will know how it will impact growth in Northern Ireland in particular. If so, can he publish that impact assessment? Secondly, I assume that the improved futures funding in Northern Ireland is unaffected by this decision. Can he confirm that, please?

Hilary Benn: I am not aware of an impact assessment that has been done. At the end of July, the Chancellor announced all the things that she would have to look at in dealing with the very adverse fiscal inheritance from the previous Government. I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman, but I did not hear what he was referring to in the second part of his question.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), referred to levelling-up funds. Is the Secretary of State aware that commitments to businesses from those funds have also been paused in Northern Ireland? In particular, Belfast International airport in my constituency was looking forward to £2.3 million from levelling-up funds, and was only told a fortnight ago that the funding was now on hold. It is not only the city deals; levelling-up funds are affected by this decision.

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman is right: a number of things have been paused. I can think of a levelling-up project in my constituency that has been paused as a result of our fiscal inheritance. That is what the Treasury is having to deal with.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, one of the unsung and often undervalued benefits of city deals is that they underpin the argument for the rebuilding of a new, post-conflict Northern Ireland, delivering normalcy and forging partnerships between sectors. That is an argument that is often lost on the bean counters in the Treasury. Can he assure the House that he will be making that key point as we all seek to rebuild Northern Ireland in the image of what we would all like it to become?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful and important point. The progress that Northern Ireland has made over the past 26 years since the signing of the Good Friday agreement is what everybody is striving to continue. I am confident that the Treasury will pay close attention to the exchanges on this urgent question, and the hon. Gentleman's eloquence speaks for itself.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I have listened to the answers that the Secretary of State has given, and I cannot understand his logic. First, one of the reasons for not progressing with these deals is that they are not far enough advanced. Does he not recognise the amount of money that has already gone into developing them, and how this decision puts that money at risk? Who will put further resources into those schemes if there is no certainty at the end?

The Secretary of State has talked about Northern Ireland being part of economic growth. In the Causeway Coast and Glens case, much of the investment will be for economic growth, whether that is the development of food and drugs at the University of Ulster, the innovation hub at North West Regional College, or the innovation hub in Cushendall. By not having those schemes in place, the Secretary of State is going to affect economic growth, so can he explain the logic of the decision he has made?

Hilary Benn: In fairness to myself, I have pointed out that these two schemes are not as far advanced as the Belfast and the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane city deals, because one of them only recently signed its heads of terms and the other has yet to do so. From memory, the time it took for the Belfast and the Derry and Strabane deals to get from heads of terms to full financial deal signing was between two and a half and three and a half years. So there is some way to go based on past experience, precisely because a great deal of work has to be done in partnership with the private sector, the Northern Ireland Executive, local businesses and the councils to put the shape of the deals in place. The right hon. Member makes a powerful argument for clarity as quickly as possible.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Could I suggest that the Causeway deal was particularly well thought out and balanced in its proposition? It is therefore very disappointing to see it paused, particularly for the small but vital village of Bushmills, which services the vast number of visitors who come to the Giant's Causeway. For years, there has been a neglect of infrastructure there. Roads have been clogged with cars because there is not adequate parking in and about Bushmills. This project was going to address that, as well as community rejuvenation in the village. Therefore, there is an immense sense of disappointment in Bushmills in my constituency at the lost opportunity. Will the Secretary of State, bearing in mind the strategic significance of Bushmills to the advancement of the great Giant's Causeway project, make a particular case for the reinstatement of the Causeway project?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman speaks up very strongly on behalf of Bushmills and the Giant's Causeway area. I know that all other Members representing

constituencies affected by the decision the Treasury has had to take will be doing exactly the same. I think all the projects are important, but he makes the case very powerfully.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I have two requests of the Secretary of State. First, would he put together and compile information on the investments that have been made to date, perhaps in conjunction with Sue Gray in her new role as envoy, or otherwise? Secondly, will he ensure that we get clarity on 30 October, one way or the other, as to whether these deals can go ahead, so that we do not have so many local authorities, private businesses and others who have invested in these programmes left in continuing limbo after that date?

Hilary Benn: There is quite a lot of information already available about the two schemes that are going ahead, what they have achieved and what the plans are. I think that is readily available, if the right hon. Gentleman needs it, and I will bear in mind the point he makes about information on the other schemes. He and the House have already heard me say a number of times that clarity as soon as possible would be in the interests of everybody.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State has kindly agreed to meet the council leads in the Mid South West deal area, for which I am a Member of Parliament. Upper Bann, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Mid Ulster are all included, but he will note that the other MPs for those areas are absent from this place.

The Secretary of State speaks of partnerships, synergy and the great things that can be achieved. Sadly, in the Mid South West deal area, we are not going to be able to achieve them because the main partner has pulled the plug and paused the deal, which is impacting on infrastructure, tourism and regeneration. Will the Secretary of State assure the House today that he will make the case for the Mid South West area, which is home to over half a million people and a vital economic driver in Northern Ireland within this United Kingdom?

Hilary Benn: I have already indicated to the House that I of course give that assurance. As I said in answer to the previous question, all those who have an interest in these schemes progressing and who are concerned about the impact of the pause—the plug has not been pulled, and you cannot pause a plug, but I think the hon. Member will understand the point—should be making the case, too.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): If the two city deals do not go ahead and the money is not found through the Treasury, will those deals continue to be parked or will they be dead and buried forever? Can the Secretary of State give a reassurance that those deals will continue, maybe further down the line?

Hilary Benn: I think we are going to have to wait for the Chancellor's announcement on 30 October, but as I have already told the House, other partners are involved in those deals. Of course, I welcome the Executive's announcement yesterday that they will proceed with the funding of elements of those deals out of the money that they have.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, would the Secretary of State extend our collective thanks to the emergency services and local people for their response to the Strangford college bus crash on Monday past in my constituency? It is a miracle that no one was killed, and we thank God for that.

There have been headlines over the last few weeks about potential pauses of funding for city deals in parts of Northern Ireland, some of which cover areas of my constituency. Can the Secretary of State clarify that in the future action will be taken to ensure that funding that is offered will be delivered, and that devolved nations will not suffer as a result of central funding shortfalls here?

Hilary Benn: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I echo what the hon. Gentleman said about that bus crash. I must say that, when I first read the report, I was very fearful—I think we all were—about what might have been the consequences. I think the response of the emergency services was terrific, and I wish all those who were injured the very best for the future. I understand that the school is providing support, because it must have been and is still a very traumatic experience for the students who were on the bus.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman's second point, we would all like to live in a world of certainty on a whole load of things. Being in government is about having to deal with the bits where certainty is not quite as certain as the hon. Gentleman may have hoped.

Film Industry

1.6 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): With permission, I would like to make a statement about the Government's support for film making in the UK. Film is one of the great British success stories of the last 30 years. Ever since Gordon Brown created the film tax credit back in 2007, this amazing industry has created jobs and growth across the UK and flown the flag for British creativity across the world. Our Government have huge ambition for the film sector, and today we are introducing secondary legislation that will put rocket boosters under this growing industry and unlock the potential of our incredible independent film sector.

The UK has some special advantages that give us a natural competitive edge. Thanks to the creativity and imagination of our authors, playwrights and publishers, we have some of the best stories to tell and take to the screen, helped by some of the best story tellers in the world—the directors, scriptwriters and cinematographers—and against some of the most incredible backdrops, from the Welsh valleys to the north-east coastline, as well as acting talent that is second to none and that breathes life into those stories. Our film industry is one of our great economic and cultural success stories. It is worth £1.36 billion and employs more than 195,000 people, and it has created true icons such as James Bond, Harry Potter and my personal favourite, Paddington Bear.

Our Government have three aims for our film industry. First, we want to attract the investment for UK film makers to make the best films in the world. Secondly, we want UK audiences to see films that reflect their lives and their communities. That means telling a wide diversity of British stories that draws on the rich cultural inheritance in every region and nation. Thirdly, we want the UK to be the best place in the world to make films, because we have the right ingredients: the investment, the talent, the technical skills, the sound stages, the creative imagination, and the right fiscal and regulatory environment. That is why this Government will do everything in our power to ensure that the fiscal and regulatory environment matches the ambition of film makers and studios around the world. We want them to invest in great British film making.

However, the key to maintaining that advantage is an internationally competitive tax regime, and I think that is beyond party politics. As Members will know, tax incentives for film were first introduced by the last Labour Government in 2007, and the previous Conservative Government followed suit with the announcement of a planned UK independent film tax credit in the last spring Budget. We have heard loud and clear the industry's concerns that any further delays to introducing this secondary legislation, even to the end of the month, may mean that investments in UK independent films are lost. So I am glad to announce that we have today laid the necessary statutory instrument, under the negative process, for the independent film tax credit to take effect. It means that eligible films with a budget of up to £23.5 million can claim enhanced audiovisual expenditure credit at a rate of 53% on their qualifying expenditure up to £15 million. That is higher than the standard 34% rate for other films. The regulations set out the eligibility criteria for film production companies, who can apply from 30 October.

This Government do not underestimate how important this tax credit is. Big blockbuster movies are an important part of the mix, but independent films are every bit as important, both for the British talent that they allow to shine and for the untold stories that they bring into the spotlight. Too often, people do not see themselves and their community reflected in the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves as a nation, and this Government are determined that will change.

Later today, the 68th London film festival will open with the world premiere of "Blitz", written, directed and produced by one of our most successful British directors, Steve McQueen. Set in England during world war two, it is an example of exactly what film can do. It brings together top talent on screen and off, and it showcases the nation's history through storytelling and highlights on screen our beautiful country, from London's east end to Hull's old town. Our independent sector has produced films such as "Pride", "The King's Speech" and "Bend It Like Beckham", which show our heritage, our communities and our culture to the world and act as a springboard from the grassroots for world-class UK talent on screen and behind the scenes.

While major film production has flourished, smaller-budget independent films have not received sufficient support over the past decade. They face multiple challenges, including rising production costs, crew shortages and declining revenues, which have hampered the growth of this vital sector. While too much of our creative industries has traditionally been concentrated in just one part of our country, independent film thrives everywhere, given the chance. This uplift will not only boost creativity but create jobs, growth and investment in every nation and region. Through that, we will help the independent film sector to reach its full potential.

While the uplift has been designed to support and target British independent film makers, I am glad to say that it is also open to qualifying official co-productions, because film and television co-production is a key way in which the UK increases its cultural ties and collaboration with Europe and the rest of the world.

This Government will go further still to support this critical industry. The skills shortage that has been ignored for too long acts as a break on the ambitions of this incredible sector. That is why this Government launched Skills England to bring about the skills we need for a decade of national renewal of our communities, business and country. We will focus apprenticeships once more on young people to set them up to succeed and to help fill the 25,000 vacancies in the creative sector.[1] The Secretary of State for Education is overhauling the apprenticeship levy to provide better career opportunities for young people, building on the success of existing high-quality apprenticeships in the creative industries, and we are working closely with Skills England to ensure that the new flexibilities announced by the Prime Minister last month offer shorter apprenticeships and an improved offer for a creative skills pathway for young people embarking on careers in this sector. Every child should have the chance to live a richer, larger life and to consider a career in the arts.

1.[*Official Report*, 13 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 7WC.] (Correction)

In addition, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is keeping the Government's mission to deliver economic growth at front of mind when making decisions about planning applications. I am pleased to announce to the House that yesterday MHCLG recovered an application for planning permission for Marlow film studios in Buckinghamshire. The merits of that application will now be reviewed by its Ministers in detail before they reach a decision.

Finally, next week the Government will host the international investment summit, where industry leaders, investors and businesses from across the world will come together to put the UK back at the global table and to kick-start a decade of economic renewal. As a critical part of that, our creative industries will be at the summit's heart. This Government are committed to ensuring that the UK is a first-choice destination for film production. We are backing up those words with actions today. Britain is open for business, and creativity is back at its heart. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.14 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I am grateful for my first chance at the Dispatch Box formally to congratulate the right hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on her new job following the electoral loss of the erstwhile Member for Bristol West, Thangam Debbonaire—I know it was unexpected. Given those circumstances, it must be difficult to have in a No. 2 someone who has greeted her leapfrog into the Department for Culture, Media and Sport job with all the enthusiasm of Scar when Simba returns to the pride lands. I, for one, am glad that out of the ashes of Thangam's tragedy, a new era of lion and hyena did not come to pass.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on a tremendous achievement. With 100 days of Labour looming, she has the honour on day 97 of announcing Labour's first decent policy. We know it is decent, because it is a Conservative policy. Do not be fooled: today's statutory instrument puts into effect the extra support for independent film that we, the Conservatives, brought in at the March Budget. Our announcement followed months of careful work with brilliant organisations such as Pact and the British Film Institute, and it was welcomed by industry titans such as Chris Nolan, Barbara Broccoli, Steve McQueen and Ridley Scott. At the time, the BFI dubbed it

"a game changer for UK filmmakers"

and British storytelling, and

"the most significant policy intervention since the 1990s."

The Chancellor and the Culture Secretary now say it is all part of their plan for growth, but it was our plan for growth. As far as I know, they have not got one. Even their plan for tax seems to be falling apart, as the socialist utopia of opposition hits the reality of governing. The policy was the latest in a seriously successful suite of Conservative-created tax reliefs that mean this new Labour Government inherit a thriving industry to steward. I am genuinely glad that something has finally been announced ahead of the London film festival. It is a tremendous showcase of UK talent that we backed with £1.7 million from our creative sector vision. Through it, we have gifted the Culture Secretary something to say, the Chancellor something to back instead of tax, the Prime Minister another sparkling event to go to and the Home Secretary a new police escort to fund, but it has taken too long. The consistent feedback we are getting from every DCMS sector is simple: what is going on? Where is the plan?

If the Culture Secretary gets invited to the latest gallery opening, will she finally commit to continuing the museums and galleries exhibition tax relief at the extended rate, as we committed to in the March Budget? If she gets invited on another rollercoaster, will she give clarity on whether we will secure investment in a new film theme park in Bedfordshire in time for the investment summit? If the Prime Minister gets a bit more time in Arsenal's exec suite, will the footballing world get clarity on how this Government wish to regulate it? Can she reply to my letter, sent weeks ago, that asked all these questions and more?

In her media round this morning, the Secretary of State claimed that Gordon Brown was behind the success of the British film industry. Does the Secretary of State remember that in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2022 and 2024, Labour voted against our film, video game and TV tax reliefs? Does she accept that regardless of the positive investment environment we created, it is the ingenuity of Britain's film makers, costume designers, writers, runners, researchers, post-production talent and actors who have made the UK the best place in the world to make films? We cannot take it for granted. With the Irish Government announcing last week that Ireland will receive its own boosted tax incentives for films under €20 million, can she commit to keeping a close eye on international competitors, so that we do not lose our edge?

Finally, the Culture Secretary's press release states:

"The new measures are the latest in a series of interventions from the government to drive growth, which is creating the conditions for confident investment and trusted partnership with business."

Can she name any other growth measures that Labour has revealed that are not rebadged Conservative policies and announcements, or things that will not drive growth, which is to say, anything announced by Ed Miliband?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Lady for her warm words of welcome at the beginning. I think that is perhaps the beginning and end of the consensus that we might be able to reach today.

If I may, I will highlight a few areas where we are in agreement. First, I think we are in agreement that today's announcement is a thoroughly good thing for the British film industry. Secondly, I think we are in agreement that a number of the initiatives that this Government are taking forward—including the football Bill that she referenced and various other issues relating to the competitiveness of our creative industries on the global stage—are welcome and should receive cross-party support.

The hon. Lady mentioned the fact that the Conservative Government brought in this independent film tax credit at the last Budget. If that were true, we would not be needing to legislate today. The truth is that the Conservative Government did what the Conservative Government did for 14 years: they talked a good game and then did

[Lisa Nandy]

absolutely nothing to deliver for the people of this country. She says that we voted against film tax credits, but the truth, as she well knows, is that we did not vote against them. They were our idea and our initiative in 2007. In fact, it was her party that opposed them in the first place. If they had had their way in 2007, our British film industry would not be where it is today, which is rivalling Hollywood as one of the best film industries in the world. She knows full well that we supported every one of the measures that, after years of opposing them—they had to be dragged kicking and screaming by the film industry—the Conservatives belatedly came to support. She also knows that we voted against successive Conservative Finance Bills because, as we are discovering now that we have had a chance to open the books, there was no money attached to any of the measures. It was a hoax and a con trick practised on the British people.

I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Lady, and I am grateful to her not just for her welcome today and her warm words but for the support that she and others on the Opposition Benches have given me and the team to take up the mantle. But if I had left a sector with 25,000 vacancies that it could not fill, a legacy of creativity being erased from our communities and our classrooms and, most of all, a £22 billion economic black hole that working-class people are paying the price for up and down the country—all of that—and then had such a resounding rejection from the electorate only a few months ago, I would be speaking with a little bit more humility from the Dispatch Box.[1]

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome the statement. When we met the film industry at roundtables in the last Parliament, it consistently called for this measure, so I am delighted to see that the Government are taking action. With 25,000 job vacancies in the creative industries, does the Secretary of State agree that if we can line up the training, T-levels and other skills taught in our sixth forms, further education colleges and education centres, we can create job opportunities for a generation?

Lisa Nandy: I put on record our thanks as a Government for the work that my hon. Friend has done to champion opportunities for young people in his constituency and across the country. One of the things that matters personally to our Government is not just that we put rocket boosters under some of the fastest-growing industries—the creative industries outside of London and the south-east, as well as in London—to offer opportunities in every part of the country, but, crucially, that we ensure that young people in those communities can have those opportunities. That is why we have already kick-started the curriculum review to put art, sport, music and culture back at the heart of the curriculum where they belong, after the mindless cultural vandalism of the last 14 years. It is why we are also reforming the apprenticeship levy, and it is why we are working closely with industry to ensure that there are no limits on our ambition for young people, so that we can match the ambition that they have for themselves.

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

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned my favourite film, and I promise that my contributions in the Chamber will always be in the spirit of Paddington Bear and not Mr Curry. As the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), will know after our exchange on Twitter, "Paddington 2" is the best film.

This is a positive statement. The Liberal Democrats welcome the announcement, as we did when it was announced in the Finance Bill earlier this year. It is good to see the Government following through on that. The creative industries are the heartbeat of British life and the film industry is a powerful tool for soft power and economic growth, too. This is a first step, but our view is that wider tax relief measures should be considered in future. We need to address the skills gap by reforming the apprenticeship levy, as has been mentioned—that is a positive thing. We should transform it into a training and skills levy.

We need to address the barriers to finance suffered by so many in the creative industries. We hear about that regularly, particularly from smaller operations. We believe that creative enterprise zones will help to regenerate cultural output across our regions and nations, and we believe that this country should apply to join Creative Europe to boost the funding options available.

I have three questions. In the light of Ireland's announcement, is the Secretary of State satisfied that the measure announced today gives us enough of an advantage over our neighbours in Europe? On Europe, have the Government considered the merits of enabling full participation in Creative Europe? Finally, what steps are the Government taking to extend access to finance for the creative industries?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Member very much for his warm welcome for the measures. However, the cross-party consensus has now completely broken down—in fact, not just across the Benches but on them—because "Paddington" is a far superior film to "Paddington 2". It turns out that the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) may have been right.

I welcome the issues that the hon. Member raised, particularly on finance. We know that there is a major gap in the amount of finance that the creative industries can raise in different parts of the country. We also know that the gender gap is a particular problem, and that is something that our Government are determined to address. On Creative Europe, he will doubtless know that the Minister for the Cabinet Office is currently involved in negotiations with Europe to try to build on the paper-thin agreement that the last Government secured. We are keen to secure a closer relationship with our European friends and neighbours, but obviously those negotiations are ongoing so I cannot comment on that at the present time.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I have to say, "A Black Hole" sounds like a film to be produced by the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition.

I welcome the statement. Will the Secretary of State congratulate Steve Rotheram, the Mayor of the Liverpool city region, who is putting £17 million into the Hollywood of the north project at the Littlewoods building, which will create 4,000 jobs? That is investment from a Labour

1.[*Official Report*, 13 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 8WC.] (Correction)

mayor, supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker)—a Labour Member of Parliament—and by a Labour council. Labour, Labour, Labour supporting the film industry.

Lisa Nandy: May I take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done to support the creative industries both in Merseyside and up and down the country? Yesterday I was at Pinewood, where the work he has done to support our creative industries was spoken of highly.

I share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for the work that Steve Rotheram is leading in Merseyside. Just a few years ago, the mayor took me to see the newly opened Shakespeare North playhouse, an incredible project just a few streets from where he grew up. He was told by the previous Government that nobody would come to see Shakespeare in the north of England—how wrong they were.

I am keen to support the work that Steve Rotheram, Tracy Brabin and other mayors in the north of England are doing through One Creative North. It is the most exciting project to create a cultural corridor in the north of England, building on the assets and talent that exist in every part of our country. Parts of the country have not been heard for far too long, but with this Labour Government they will be heard.

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

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): First, I welcome the Secretary of State's words. The Select Committee worked hard to get that commitment to tax credits in the Budget earlier this year, and her implementing it at a time when investment in British film—particularly low-budget British film—is at its lowest ebb, is both welcome and timely. Our recollections of the previous Government's achievements on the creative industries differ. I think that once she has had a little bit of time to get her feet under the table, she will see that she has a hard act to follow on commitment to the creative industries.

When does the Secretary of State expect the Government to confirm the introduction of the visual effects tax credits? They were also announced in the Budget and have been consulted on, and they are also desperately needed and urgent. I would be grateful for an urgent response on that. Does she have any plans to look at the enterprise investment scheme for film and high-end TV? That is also much needed to get investment into British independent film and television. Finally, she spoke about the investment summit. Will she please confirm that the creative industries' role in that will not just be to add the stardust? They are such a fundamental and integral part of our industrial strategy and they contribute so much to the British economy, so they must be there as a central focal point of her Government's future industrial strategy.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Member very much. I know from her previous role on the Select Committee that she is a formidable Chair, and I am very much not looking forward to appearing in front of her at the earliest opportunity.

The hon. Member is absolutely right about the visual effects tax credit. We understand how important these reliefs are to the industry and we plan to provide an update as soon as we can, although we have the spending review imminently, and there is work ongoing to ensure that we get right our offer to the creative industries as a whole. On the enterprise investment scheme for high-end TV, I am afraid that the answer is similar, but I would welcome the chance to keep talking to the hon. Member and to members of the Committee, once she has some. On the investment summit, I appreciate her calling me stardust—I do not think I have ever been called stardust before—or did she mean the people that we might bring along? She and I share the view that the creative industries are absolutely central to our economic growth agenda, and I am really pleased that that view is shared by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade. She will see that at the investment summit next week and in the work that we will release over the next few weeks.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): I welcome the statement. As a recent chair of the all-party parliamentary group for film and broader screen, I applaud the work of the British Film Institute, which does a great job as a champion of this fantastic sector. In Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, we have the brilliant Cymru Creations, a local film company that helps young people to produce great films and learn a brilliant trade. What more can the Secretary of State do to support small and medium-sized enterprises in this sector? It is vital that we get behind them.

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for his role in helping to fly the flag for the British film industry. I also join him in paying tribute to the work of the BFI, and particularly to Ben Roberts and Harriet Finney, who have done extraordinary work for the film industry and for our country. I share my hon. Friend's sentiment about SMEs. The measures announced will be a huge boost to SMEs, but this Government are aware that there is more that we can do. As we continue to build this exciting agenda with the British film industry, we will continue to talk to it and to make sure that we are meeting the needs of SMEs from the length and breadth of the country.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the statement, but does the Secretary of State recognise that investment in the film industry depends on confidence and certainty, not least in the copyright protection regime? Will she make it clear that the Government do not intend to extend copyright exceptions to text and data mining? That would damage both the creative and the publishing industries massively.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for all the work he has done over many years to support and champion the creative industries and to challenge successive Governments, as I know he will challenge us—sadly—on these issues. I agree that investment depends on confidence and certainty. That is one of the reasons why we introduced this measure now, rather than waiting a few more weeks until the spending review: we heard the message loud and clear from the film industry that the longer it faced further delays, the less investment it would be able to attract.

I noted the right hon. Gentleman's point about the copyright protection regime. In the Government's view, artificial intelligence presents significant opportunities,

[Lisa Nandy]

but it also poses serious challenges for creative industries. I am delighted to say that our Minister of State—my hon. friend the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism—is also a Minister of State at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and he is working at pace to try to resolve these issues.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her announcement. The film industry and creative arts more generally play an important role in constituencies such as mine. Not only do the arts grow and boost our economies and enrich our communities, but they help to close the opportunity gap in our societies by inspiring future talents. Will the Secretary of State assure me that she will continue to support the entire creative industries with initiatives such as the one she has announced across all our regions and nations, so that my constituents can take up the opportunity to become the next generation of Welsh film and TV talent?

Lisa Nandy: I have not had the opportunity to welcome my hon. Friend to his place formally, but I am glad to see him as the new Member of Parliament for Cardiff West. He will know that his predecessor, Kevin Brennan, was an amazing champion for the creative industries and for the music industry in particular. We miss him dearly, but I know that my hon. Friend will be a worthy successor; he has already proved himself to be such.

Cardiff is an incredible hub of creativity. Cardiff's film studios, among others, are showing exactly what can be done, and this Government are absolutely determined to do everything we can to support this incredible industry. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), that includes making sure that young people growing up in Cardiff have the opportunity to make a career in the creative industries. Who knows? The next Steve McQueen, Gurinder Chadha or Danny Boyle could be waiting right now. This Government are determined to unlock those opportunities for the next generation.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Bray Studios in my constituency has produced some fantastic pieces, such as "The Rocky Horror Picture Show"—

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Take a step to the left. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Reynolds: It also produced "Alien" and, more recently, "Rocketman". However, the creative industries are crying out for support. Costs and funding are key issues facing them, and another is skills. The Secretary of State confirmed in her statement that the Government are overhauling the apprenticeship levy, but is she confident that the reforms will fully suit the needs of the creative industries, given the 25,000 vacancies in the sector?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question—he gave my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant) the opportunity to make the worst joke I have heard from him in at least a few hours.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the important issue of skills. We are focused on it because we have heard loud and clear from the creative industries that it is the brake on an industry that is otherwise growing much faster than other parts of the economy. As well as our work on the apprenticeship levy, to which he referred, we have already kick-started the curriculum review to put art, sport, music and creativity back at the heart of our classrooms, where they belong. We are about to launch a piece of work looking at arts across the whole country, to make sure we get our offer right in communities.

On the specific question about the apprenticeship levy, we are confident that we are making the right reforms, because we are working with industry—not just the big players in the industry for which the apprenticeship levy worked better, but the smaller organisations that need far more flexibility in the levy than is currently on offer. We are confident that the work that I, the Education Secretary and others are doing in conjunction with the industry is going to get that right.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to the UK's film and creative industries and their commitment to growing our economy, jobs and skills across every corner of our nation. London's most iconic borough, Croydon, provides an amazing UK filming backdrop. What more can be done to promote Croydon as a filming location?

Lisa Nandy: Having visited Croydon, I would say that it promotes itself. I also know that my hon. Friend will be an incredible champion for her community; she is already proving it by singing the virtues of Croydon. All the many film makers and film studios that have welcomed this announcement with open arms will have heard loud and clear what she has to say about the benefits of Croydon and will hear what she has to say in the future. I am sure that Croydon and the young people my hon. Friend represents will be part of the success story of this next chapter of our national story.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. One of this sector's real challenges, as she rightly pointed out, is skills. So many of those working in the sector are freelance. Will the Secretary of State give some thought to how we can get some of the larger players to act as incubators to bring through more talent and support, as they have the full breadth of resources that are needed?

Lisa Nandy: I recognise the challenge that the right hon. Gentleman lays down. The freelance sector represents 50% of the creative industries, and we are alive to the need to protect flexibility in the industry while ensuring that people are treated and paid well and that there is the incubation and talent pipeline that he mentioned. The independent film sector is crucial to that. I mentioned three film directors, all of whom came up through the independent film sector. Some of our greatest work has been produced there, and the people involved have gone on to produce blockbusters. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that there are big players in the sector, some of whom are doing an incredible job, but by doing so, they prove that others could do more.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): My constituency is not just a great backdrop for films; it is home to the Edinburgh international film festival, the longest-running film festival in the world. Given the critical role of film festivals in the film ecosystem, particularly in giving independent films a platform, does the Secretary of State agree that this announcement is good news for film festivals, too, and moreover that it is an example of the new Labour Government delivering for Edinburgh?

Lisa Nandy: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his debate yesterday on the Edinburgh film festival. I know that he will be an incredible champion for the creativity of his city. It was a pleasure to meet him there several months ago to see the work that he and new colleagues have already started to do to boost and protect it in quite challenging economic circumstances.

When I visited Edinburgh over the summer, I met my counterpart in the Scottish Government. We are seeking a far more constructive and adult relationship with the Scottish Government than existed under the previous Government, and a far more direct relationship with the Scottish cultural sector. We are the UK Government, and Scottish culture is one of the richest exports and most incredible crown jewels in the whole UK cultural landscape. We are determined to have a far more systematic and sustained relationship with the sector there to support it.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State will understand that the boundaries between film, cinema, e-sports and gaming are increasingly diffuse, but what they have in common is digital, and the need for digital skills. Does she agree that the local skills improvement fund has been crucial in developing digital skills across the country? Will she commend the work of Trowbridge college's "Tech Trowbridge" initiative in its digital skills centre, which has been facilitated by that fund, and does she hope, as I do, that it will continue to be generous? She is very welcome to visit Trowbridge at any time and see the excellent work that we are doing to advance digital and its contribution to the media industry, particularly around e-sports and gaming.

Lisa Nandy: I heard the pitch for Trowbridge loud and clear. The right hon. Gentleman can consider that to be duly noted by those of us on the Government Benches. He is right about digital skills and that the boundaries between some of the creative industries are increasingly blurred as more of them find themselves online. Our Government are committed to introducing a digital inclusion strategy, which we will produce shortly with a strong emphasis on digital skills. This country has been without a digital inclusion strategy for 10 years, and during that time other countries have leapt ahead of us. We are determined that that will no longer be the case. I very much hope that the great work going on in his constituency will be at the centre of it.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I welcome very much today's statement and the move to increase the number of film studios. The independent sector has the ability not just to tell our diverse stories but to transform the workforce and create a more diverse one. I had the great privilege for much of my working career to represent freelancers in Bectu and to represent the creative industry unions. What message does my right hon. Friend have for Bectu, the Musicians' Union and Equity, which do tremendous work in this area, as well as young people in my constituency looking to join the film industry, to tell them that this will create not just more jobs but a more diverse set of jobs in all parts of the country?

Lisa Nandy: I, too, pay tribute to the unions who work in this field. I have held discussions with Bectu and the Musicians' Union in recent weeks, and I am very grateful for their insight and expertise and all their work to support our amazing creative workforce. I recognise the challenges that my hon. Friend lays out, particularly over the course of the strike, which many workers and studios found very difficult. Our Government are very aware of that, especially coming off the back of a global pandemic, which posed major challenges for the industry. We are aware that the situation of many workers and institutions in the creative industries is extremely fragile, and we are committed to working hand in glove with our unions to resolve that.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Berkshire is the Hollywood of the United Kingdom, and I am proud that Wokingham contributes to its success, whether it is on stages of the Arborfield Film Studios or through my constituents commuting to Shinfield Studios. Today's announcement is a very welcome step and great support for our independent film industry, which is crucial to our local economy. Will the Secretary of State confirm when the guidance on business rates tax relief will be published?

Lisa Nandy: I do not think it has been said in this House that Berkshire is the Hollywood of the United Kingdom, but I will take his word for it, and I look forward to visiting at some point. He is right to raise the guidance on business rates, which we are aware is a pressing issue. I am afraid that I cannot give him a date today, but it is at the top of our agenda and will be forthcoming.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Does she agree that it is vital that our creative skills pathway reaches coastal communities, so that talented young people in constituencies such as mine have access to training and the opportunity to help fill the creative skills gap?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is right, and she is a fantastic champion for Scarborough and Whitby. Our coastal communities have so much to offer this country. They have offered so much in the past when it comes to tourism, music and nightlife. I was privileged to go with my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) to see the incredible work going on in that coastal community, to help to develop the incredible creative pipeline of talent that comes out of communities like his and hers. We are committed to ensuring that coastal communities that have played such an important part in our cultural life for generations and mean so much to so many families in the UK, including my own, are at the centre of our new renaissance.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): As a very former independent producer who once cast a Culture Secretary in a film, I can say that confirmation of the

[Steff Aquarone]

tax relief is welcome. Closer to home, North Norfolk has a blossoming film industry. I am sure the right hon. Lady will be aware of the film "Alpha Papa", where Alan Partridge met his fate on Cromer pier. However, lack of rural transport makes it hard for young creatives to live and work in my constituency. Can she tell me what discussions she has had with her colleagues at the Department for Transport about ensuring that jobs in this exciting industry are accessible for all?

Lisa Nandy: I thank him genuinely for that question on such an important issue. I have already held discussions with the Transport Secretary about young people having issues accessing art, sport, music and creativity in their communities because of transport challenges. I recognise exactly what he says from my own constituency in Wigan, which is for the most part very rural. He is right to raise the impact that the lack of rural transport has on employment and the industry. I will commit to taking that away and talking to the Transport Secretary to resolve it.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to supporting our film and creative industries in all parts of the country. My constituency supports the full life cycle of our film industries, from our universities that train our technicians, producers and actors to the world-leading post-production companies that provide visual effects work for big budget film and TV productions. What more can be done to boost investment in jobs in the creative industries in Bournemouth and the south-west?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend does a very good job of singing the virtues of Bournemouth, and our Government are very aware of that. Universities are incredibly important to our plans to put rocket boosters under the creative industries. Only yesterday I was at Pinewood Studios. Its partnership with the local university is introducing young people to skills and opportunities that some of them told me yesterday they would never have dreamed of. I met a young woman who is undertaking a course; she had had a dream to work in the creative industries, film in particular, since she watched "Mrs. Doubtfire" as a child and saw the amazing work that could be done through hair, make-up, and prosthetics. That gives us an idea of the enormous ecosystem of good, skilled jobs out there in the creative industries if we get this right. We are absolutely determined to make that happen.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for her clear energy and enthusiasm, which is incredibly infectious. I think we are all enthused about becoming an actor—I do not know whether that is possible for me, but that is by the way. It is no secret that Northern Ireland has produced some incredible films over the past couple of years, including "Belfast" and "An Irish Goodbye", where scenes were filmed in Saintfield, formerly in my constituency of Strangford. It is great to hear of the increased tax relief on production costing up to £15 million. Can the Minister provide assurances that all the devolved regions, including Northern Ireland, will feel the full effects of the tax relief in order to help our film industry?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words—he got so enthusiastic that he is not speaking at the end of the session for once, which is very unsettling. I really appreciate what he said, and I reassure him that for every independent film that is made, this announcement will put £6.36 million in additional revenue on their budget. As many independent film makers told me yesterday, that means that they are able to de-risk their projects and attract far more private investment to support them to make the films that they want to make. There are films that have already been given the go-ahead because they knew that this announcement was coming and because we have laid the legislation today. And on a personal note, I am very well aware of what Northern Ireland can offer the people of the United Kingdom, because "Derry Girls" is my favourite TV show, bar none.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The film industry was worth £850,000 to Calderdale last year alone, from Marvel to "Happy Valley", and I think it is obvious what the real Hollywood of the UK is—there is only one "Collywood". Does the Secretary of State agree that the film industry must be part of developing our economies outside London, and will she work with me to make sure that we attract more brilliant film and TV projects to Calderdale and beyond?

Lisa Nandy: If my hon. Friend has even come up with a name, I say with sadness to the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) that I think my hon. Friend is currently winning this war. I recognise what he says about Calderdale, not least because I have visited it with him and I have seen the huge benefits that film and TV have brought to his constituency, and the amazing talent that it has been able to showcase. I think about shows like "Happy Valley" and not just the incredible backdrops that in his beautiful constituency, but the amazing women writers that it brings to the fore and great actresses like Sarah Lancashire. It really does show the best of what our country and the north of England have to offer, and my hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for them.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the statement, just as I welcome the cross-party consensus on the brilliance of the Paddington films. Here I would like to declare a family interest: my wife's cousin, Rosie Alison, is the executive producer of those amazing Paddington films. And the House will not have long to wait: "Paddington 3" is coming out on 8 November.

As far as Rochdale is concerned, it is a fantastic location for filming, whether that is our magnificent town hall, our moorlands or Hollingworth lake, where the recent BBC TV series "The Jetty" was filmed. Rochdale Development Agency is currently exploring setting up a Rochdale film office. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this new tax break may well encourage that development?

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and can I convey my thanks to his wife's cousin for her role in British cultural life and perhaps put in a plea for a cameo in "Paddington 4"? *[Interruption.]* I am not sure—that might be an abuse of the Dispatch Box.

The work that is happening in Rochdale is incredibly exciting. It shows that it need not just be our major cities that play a central part in our cultural life. Towns like his and mine and many of the towns and villages represented by Members from across our country, on all of our Benches, have made an incredible contribution to this country's cultural life. We are absolutely determined that they will continue to do so.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome the announcement today and, in particular, the opportunity to capitalise further investment in new facilities. In my constituency, on the banks of the River Wear, there is the opportunity to develop Crown Works Studios, with 19 new sound stages and £450 million of international investment. Will the Secretary of State work with me to think about how we build on today's announcement and use it not just to safeguard existing facilities, but build new facilities in the likes of the north-east?

Lisa Nandy: We have already held discussions with the film industry to talk about what more major studios can do to help to create the supply chain that supports initiatives like the fantastic work in my hon. Friend's constituency. We absolutely commit as a new Government and as a ministerial team to engage fully with him to ensure that we unlock the true potential of the whole country and that we put rocket boosters under not just the existing infrastructure, but the new, exciting projects that are emerging across the country.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): There is cross-party support for Paddington and for Berkshire being the Hollywood of the UK. Last week, other Berkshire MPs and I visited Shinfield Studios, a new state-of-the-art film studio in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang). We heard there how important skills are to promoting further growth across Berkshire, so I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment on skills today. Does she agree that getting the right support in place for skills is vital for ensuring growth for Berkshire's film industry and vital for securing the chances for my constituents in Bracknell to access the great opportunities that this industry has to offer?

Lisa Nandy: Absolutely, and my hon. Friend is right that as well as the amazing investment that we are seeing flowing into the United Kingdom, which is opening up opportunities for good jobs and investment, we also need to make sure that people in every part of our country can benefit from those. I recently met Steven Knight from "Peaky Blinders", who is running an incredible project in Birmingham: he is setting up a film studio and recruiting 20% of the local workforce from the five most deprived postcodes in Birmingham. He is doing that because not only is it the right thing to do, but it makes good business sense, because having a good, local, skilled workforce is a significant attraction for overseas investors when they choose where to invest. We think that we could draw on that model in other parts of the country, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to make sure that Berkshire feels the full benefit of that.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement to support this vital sector. The Cornish creative industry is a vital part of the Cornish economy, and we have a burgeoning independent Cornish language film industry, led by the remarkable work of our own Mark Jenkin, but it needs careful nurturing and support in line with Cornish national minority status. I invite the Secretary of State to come to Cornwall to meet the industry and to understand why our Cornish language film industry is so important.

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the fact that the country is far stronger for the rich cultural inheritance and diversity we have in its different parts. I am a huge proponent of devolution, as are our Government, and one reason why is that we know that we are stronger for our differences across the country and not weakened by them. That is why I said early on, when I took on this job, that we want to see an end to politically driven culture wars. This country is stronger when we come together and celebrate our rich diversity, so I am pleased to say that I accept my hon. Friend's invitation. The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism will meet him and visit his constituency to see the work that is being done.

I was very struck by the phrase "careful nurturing", which my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) used. I think he speaks for many Members on both sides of the House when we talk about the creative industries. The work that we are developing is exciting and vibrant, but it is also very fragile. We need to make sure that we work to carefully nurture it so that we can unlock its true potential, and this Government stand right behind him in helping to do that.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I also welcome this fantastic statement. The creative industries as a whole, but the film industry in particular, punch above their weight internationally. The Secretary of State mentioned Steve McQueen, who famously spoke about the challenges that he faced as a young black man to succeed in the industry, and the support that he had to get from others, including Denzel Washington. What can we do to ensure not just that there is geographical equality, but that there is better equality in the sector as a whole, particularly for deprived and ethnic minority communities and our young people?

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue, because it is something that we on the Government Benches are very exercised about. For far too long, not only have the creative industries been largely concentrated in one part of the country, but over the years it has become increasingly hard for the full range of talented people to see themselves represented in those industries; to break into them and have opportunities. I think, for instance, of our former colleague Glenda Jackson. What route would there be for her today? That is a question that our Government absolutely must be able to answer.

We have already started some of the necessary work. We have been talking to some of the big institutions that have a central role to play, and I have been struck by the great work that is going on, which we could extend. The Royal Shakespeare Company is visiting schools throughout the country, particularly in deprived areas or areas where there is a low cultural offer, to

[Lisa Nandy]

boost confidence and employability, open up young people's options, and help them not just to have dreams—they all have dreams—but to have a plan to get there. That is the intention of our Government, and I would be delighted to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) to achieve it.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): This is great news for my region in the west midlands—bostin news, in fact—and, in particular, for special places such as Ironbridge Gorge, a world heritage site in my constituency. May we have a commitment from the Secretary of State that, across the Department, attractions such as the living museum at Blists Hill will be protected so that filming can take place there for many years to come?

Lisa Nandy: Notwithstanding the rivalry that is going on in the Chamber today, my hon. Friend has a genuine claim to represent one of the country's cultural hubs. We are well aware of the challenges that he and his constituents are facing in attempting to preserve that cultural offer—we are absolutely on the case—and I look forward to working with him to ensure that we protect it for generations to come.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I, too, welcome the statement. Last week I had the pleasure of opening a state-of-the-art media suite at Basingstoke College of Technology, which uses high-tech facilities similar to those employed in "Star Wars". I am afraid I must inform my colleagues that, although it is near Berkshire, the Hollywood of the UK is actually in Hampshire. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me about the importance of investing in such facilities in order to ensure that we can provide the necessary education and skills for those who want to go into the industry in future? Perhaps one of her Ministers could visit the college to meet the students who are learning with the aid of those brand-new high-tech facilities.

Lisa Nandy: I must say to my hon. Friend that he would have made a much more compelling case for his constituency being the Hollywood of the UK had he come here dressed as a stormtrooper. He might consider that next time. As for education and skills, I very much agree with him, but we are acutely aware that in some parts of the country the opportunities for young people to gain work experience, to benefit from mentoring, and to meet the people who do these jobs and therefore believe that they or someone like them could go on to do them as well are very limited. We are looking into what we can do about that.

My hon. Friend was right to raise the subject of acting, but it is not just a question of acting; it is a question of the range of jobs that the creative industries support—jobs that a young person like me would never have dreamt of going into, because we simply would not have known about them. I want to ensure that we break that cycle, and that the next generation know there is no limit to what they can achieve with the help of this Labour Government.

Renters' Rights Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I inform the House that the reasoned amendment in the name of Kemi Badenoch has been selected.

2.03 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I hope the entire House will agree that everyone should live in a decent, safe and affordable home. Everyone should, but not everyone can. That is why, as Housing Secretary, I have put decency at the heart of my plans for housing, and taken steps to ensure that all homes are warm and safe. Nowhere is that more needed than in the private rented sector, which plays an undeniably critical role in our housing system.

I want to be clear from the outset that this Government recognise the important role of landlords, most of whom provide good-quality homes for their tenants. But this is a sector in serious need of reform. Millions of people live in fear of section 21 no-fault evictions that could uproot them from their homes and communities, and they are forced to live in homes that are riddled with damp and mould, too scared to complain in case they end up being evicted and homelessness, and knowing that another potential tenant will be desperate enough to move in.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): During the general election campaign—a stressful time indeed—I was served with a section 21 notice. Thankfully, my family supported me, but such support is not available to everyone. Does my right hon. Friend agree that ending no-fault evictions will give British families the peace and stability that they desperately need?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for giving us the benefit of his personal experience—an experience that is suffered by far too many families. Hundreds of thousands of young families are in temporary accommodation, in many cases because of section 21. In 2019 the ending of this scandalous practice was included in the previous Government's manifesto, but we are still waiting. It has taken us just four months to bring the Bill to the House, because we felt that the need for it is critical. Too many young people are priced out of leaving home, unable to move to the big city where they could start their careers because of sky-high rents, and that too must change—I know that many hon. Members agree.

The Conservatives promised to pass a renters reform Bill in their 2019 manifesto, but, in a desperate attempt to placate their Back Benchers, they caved in to vested interests, leaving tenants at the continued mercy of unfair section 21 eviction notices. They dithered, delayed and made excuse after excuse for their inaction. What has been the human cost of that failure? Since 2019, when the Conservatives first promised action, more than 100,000 households have faced a no-fault eviction, with 26,000 facing eviction last year alone. Too many families facing homelessness; too many families priced

out of a safe and secure home; and too many families stuck in cold, rotting, damp homes—that is the inheritance that we need to fix.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for pursuing renters' rights in this way. Does she agree with the Mayor of London that we should consider setting caps for rent increases?

Angela Rayner: I will set out later in my speech what we are doing to ensure that renters get a fair deal.

This is why we have moved so speedily in getting this Bill to its Second Reading. We will not take another four years, which is why we have done it in less than four months. I must give credit where it is due, because many parts of the Bill build on the good work of my predecessor in the Department. However, let me be clear that this is a fundamentally different Bill; it goes above and beyond the last Government's Bill in several critical ways. This is not just a renters reform Bill; it is a Renters' Rights Bill, a plan to ensure that all private tenants can aspire to a decent, affordable and safe home.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Changing tenants involves significant expense for both tenant and landlord—my interests can be found in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—and the ability of a tenant to end a tenancy after two months presents a significant risk to the landlord, particularly in the student rental market, where re-letting a property within the academic year can present a considerable difficulty. Will the Secretary of State at least consider amendments in Committee to address that issue?

Angela Rayner: I say to the right hon. Gentleman, whose interventions are normally more pithy, that the Bill accommodates the unique circumstances of students. I hope he can see that we are trying to strike a balance. I am sure that his entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests proves that he is one of those landlords I would like to commend for being decent landlords. We want to ensure that the standard that I am sure he gives to his tenants is applied across the whole country.

Many right hon. and hon. Members will have heard heartbreaking stories from constituents who have been forced to leave their homes with little or no justification. This Government will remove the threat of arbitrary evictions by finally bringing to an end no-fault evictions. Unlike the previous Government, who put in place last-minute caveats, we will abolish no-fault evictions for new and existing tenancies at the same time, to give all tenants the same security immediately.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): In Maltby in my constituency, the campaign group Big Power for Little London has been campaigning to end no-fault evictions for years, because the community have suffered as a result of rogue landlords. I am very grateful to the Housing Minister, who is sitting next to the Secretary of State, for agreeing to meet the group later this year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this Bill will be welcomed by the thousands of campaigners across the country who have fought so long for this important change?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I, too, pay tribute to the Housing Minister for the work that he did in opposition and in getting us here today.

In saying that we need to end the cruel practice of no-fault evictions, I recognise the huge pressures on the court system as a whole, which have been caused by years of Tory failure and neglect. To support the changes, we will digitise the county court possession process, working closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to create a modern, efficient service for our courts. We will also take steps to ensure that, wherever possible, disputes will be resolved at an early stage, and the new private rented sector landlord ombudsman service that the Bill introduces will play a vital supportive role.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister to her place. Does she agree that no-fault evictions are bad not only for tenants but for local councils, which across the country spend billions of pounds on temporary accommodation? It causes havoc for children and the education system, as young people have to go from one school to another.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. friend, and I pay tribute to him for the work that he did in local government before coming to this place. He will know about the direct impact of this issue, as will many Members of this House. It is not just about having a home; no-fault evictions have an effect on children, and on a person's life, job, income and everything else that they want to do. That is why it is so important that, whereas the previous Government made no progress in four years, we are now at this stage of the Bill after four months and we intend to continue at speed.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I warmly welcome the Bill. It is right that we should regulate to avoid bad practice in the sector, but does the Secretary of State agree that measures should be available to enable, and indeed incentivise, good practice? Given that the previous Government gave millions of pounds to holiday homeowners in various tax incentives to encourage that sector, surely there must be methods by which the Government can incentivise good practice. Otherwise, the Bill might become counterproductive.

Angela Rayner: I thank the hon. Member for his comment. I hope that he recognises from my opening remarks that good landlords have nothing to fear from this Bill, and we will help them. The new database will help landlords to understand and meet their legal duties, and we will provide clear guidance. I will talk more about how that database will work.

Part 1 of the Bill will introduce a new, modern tenancy system that removes fixed-term tenancies, meaning that tenants can stay in their home until they decide to end the tenancy, and they will only need to give two months' notice. This will end the injustice for tenants who want or need to leave at short notice but cannot, and allow both landlords and tenants the flexibility to respond to changes in their circumstances.

I want to make it clear that our Bill ensures that landlords will still be able to reclaim their properties when they legitimately need to, through clear and robust possession grounds. We have also considered the unique situation of student accommodation and specialist sectors such as stepping-stone accommodation, for which the Bill also includes a possession ground. In most cases, tenants will have four months' notice, so that there is

[Angela Rayner]

time to find a new home, and landlords will have to wait a year from the beginning of a tenancy before they can use the "moving in and selling" grounds for eviction. This honours our commitment to level the playing field decisively for renters, which goes further than the last Government's ambitions. Of course, landlords will still be able to quickly evict tenants who engage in antisocial behaviour and make other people's lives a misery, to protect the strong communities that we want to see flourishing around the country.

The Bill will also empower tenants to challenge unfair rent increases that are designed to drive them out. It will prevent tenants from being bound by rent review clauses, putting them in a stronger position to challenge unreasonable rent hikes at tribunal.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I welcome most of what is in this Bill. A third of my constituents live in the private rented sector. The last time I looked, there were hardly any available properties to rent in my constituency that were within the local housing allowance. The level of rent is astronomical, unaffordable and driving working-class communities out of inner-city areas. Does the Secretary of State not agree that the Bill needs to go further and bring in rent controls, so that housing is available for all people?

Angela Rayner: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point, but I disagree on how to resolve the issue. Rent controls restrict housing supply, which does not help anyone, but our Bill takes practical measures to help renters by empowering tenants to tackle unreasonable rent hikes and prohibiting unfair rental bidding, and we will continue to assess potential action on sky-high rents. Hopefully, we are taking measures that will help his constituents and others across the country.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Could my right hon. Friend clarify whether, under the Bill, landlords and letting agents will be prevented from requiring individuals who do not have all the correct supporting information to pay excessive deposits, which prohibit people from getting secure properties for their families?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend makes a really important point about deposits and paying rent in advance. This Bill will protect tenants from requests for large amounts of rent in advance, but we are in listening mode. We will keep this issue under review during the passage of the Bill, and we will take the necessary action. We think that we have done enough on that, but we are open to interventions, if people feel that they would help.

Unlike in the previous Government's Bill, the tribunal will not be able to increase rent above what was originally proposed by the landlord. In cases of undue hardship, we will give the tribunal the power to defer rent increases by up to two months, thereby finally ending the injustice of economic evictions.

However, that is not all we will do to tackle unfair rent costs. We remain committed to ending rental bidding wars, which all too often price hard-working families out of a home. Landlords and letting agents will be required to publish an asking rent for their property, and will not be allowed to ask for, encourage or accept a higher offer. We are delivering real change for working people.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The challenges faced by tenants in the private sector are very real, but is the right hon. Lady familiar with the law of unintended consequences? What have she and her officials learned from the study of the application of similar rules in Scotland, which have made the plight of renters worse, not better?

Angela Rayner: I do not accept that from the hon. Member. We have had scare stories about this before. As I have said, the majority of landlords are doing the right thing. The Bill is about fairness for landlords and tenants, and I think it strikes the right balance. I am acutely aware of the law of unintended consequences. In fairness, the previous Government were batting around these ideas for years, after promising in their manifesto to tackle the issues, but they let down the people who are in these situations, who deserved better from their Government. This Government will do better than the previous Government.

As I set out at the start of my speech, tackling the blight of poor-quality homes is a priority of mine and of this Government. That is why part 3 of the Bill will apply a decent homes standard to the sector for the first time, requiring privately rented homes to be safe, secure and free from hazards.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Darzi report last month highlighted the severe problem of damp and mould, particularly in the private sector, and the bitter impact of that, notably on children's health. Over a third of my constituents in Chelsea and Fulham live in privately rented homes, and in Fulham the council has had to chase landlords 74 times in the past year alone to address damp and mould. It is tremendous that the Government are tackling this, and I know that my constituents will be delighted. May I ask her to ensure that councils are resourced sufficiently to exercise the stronger investigatory and enforcement powers that the Bill provides?

Angela Rayner: We are extending ring-fenced extra resources to councils, because we recognise the need to do that. I want to pick up on my hon. Friend's comment on children's health. This Bill will also make good on our promise to extend Awaab's law to the private sector. When I met Awaab's family recently, I made a commitment to putting safety first, and it is an honour to pay tribute to Awaab's legacy, and to his parents' resolute campaigning for meaningful change for the many thousands of families living in unfit homes. I hope that no family ever has to endure what that family had to.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): It was an utter tragedy and a source of national shame that the two-year-old toddler Awaab Ishak died of a respiratory disease caused by extensive mould in his family's flat. I am delighted that this protection will be offered in the private rented sector. Will my right hon. Friend make sure that the private rented sector upholds its obligations to all its tenants in future?

Angela Rayner: Absolutely; I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. That has been at the forefront of our minds, and not just in our work on this Bill. Hon. Members will recall that it is only a few weeks since we had the report on phase 2 of the Grenfell inquiry, so when we talk about providing housing, it is at the forefront of my mind that houses have to be safe for people. It is absolutely scandalous that here in Britain at the moment we cannot guarantee that, and I will do everything I can as Secretary of State to fix that problem.

Talking about families more widely, we will also end the abhorrent practice of denying a family a home purely because they receive benefits or have children, by making it illegal for landlords and letting agents to discriminate against tenants on that basis. This Bill is about social justice and fairness for all.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend on behalf of the many families in Walthamstow who have been in exactly that position. One of the things that drives my constituents mad is having to move repeatedly because of rent increases that they cannot afford, because it means that their good credit rating stops and starts, which makes it harder for them to get on the housing ladder. What more can we do to tackle this discrimination against tenants and give them a chance of owning a home in the future, by tackling this basic issue of credit ratings, perhaps with a good credit passport?

Angela Rayner: This is a wider issue to do with the poverty trap that so many people face this country. I am also proud to plug the employment Bill that will be coming forward this week. It is another incredibly important part of this Government's agenda; the Prime Minister mentioned it earlier today. We want to make sure that the working people of this country feel better off, and are able to get on and do the things in life that we should expect anyone to be able to do—things that we were able to do as a result of the toils of the generations before us.

I want to talk database. Part 2 of the Bill will introduce a new online private rented sector database, to the benefit of landlords and tenants alike. Landlords will need to provide key information about the properties they let out, including around property standards and compliance with the law, helping tenants to understand more about the property and the landlord who they are looking to rent from.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Energy efficiency is really important in the rented housing sector, so does the Secretary of State agree that it is important that the Bill ensures that landlords upgrade their rented properties to an energy performance certificate grade C or above by 2028?

Angela Rayner: I agree that we should be moving towards doing everything we possibly can to be efficient, and there will be consultations on that issue. One of the things that shocked me in bringing this Bill forward was that the standards are so low for some; we need to really ramp them up. The bottom line for me in bringing this Bill forward is that people should have safe, secure homes that are free from hazards. We can then build on that. We are doing much more as a Government on our ambitions to do that, working with landlords.

The database, alongside greater guidance and support from the Government, will also help landlords to understand and meet their legal duties. Good landlords should be supported and helped. In addition, the database will provide local authorities with the information that they need in their enforcement activities to drive out rogue landlords. In this Bill, I have also taken steps to support local government in its crucial role in keeping tenants safe and rooting out bad actors from the sector. That is why, as well as setting up the database, the Bill will give local authorities stronger powers to root out and punish the small number of landlords who deliberately flout the law, and will increase the maximum civil penalties, so that we punish offenders and further support local authorities.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Where I previously lived, there was a huge number of illegal houses in multiple occupation. Those residents are potentially not protected by this legislation. In giving local authorities more enforcement powers against rogue landlords, how exactly will we define a rogue landlord, and protect people who will potentially be off the radar?

Angela Rayner: There are separate rules for HMOs, but we are also extending ringfenced civil penalties to support councils more, because we need to make sure that there is enforcement. A database will be important when we are looking at what we face, and also in making sure that we can take action. The problem is not every landlord. Most landlords act in a reasonable way, but we need to make sure that action is taken against those who do not.

We recognise the important role that tenants play in holding their landlords to account, and we want to incentivise them to do so. That is why we have significantly strengthened rent repayment orders. To empower tenants to take direct action against unscrupulous landlords, the Bill will add new rent payment order offences, double the maximum penalty for offences, and ensure that offenders will more often pay the maximum penalty. When landlords break the rules, tenants must have recourse to action.

Finally, I want to mention pets. It is a shame the Speaker is not here, because this was my bit for him! Our reforms are aimed squarely at improving the lives of people and families, but I trust that right hon. and hon. Members will agree that pets are not just animals but family. That is why this Bill will make it easier for tenants to request the ability to have a pet in their home. It will also allow landlords to require insurance covering pet damage, so that everyone is covered and no one is left unfairly out of pocket.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is important that this legislation balances the rights of both tenants and landlords. We all know the benefits of pet ownership to our physical and mental health, and indeed to the animals. I very much welcome the fact that clauses 10 and 11 will allow pet ownership in tenancies, but can the Secretary of State reassure the House that those clauses will allow responsible pet owners to ask to keep pets in their property while ensuring that landlords are insured in case of property damage caused inadvertently, or perhaps advertently, by pets?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a balance to be struck. We are ensuring that landlords are protected with insurance. It is about reasonableness—so long as it is not an antisocial parrot that speaks all night, I am sure everyone will agree that this is a good thing.

The Bill will finally address the insecurity and injustice that far too many renters experience. We value the contribution made by responsible landlords who provide quality homes to their tenants, but there is no place for unscrupulous landlords who tarnish the reputation of the entire sector by seeking to exploit or discriminate against tenants.

This Government were elected with a mandate to deliver change, and this Bill is the first of many with which we will honour our promise to the people. After the last Government failed to legislate for renters' rights in five years, we have introduced this Bill within our first 100 days in office. This will change the lives of millions of people, so for them, and for future generations, I commend this Bill to the House.

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

2.31 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): It is a privilege to open for the Opposition on Second Reading of the Renters' Rights Bill in this momentous week. As the Secretary of State mentioned, Labour reaches 100 days in office this week, for which it is to be congratulated, as not everyone gets to 100 days—Sue Gray didn't. [Hon. Members: "Liz Truss didn't!"] Neither did Sue Gray. The point is that not everyone gets to 100 days, so we congratulate the Government. So far, the only real actions we have seen are the noisy infighting and chaos that resulted in the hurried reset we saw over the weekend—oh dear. This Renters' Rights Bill will only add to the chaos.

The first time the Secretary of State and I faced each other across the Dispatch Box, I warned her that she is being stitched up by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. I also told her that we are here to help, and we are, especially as it has been a particularly rough time to be a woman in the Labour party. It is not just the sacking of Sue Gray—she is soon to be awarded what Winston Churchill called a "disapeerage"—as the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) has taken the brave decision to leave the Labour party. I have followed the hon. Lady's career in this place closely and, although we do not agree on everything, she is very brave.

Dawn Butler: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is Second Reading of the Renters' Rights Bill, and the shadow Secretary of State is all over the place.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure the shadow Secretary of State will come back to that subject.

Mrs Badenoch: I am still on that subject, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I was saying, the hon. Member for Canterbury took the brave decision to leave the Labour party. I have followed her career in this place closely and, although we do not agree on everything, she is very brave. Perhaps the Secretary of State will feel nervous as she introduces the Bill, because I know that her Department is already breaking promises of its own. It promised a new national planning policy framework within 100 days, yet there is no new framework. There is just a consultation, as I predicted during our last debate on this subject.

To be fair, the Department has finally produced this Renters' Rights Bill, after copying and pasting quite a lot of our Bill, but it is still not ready. The truth is that it cannot fix the rental market by tying it in knots with further interventions and directives. The simple truth is that this Bill will not work and the proposals will fail.

We know the Bill will fail because this approach has been tried in Scotland by those great experts in failure, the Scottish National party. Research by Indigo House, the housing expert, has found that none of the Scottish legislation since 2017 has protected the majority of private residential tenants against excessive rent increases or high advertised market rents. It has discovered that tenants have found it more difficult to find a home, and that there is a particularly negative impact on those in greatest need, including homeless households and those with less economic power, such as those claiming welfare benefits.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech on an important subject. Is she familiar with this week's report from Scotland's Housing Network revealing that 16% of landlords are reducing their supply, and fully 12% are considering leaving the sector over precisely this sort of attempt to over-regulate what would otherwise be a free market?

Mrs Badenoch: I have not seen that specific report, but I have seen others that indicate that this is happening. We have to be careful. I appreciate that the Government want to make renting more secure and affordable, and we want to do that too, but this Bill will have the opposite effect, as we have seen in Scotland. As this Government will find out over the course of this Parliament, they cannot buck the market.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State recall why the previous Government failed to introduce such measures, as they intended?

Mrs Badenoch: Yes, I do recall. The reason why our Bill did not get through is that we recognised its flaws. That is what I mean when I say that I worry about the Secretary of State, because the bright young things in Downing Street who have sent her out with this Bill do not care if it fails. They will take the credit today, but she will get the blame tomorrow, and tenants will get bad regulation, shortages and higher prices, as we have seen in Scotland. Those higher prices will be paid by tenants, especially young people and the less well off.

Shaun Davies: Is it not the case that, as the country will see from the right hon. Lady's speech, tenants in the private rented sector will fear the return of the Conservative party, in the same way as mums who rely on maternity pay?

Mrs Badenoch: That question is nonsense. My point is that tenants will not be able to find properties to rent in the first place. From that intervention, it seems that Labour still does not understand these concepts.

We worry that the higher prices will be paid by tenants, especially young people and the less well off. Demand is rising in England, but availability is not keeping up. Forty-seven per cent. of landlords have either attempted to sell a property in 2023 or are thinking of doing so, with the biggest reason being to their fear of new laws.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Penrith and Solway contains the Lake District national park and other tourist areas. Does the right hon. Lady recognise that the previous Government's failure to introduce their promised reforms to section 21 has led to many private landlords moving from the private rented sector into the holiday let market? Her reasoned amendment says the Bill will

"reduce the supply of housing"—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Badenoch: Private landlords react to legislation, which is why we say that such legislation will reduce housing in the private rented sector. Fifty-six per cent. of landlords cited our Renters (Reform) Bill as a factor in their decision to sell. We already recognise those flaws, and such a reduction in supply is bad for both tenants and landlords. We are losing homes in the private rented sector.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): Does the right hon. Lady recognise that the reduction in supply over the past few years is primarily down to the increase in interest rates, which has driven landlords out of the sector? A sector that is fundamentally broken requires the Government to take action to provide security for those who need a home for themselves and their children.

Mrs Badenoch: Of course we want people to have security in homes, but to do that we need to increase supply. We did what we could when we were in government, and we will help this Government to deliver. The fact of the matter is that this legislation is not going to help. We would love it if it did—we tried to make it work and we could not—but it would have a negative effect.

Landlords provide a vital service. The private rented sector is essential for those who cannot yet afford a mortgage, for young people and for those who need to move for work. Landlords selling and giving up homes for rent for mortgages do not help many of the people who need to rent. The overwhelming majority of landlords are responsible—I am glad the Secretary of State acknowledged that—and law abiding, and they see their property as a sustainable long-term investment.

The Government claim the Bill will reform the rental market. We do not believe it will—it will break it. Respect for property rights is not just an abstract principle. It underpins confidence in our economy and legal system. If the Government do not protect property rights, investment is damaged. If investment is damaged, growth is hit. It is painfully clear to anyone who understands markets that the Bill will act as a powerful disincentive for anyone to rent out their property. Most tenants do not have friends and family to rent from and, unlike Members of the Labour party, they do not have millionaire donors to put them up, so they will suffer most when supply goes down and rents go up.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): If it was so patently obvious and it was such a fundamental principle of property rights, why did everyone on the Conservative Benches, including the right hon. Lady, stand on a manifesto committed to reform? Is it not the truth that rather than thinking such legislation would not work, the previous Government simply failed to deliver it, in common with many other things?

Mrs Badenoch: There is a big difference between having a headline in a manifesto and seeing the detail, as many Members on the Government Benches will soon find out. Earlier on, their Prime Minister could not answer the question about whether the Government will increase taxes. Campaigning is easy, but governing is hard.

Shaun Davies: How is your campaign going?

Mrs Badenoch: We will find out soon enough.

Perhaps Members on the Government Benches are oblivious to these costs and dynamic effects—listening to their interventions, it appears so. I note that no impact assessment for the Bill is available, an omission that has rightly drawn criticism from the Regulatory Policy Committee. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether an impact assessment has been undertaken? If it exists, where is it? If it does not exist, why did the Government not ask for one? I hope this is not how the Labour Government mean to go on.

When I was in government, I provided impact assessments on all sorts of complex legislation. I know that is difficult and can create arguments, but I also know there is a lot more badly thought out and costly regulation where this came from, and we on the Opposition Benches are worried. I know Members on the Government Benches will want to point to the last Government's Renters (Reform) Bill—I have heard their interventions—but the fact is, that Bill was flawed. I am quite happy to say that, but at least it recognised the practical effect of its provisions and would not have come into full effect until the courts were ready.

The then Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee warned in 2023 that the equivalent provisions in the Renters (Reform) Bill created

"a real risk that the current systems will be overwhelmed, and there will be a logjam with lengthy delays."

This Government are pressing ahead with measures that will cause gridlock in our justice system, and pit landlords and tenants against each other in protracted litigation.

Ben Coleman: It is absolutely extraordinary to hear strong opposition to every part of the Bill from the right hon. Lady, or am I mistaken? Is she opposed to the parts of the Bill that will protect children from getting breathing problems and ending up being hospitalised? Is she against the protections the Bill introduces so that people can finally live in decent accommodation? If she does not oppose those things, why is she so relentlessly negative and—forgive me, as a new Member—so relentlessly patronising?

Mrs Badenoch: I do not mean to be patronising, but it is quite difficult when there are very clear issues that have a precedent in Scotland. The question is not why I

[Mrs Badenoch]

am being patronising; the question is why the Government are ignoring what has happened when these proposals have been tried in another part of the UK. That is a serious problem. All of us here want the best for children and to see tenants do well. It is very wrong of the hon. Gentleman to ascribe negative motivations when we are pointing out problems with legislation. We on the Opposition Benches are doing our job. We do not think the Bill will work.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): On that point, will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Badenoch: I would like to make some progress.

The Government are pressing ahead with measures that will cause gridlock in the justice system, which will create even more problems for tenants. The people the Government are trying to help will not be able to get a home in the first place—none of us want to see that. We have to do better.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): On that point, will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Badenoch: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin).

Mike Martin: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. Some 25% of Conservative MPs are landlords. Does that have any bearing on the Conservative party's position on the Bill?

Mrs Badenoch: We need to focus on the contents of the Bill. If anyone has an issue with landlords in this House, it is Labour Members—I notice the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) ran away before the discussion about the Bill started. They should look at themselves, and the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells had better check his fellow Members before asking that sort of question.

As I was saying, when the problems of protracted litigation in the courts are combined with the new, extended and highly convoluted notice requirements for recovering a property where the tenant has not paid the rent, a landlord whose tenant is in arrears will face many months of uncertainty and cost. Let me summarise in two words why the Bill will fail: unintended consequences. That is what we get when we start with policy rather than first principles.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: Does the right hon. Lady think that there is already gridlock in the county courts? As of today, a landlord who secures a possession order will wait 12 weeks to get a bailiff's warrant. Our courts are gridlocked right now.

Mrs Badenoch: That is an excellent point—we should not make the problem worse.

We should start with first principles not policy, but there are no first principles here that will help the Bill get through. We want to help the Bill become legislation to deliver for tenants and landlords. However, as I have heard from the comments that have been made, this seems to be about the left being seen to be tough on landlords and passing legislation with the right sounding title, rather than delivering real improvement to people's lives.

I heard the Secretary of State teasing my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), but it is hypocritical to criticise those of us in the House who declare our interests—we on the Conservative Benches do that well—when a Labour MP was disgraced in the press for letting out unsanitary homes with mould. The Government should look at why they have Members who are behaving that way.

We want a housing market that works for everyone—landlords, tenants and those who want to own their home. By attacking those who rent out homes, they will damage investment in new homes. They will push landlords out of the market and drive up rents. That is bad for everyone. By piling on excessive regulation, they will push good landlords out and empower those bad landlords who simply ignore the rules. We need to look at enforcement of the rules we already have.

We all agree that renters need a better deal, but this Bill is not going to work. It is not what renters need—we found that out and we want to help deliver a good Bill. If the Government want to help renters, they should drive up housing supply: so far, no sign of that. If the Government want to help renters, they need to reduce immigration: so far, no sign of that. Some 80% of recent migrants have moved into the private rental sector, creating a demand the sector cannot cope with. If the Government want to help renters, they need to enforce existing rules against the bad landlords that do not look after their tenants, rather than create new rules that will make the problem worse.

This legislation is typical of Labour in government. We have tabled a reasoned amendment because the Bill fails to fix the major issues and adds yet more rules and regulations to keep the bureaucrats busy, rather than finding solutions to help those tenants who desperately need them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

2.49 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): May I start by thanking the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), for meeting me over recess to discuss the Bill. I know that he will be closing the debate later today.

I am afraid that one consequence of the Government's prioritisation of this Bill is that, because my Committee has no members, I cannot yet speak as its Chair, but I very much look forward to doing so, and I thank the House for electing me to this important role.

The Bill is of great importance to many people in my Vauxhall and Camberwell Green constituency and to millions of renters across the country. Too often they feel the sharp end of a market that is not working for them. They can suffer inflation-busting rent rises under the threat of eviction. They can end up waiting far too long for repairs to serious problems. Data from Shelter highlights the fact that almost one in three households in my constituency lives in the private rented sector. In

2001, the number of households in private rented accommodation was 8,129. By 2021, that figure had increased to more than 13,178—a staggering 62% increase in just 20 years.

We have spoken about affordability and rent increases. This issue is pushing so many people into debt and putting them at risk of homelessness. According to Shelter, the average monthly rent in August 2024 in England was £1,327, but the figure for Lambeth is almost twice the national average at over £2,210. We all know that wages are not rising in line with this increase. The reality facing many private renters today is that they can be evicted with only two months' notice, often needing to find thousands of pounds to cover moving costs and deposits on a new property.

We have touched on the fact that most private landlords are good. The majority of them are providing a good service, and they play an important role in our housing ecosystem. The majority of them take their responsibilities seriously, but for far too long a minority of rogue landlords have been able to exploit loopholes in legislation to treat tenants in a frankly unacceptable way. The Bill must put an end to that, and provide tenants with the certainty and security they deserve.

In 2019, when I first stood for election, the Conservative manifesto promised to end no-fault evictions, yet half a decade later, renters are still desperately waiting for a fair deal and they cannot afford to wait any longer. I think about the emails that I have received since the start of the cost of living crisis, with constituents facing rent rises of between 20% and 30%. One constituent even emailed me to say that their rent had doubled in just one year. They said:

> "I am a private renter. I'm particularly concerned about unfair rent increases. I am 47 and have lived in the same area for most of my time in London, but despite the huge amount of properties that have been built in the area, none is affordable to buy and few are affordable to rent."

He goes on to say:

> "I rent privately and my rent has been increasing faster than my salary. At this point in my life, things should feel more secure. If you want to truly end no-fault evictions, you need to address extortionate rent increases which are as good as an eviction for many."

I know that many colleagues across this House have received similar emails, which highlights why this Bill is so badly needed.

It is critical that the Government act urgently on this matter, so I welcome the speed with which they have delivered this Bill to the House. It shows how seriously they take the private rented sector. Although this Bill is similar to the Renters (Reform) Bill, which was introduced under the previous Government, there are a couple of important differences that further improve the offer to private renters.

The raising of maximum fines in multiple areas, such as discrimination against those with children or those who are on benefits, is a step in the right direction, although the Renters' Reform Coalition has called for an even larger fine to act as a proper deterrent. I hope the Secretary of State will take that on board.

The introduction of clause 55 outlawing rental bidding is also important. Since the general election in July, I have been contacted by tenants who are facing bidding wars. A person is told that they are going to view a rental property, and then, when they turn up, they are told that 45 other people will be viewing it with them and that the property will go to the highest bidder. That is just unacceptable.

I also welcome the extension to the protected period for no-fault eviction grounds and the required notice periods where these grounds are used.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the unintended consequences of section 21 is that people often do not report damp and mould or the repairs that they need for fear of eviction, because they will be pushed into finding a new tenancy, which they simply cannot afford?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. That is really important. I give credit to the previous Government for Awaab's law, which tackles the problems of damp and mould in the social housing sector, but it is vital that we have the same protections for private tenants who, frankly, live in squalor. We have seen emails from people talking about black mould. That is not acceptable. Housing benefit is being paid for those properties. We need to make sure that tenants are renting the right properties.

The Bill will increase security for tenants, and help deal with those big deposits that they have to save for. However, as some colleagues have highlighted, the success of the measures in this Bill will come down to enforcement. In its report on the previous Government's Renters (Reform) Bill, the predecessor Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee found that measures making it easier for tenants to challenge rent rises in a first-tier tribunal could increase the workload of our justice system. We all know that our justice system is struggling under the backlog, and that backlogs are far too common. It is critical that the Government's good intentions do not result in a system that tenants simply cannot access because of those lengthy backlogs. We cannot send tenants to tribunals if it ends with them being further frustrated by the judicial system. Will the Minister please tell me what work is under way to ensure that the tribunals are ready for this change in the law and can cope with the increase in cases?

The previous Committee also warned that levels of implementation could vary massively between different councils. The large number of landlords in this country can make enforcement in the sector quite challenging, particularly when local authority finances are so stretched. Although the introduction of the private rented sector database will help, we could see unscrupulous landlords fall through the cracks if there is not stringent enforcement by councils. The Bill will place new regulatory powers and enforcement responsibilities on local authorities.

The Minister is well aware that our councils are facing significant funding pressures. The Local Government Association reports that due to inflation, wage pressures, and cost and demand pressures, English councils face a £2.3 billion funding gap in 2025-26. What steps is the Minister taking to work with councils to ensure that there is sufficient enforcement of this legislation and that councils are properly resourced to carry out their new responsibilities effectively?

Finally, will the Minister please confirm whether the housing ombudsman will run the new private rented sector ombudsman, so that tenants can access justice in disputes? When I met the housing ombudsman, he mentioned that a number of cases that were brought

[Florence Eshalomi]

before him were allowed when an appeal was made, so there is already failure at a local level. We also have to consider the fact that so many private renters are afraid to challenge their landlord because of the fear of eviction. We need a strong ombudsman to help them get the justice that they deserve.

I look forward to working with the Minister as this Bill progresses through Parliament. I hope that he will address the points I have made and ensure that we have a sector that works with our tenants, recognising how much they pay, and provides them with security, so that they no longer have to fear being evicted through no fault of their own. Thank you.

2.59 pm

Mr Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I have congratulated the Secretary of State on her position, but I also congratulate her colleague, the Minister for Housing and Planning, on his. He follows a long line of Ministers—the first, arguably, being Christopher Addison, the great Liberal and Labour Minister, who delivered not only the great Housing and Town Planning Act 1919, but more than half a million council houses. I am sure that the Minister will be delivering just as many over the next two or three years.

As the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich, the Minister also follows former Housing Minister Nick Raynsford, with whom I had the pleasure of working. I was going to say that something in the water of Greenwich and Woolwich produces great Housing Ministers, but unfortunately, following the legacy of the last Government, there is far too much in the water—and we really do not want to dwell on that. Seriously, the Minister is taking on an important portfolio, as is the Secretary of State, of course. Housing and planning have the power to touch every single person in the country and make up one of the most important roles in Government.

My own experience is limited to being a tenant and landlord—only ever a landlord of registered social housing; I am happy to declare that interest today. The Government face huge challenges, but we must not shrink from the overall objective of ending homelessness, which was enshrined in both the Liberal Democrat and Labour manifestos. The Government will have the full support of my colleagues on the Liberal Democrat Benches of the measures that they bring forward to that end. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) has made clear and demonstrated, when opposition is needed it will be constructive and positive.

In that spirit, I am pleased to generally welcome the Bill, which will give tenants the security that all other residents already have and that tenants surely deserve, and put right the scandalous delay in bringing an end to no-fault evictions. We must encourage the majority of landlords out there, who are responsible, as are the majority of tenants. When those interests go together, we can deliver the thousands of private rented homes that we need in this country—we cannot do without them. It is right also to dwell on elements of the Bill that can support the supply of private rented housing.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I refer colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I welcome this Bill, and want to reflect on my constituency. The national average proportion of renters in the private sector is 19%; in Torbay, the figure is 26%. That is mostly driven by the fact that we are the 10th worst authority in the country when it comes to the amount of social housing, at 8%, compared with a national average of 17%. Once upon a time, 35% of people in our nation had social rented accommodation. Does my hon. Friend agree that more should be done about the significant issue of absentee landlords?

Mr Amos: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. We need a lot more council and social rented homes. I will return to that issue.

In the spirit of ensuring that a plentiful supply of rented housing comes forward, we urge the Government to retain the option for landlords and renters to agree between them fixed-term tenancies of three years, rather than periodic tenancies being the only product on the shelf, so to speak. We are worried that investors will be unlikely to invest ahead if they cannot see security of tenure coming from their investments. There could just be an increase in short-term holiday lets as a result, because there would be no difference between tenures.

If both renters and landlords are to have any faith in the courts when it comes to resolving disputes over evictions, the courts must have the investment to do the job. Put simply, and as was said earlier, there are not enough judges or bailiffs and the system simply will not work until there are. In the same way, local authorities must be funded properly to take on the new responsibilities in the Bill. In Taunton and Wellington, the local Somerset council has more than 10,000 people on the council housing waiting list and was brought the brink of bankruptcy by the Conservative Government's cuts to proposed funding for social care—a crisis across the country that the outgoing Conservative leader of Somerset called a "ticking timebomb", which was handed to the new administration.

In those circumstances, it is not surprising that Somerset and local authorities across the country are unable to enforce the standards of housing that we would want. The House of Commons Library found

"evidence of low and inconsistent levels of enforcement"

when it comes to addressing poor property standards. No amount of words in the Bill will make up for the need for resources; I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State mention funding for local authorities to discharge those duties. That is vital. The Bill also rightly makes separate provision for student housing, but it does not extend to one or more student renters renting together. If that does not happen, there could be a significant withdrawal of student housing from the market. We would be concerned to see that.

I turn to other provisions in the Bill. We welcome the protections for renters on benefits, who of course should not be discriminated against. We will also be seeking an assurance that the 12-month prohibition on re-letting following an eviction will also apply to re-letting furnished holiday lets, such as on Airbnb. We are pleased to see that, following the work of my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) and of the Minister of Housing and Planning, who both worked on the Bill in the previous Session, no new, punitive definition of antisocial behaviour is being introduced. We thoroughly welcome that element of the Renters' Rights Bill.

To support our serving military personnel and help address the recruitment challenge in these uncertain times, I also support the bid of my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire, also in the last Session, to ensure that MOD housing is also subject to the decent homes standard proposed in the Bill. It is curious that the Government often like to legislate for others; I want reassurance that they will legislate for their own MOD housing at the same time. Service personnel deserve decent homes just as much as anyone else. That decent homes standard surely must extend to better insulation and energy efficiency—to EPC level C, as was mentioned earlier.

I ask the Minister to meet the concerns of my constituents in Taunton and Wellington and across the country by agreeing guidance with landlords and the sector on what would constitute reasonable grounds for refusing permission to have a pet—a subject close to the heart of the Secretary of State, I know—and ensure that tenants are allowed to keep their pet once that has been agreed.

Above all, the Bill is about bringing an end to the shameful delays of successive Conservative Governments when it comes to protecting renters from unfair evictions. I heard the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) say that she wanted to help the Bill—but she has also tabled an amendment to kill it. If that is helping, I would hate to see her definition of attacking something.

The change really cannot come soon enough. One of my constituents, Mike Godleman, came to me some time ago. He had been served with a section 21 eviction notice while recovering from major surgery. He had loved his home of over nine years. A couple of months ago, his councillor and I visited him to try to help him. We met a kind, gentle and creative man who taught sign language, loved dance and was a talented teacher and photographer. His charming sons Perez and Zakkai meant the absolute world to him, and he had become more of a friend to us than a constituent. His sons were a complete credit to him when we met them. Sadly, some 10 days ago Mike was found in his flat. He had passed away as a result of a pulmonary embolism—clearly not caused by his eviction notice, but surely people in Mike's position should not have to suffer being made homeless as a result of a notice that inherently, and on the face of it, shows that there was no fault on his part.

Conservative Administrations since 1988 have ushered in a system in which the tenure that has grown most is the one that gives the least assurance to tenants; assured shorthold tenancies are now the most common form of tenancy. Their approach seemed designed to maximise disadvantage to renters—40% of renters now say that, as a result, their last home move was forced on them, adding turmoil to insecurity of tenure. In fact by repeatedly announcing that they would legislate but then failing to deliver on that legislation, the last Government prompted a massive 30% growth in Airbnb short-term lets, taking away more security of tenure from other tenants.

It is hardly surprising that Ministry of Justice reports show that standard procedure claims for possession and eviction massively increased under the last Conservative Government, while accelerated procedure claims doubled from 4,000 to 8,000. The Conservatives' inaction was a shocking abandonment of thousands of tenants to increasing eviction rates, as landlords sought to pre-empt the often promised, but never delivered, end to no-fault evictions.

Markus Campbell-Savours: Does the hon. Member agree that, as I think the shadow Minister alluded to in her speech, there have been attempts to use no-fault eviction as a way to deal with people who are at fault, and that the failure of that system has now become an excuse for not reforming this injustice?

Mr Amos: I agree with the hon. Member. We must make sure that the courts are properly resourced so that the grounds that are in the Bill to provide for eviction, where it is justified, can work effectively. That is surely the way forward, rather than some back-door approach in which no-fault evictions are used for a multitude of reasons, many of them not justified.

While it is right to legislate to end no-fault evictions—measures that Liberal MPs such as the former Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, Simon Hughes, vehemently opposed from these Benches back in 1988—we surely cannot think that the private sector alone is the answer to solving our nation's housing crisis. The Government must be more ambitious, immediately banning no-fault evictions, building 150,000 council and social rent homes per year, a comprehensive programme to insulate all housing, a planning use class to control second homes and allowing councils to halt the right to buy, so that when we build council houses we are not trying to fill the bath with the plug taken out.

Those are the priorities that the Liberal Democrats will be campaigning for and working to see on the face of this Bill. I urge the Minister and the Government to take on as many of our suggestions as they possibly can.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. The House will be aware that more than 50 Members want to speak in today's debate. I am imposing an immediate time limit of four minutes on Back-Bench speeches and six minutes on maiden speeches.

3.12 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I stand to support the Second Reading of this Bill, particularly the abolition of section 21 no-fault evictions. It falls to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to introduce a Bill that will fulfil the hopes of the former Member for Surrey Heath to abolish section 21 evictions, which are the sole cause of crisis for homeless families right across our country.

We currently have 117,450 families in temporary accommodation, including 151,630 children and—disgracefully—more than 20,000 babies under the age of one. That comes at a cost to the British taxpayer of £1.6 billion a year—all of it public money badly spent; all of it undermining the finances of local authorities of all sizes and in every part of this country.

What bothers me most, however, is the families who present to me in my Mitcham and Morden constituency who are going through a section 21 eviction and know that temporary accommodation is on its way. Merton is a small south-west London borough and does not face

[Dame Siobhain McDonagh]

the pressure that many others do, but those families know that they are going to be placed tens of miles away, if not hundreds of miles away, from their families and support networks.

Nesil Caliskan: On the point about temporary accommodation, does my hon. Friend agree that there is something perverse in this broken market when a family is faced with an eviction notice and a local authority has to rehouse them again in the private sector, costing the taxpayer more money?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Local authorities have to rehouse those families in identical accommodation, only in worse repair, because there are not the same legal provisions for temporary accommodation.

Children lose their places at school and their educational attainment falls, parents lose their employment, and babies die. We know through the work of Dr Laura Neilson, who works with me on the all-party parliamentary group for households in temporary accommodation, that between 2019 and 2023, 55 babies in temporary accommodation—in the 21st century, in the fifth biggest economy in the world—died for the want of a cot. Members right across the House know this, because we see the families and we talk to them, but most of our friends and neighbours would be shocked to the core that these things happen in our country.

I will give two examples from my last surgery. Mrs S is a nurse at St Helier hospital and Mr S works morning shifts at a local supermarket. They have three children, one of whom is non-verbal and has autism. Following a section 21 eviction from their home, they were placed 31 miles away from Merton, in Windsor—but only after they had spent eight hours in the reception of the civic centre and got their accommodation so late that when they turned up at Windsor, the estate agent was closed and they had nowhere to go. Mr S had to pay £300 for them to be in a hotel that night. Next day, when they turned up at the house, there were no beds, because nobody from the local authority—nobody from any local authority—checks the accommodation before the families move in. I say to hon. Members, "Don't believe your local authority if they tell you they do, because they simply can't do it."

My second example is just in case anybody thinks this issue only affects families. Mr H has dementia. When he was evicted, he was placed 8 miles away, in Croydon. That is not far, but it caused South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust to remove him from its list and he lost the support he got from the geriatrician. We are doing these things to the most vulnerable people. That keeps me awake at night, and I think it should keep all of us awake at night.

3.17 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I want to open my remarks by recognising that in this important debate we all want to ensure that families who rent have good access to quality homes and housing. That is the baseline that we must all recognise and acknowledge, with landlords in the private and social sector doing the right thing when it comes to their responsibilities, their obligations and their duties to their tenants.

This House needs to be honest with itself and recognise that during these debates in recent years, not just today's debate, we have seen landlords vilified. There is no question but that there are some terrible and shocking examples—as was mentioned earlier, there are examples in this very House as well—and it is right that they are exposed. It is right that there are sanctions for those awful landlords and it is important that, throughout the passage of this Bill and the discussions in this House, we all act responsibly to set the right bar and the right standards. That is crucial.

Although we have those shocking examples, we should not forget that the overwhelming majority of landlords work hard to invest in their properties and do the right thing by their tenants. That is fundamental to providing housing supply in the market—there has been back-and-forth between those on the two Front Benches already around what will happen to housing supply, but we should bear that in mind through the type of regulation and legislation that this Government are intent on passing. We should not focus disproportionately on the minority who need to raise their bar and be held to account; as my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) has said, we must work through the unintended consequences of this legislation.

I want to pose some questions to those on the Government Front Bench. First, from the landlords' perspective, may we have some transparency on the costs and impacts? The Government will not have the details yet as this is a Second Reading debate, but we should recognise that during the passage of this legislation landlords will almost inevitably be passing on the costs arising from certain clauses through higher rents.

Coming back to unintended consequences, there are also clauses on controlling rent increases and initial rent reviews for tenants and they could be set higher; the Government should be thinking about this. The costs of selective licensing schemes already introduced by local authorities have been passed on to new tenants through tenancy agreements, so we need to look at what works and what does not work. Moreover, landlords are leaving the market as a result of what they know from the draft legislation about taxation and regulation, and we need to look at what that means for private sector supply and what will happen to the market costs of rent.

My next questions, in the time I have left, are on housing supply. I do believe that we need more social housing. I represent a constituency with four local authorities, and our house building has been phenomenal over the last decade. That has predominantly been in the private sector but also in the social housing sector. My local authorities play a very significant role in planning, housing and development, and we all recognise the heavy the work that takes place in those areas, but I would like to know how the Government are going to fund their enforcement policies for local authorities, and how the capability will be put in place and how the prioritisation will come together.

I know there will be further scrutiny and questions during the passage of this Bill, and I will be pressing those to the Government Front Bench.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Alex Baker to make her maiden speech.

3.21 pm

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. For more than 100 years, since the dawn of universal suffrage, the people of Aldershot and Farnborough have sent Conservative MPs to speak for us in this place, so it is with great pride and even greater humility that I rise to give my maiden speech as the first woman and the first Labour Member of Parliament ever elected by my community. I congratulate everyone on both sides of the House who have made their maiden speeches before me.

Let me begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Leo Docherty, for the seven years of service he gave to my constituency. Mr Docherty served our country in the Scots Guards, as a Member of Parliament and as a Minister of the Crown, and we wish him well for the future. Leo will be remembered as a champion for our armed forces, and I have already learned in my first few weeks as an MP to follow the maxim of the Parachute Regiment, be "ready for anything", including the moment when I was told just a few weeks ago that a tornado—yes, an actual tornado—was landing in my constituency.

Whatever strong winds are yet to come, I am truly honoured to represent my home and the place where I am raising my family. Today I repeat the pledge I made to my constituents on the night I was elected: "No matter how you voted, or whether you voted for me or for anyone at all in the general election, I will dedicate myself to serving you, our neighbours and every corner of our community, in Aldershot, Farnborough, Blackwater, Hawley and Yateley."

My politics has been shaped by people and place: my volunteering; community groups; residents' associations; my church; and my career working with business and communities, from the co-operative movement to the regeneration of Battersea power station, where I helped build not just the bricks and mortar of a new town centre but a vibrant and diverse community, best represented by Battersea power station community choir, which I founded. These experiences taught me that every voice matters and that listening to one another is the first step to getting stuff done. That is the approach I am trying to bring as our new Member of Parliament, and I know from Danielle, Syfun, Katie and many other residents who have already come to me with housing cases how much we need to bring greater fairness to our private rental sector, so I am looking forward to supporting this Bill in the Lobby tonight.

The history of Aldershot and Farnborough is built on service and Great British innovation. We are the home of the British Army and the birthplace of British aviation. Our story began 170 years ago, as our country entered the Crimean war. It was in 1854 that Queen Victoria gave her blessing for the British Army to establish a permanent training camp in a small village on the Hampshire border. The Aldershot garrison town was the first complete military settlement built in the British Isles since the Romans. And Farnborough was transformed too, growing from a small railway town to become the home of the Army balloon factory and the Royal Aircraft Establishment and a hub for military aviation. It was there in 1908 that Samuel Cody piloted the first aeroplane to take flight in Britain. My home continues to deliver cutting-edge technology to this day, with every single Boeing commercial aircraft tested in the Farnborough wind tunnel.

Above all, Aldershot and Farnborough have been defined by the men and women who have served and sacrificed in every major conflict that our country has faced. We will always remember them. Today we are also home to the largest Nepalese community in the UK. The Gurkhas have served our country with outstanding bravery over generations, and I look forward to serving them and advocating for them in this place.

As well as our military heritage, my community has a rich cultural history. We hosted the Olympic games in 1948, when events were held in the Aldershot lido, where I now take my daughters swimming. We were the setting for several Bond films, the place where Charlie Chaplin made his stage debut, and where The Beatles gave their first performance in the south of England. We need to shout loudly and proudly about the great things that have happened and continue to happen in our constituency, and that is something I will always try to do.

There is Farnborough football club, whose women's team are league champions and cup winners after their first ever season, and Aldershot Town—the Shots—who recently became the first football club to receive the Ministry of Defence gold award for upholding the armed forces covenant. There are great charities such as Step By Step, the Grub Hub, Yateley Industries, our Rotary clubs, the Vine Centre, and many more I could mention. They are all making a tremendous difference. And the world still comes to do business at the Farnborough air show every two years.

But for everything that is right with our community, I know from countless conversations on the doorsteps that many of my neighbours question whether our best days still lie ahead of us. I take that really seriously. I am ambitious for our towns—these communities that have played such a role in our national endeavour—and I believe that if we can bring people together, we can bring new opportunities to our home, breathe new life into our town centres, and realise our incredible potential. I am ready to play my part in that and hope others will join me.

Let me end with a promise, because as I begin my term I have found some inspiration in the work of the Royal Corps of Transport, which was based in Aldershot for many decades. These men and women kept our Army moving across land, air and sea, and their work continues today through the Royal Logistics Corps. They went by the motto "Nothing without labour", and that serves as a reminder to me that everything we discuss in this Chamber, and everything we hope to achieve for our constituencies, begins and ends with hard work—struggle, toil, effort, doing our best. For as long as I have the privilege of representing my home in this place, I can promise that hard work is the very least that my constituents will get from me, every single day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Ayoub Khan to make his maiden speech.

3.29 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): May I start by commending the eloquent maiden speech by the hon. Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker)?

When I was studying law with aspirations of becoming a barrister, I often recalled the words of Lord David Pannick KC. He once said that the Bar is like the

[Ayoub Khan]

Ritz hotel: the doors are open to all, but only a select few ever get in. Those words resonate as I stand here, privileged to represent my Birmingham Perry Bar constituents. There are many parallels between my journey to the Bar and my journey to this House. The Bar was once considered too elite for someone like me—a young man of colour from inner-city Aston, who grew up in one of the most deprived and disadvantaged areas in Birmingham. Yet despite all the barriers, I persevered and became a member of the legal profession, just as I now stand here as a Member of Parliament, representing a community rich in resilience and potential, despite its challenges.

Like many in this House—the most diverse in our nation's history—I bring a unique story. Our diversity in race, religion and culture strengthens this Parliament, reflecting the richness of the nation that we serve. In this House, we have the immense privilege of debating, challenging, and holding the Government to account for the decisions that shape our country's future. I recognise that our opinions often differ and are, at times, deeply polarised, but our respect for opposing views, and ability to agree to disagree, are what define our democracy.

My political journey began over two decades ago in 2003, when I was first elected to local government. It was a remarkable experience, not just because of my initial victory, but because after losing my seat in 2004, I challenged the result through an election petition, exposing Birmingham's postal vote scandal. As the election commissioner in that tribunal commented—I paraphrase—"Mr Khan must be commended. He was the backbone of the petition, fighting this on a shoestring while studying at the Bar." That defines my character—my commitment to fairness, justice and equality. Barristers are taught to act without fear or favour, a principle that guides my actions in public life. Winning as an independent is extremely rare, but that victory was not simply plucked out of thin air. It may surprise some, but during my political journey, I have contested seven local elections, three general elections, the west midlands police and crime commissioner election and a European election. As I have served my residents faithfully for over two decades, and will continue to do so, I am certainly no stranger to politics, and I take great exception to those who seek to undermine me, my campaign or my constituents.

Birmingham Perry Barr, like many constituencies, has its charms and challenges. It was once home to the great inventor James Watt, whose contributions were instrumental on a global level. My constituency is also home to the Jacobean Aston Hall in Aston Park, a stone's throw from where I grew up and still live. We are home to Aston Villa football club, which, as we all know, is supported by His Royal Highness Prince William. And before anyone asks, no, I have not received any complimentary tickets—yet! The Commonwealth games at the Alexander stadium in Perry Barr brought much-needed positive global attention to our constituency.

However, we must not lose sight of the real challenges that we continue to face. Many people in Perry Barr, like others elsewhere in the country, are at breaking point. Our doctors and nurses are overwhelmed, struggling to deliver care under increasing pressure. Meanwhile, families are enduring unsafe and unsuitable temporary housing. Fly-tipping continues to plague large parts of the constituency. The cost of living means that child poverty has hit record highs. Crime and antisocial behaviour are rampant: just last week, our community faced another tragic murder.

Growing up, I had the support of youth workers, who helped to shape who I am today, but now, our youth centres are being dismantled. Youth services and employment opportunities are vital for reducing crime, tackling unemployment and ensuring a brighter future for Birmingham. Children with special needs are also being failed. I visited Anglesey primary school, where 20 non-verbal children with autism are confined to a dilapidated room. Their teachers are pleading for just £10,000 annually for better facilities. Those urgent issues require real solutions.

Let me turn to the substantive issue under debate. I have registered my interest in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Although I welcome the Renters' Rights Bill, I urge the Government to take stronger action to address the appalling standards in temporary housing. We have 25,000 families on the waiting list for homes, and with Birmingham city council declaring bankruptcy, the situation is dire, but that is no excuse for the deplorable conditions that families are forced to live in. The Government must step in and provide support to bail out the council, just as we did with the banks. The people of Birmingham should not be made to suffer for the failures of local government.

I must acknowledge my predecessor, Khalid Mahmood, who was the first Muslim MP to be elected to this House. He paved the way for many, and I hope to build on his work to improve the lives of my constituents. Another name fondly remembered by my constituents is Jeff Rooker, a significant figure. A common bond between the three of us is our shared working-class heritage through our parents.

My late father, Iqbal Khan, worked 12-hour shifts at the steel factory, while my mother, Parveen Akhtar, raised me and my siblings. Both my parents sacrificed family ties in Azad Kashmir to pursue a better future for me and my siblings. I like to think that I have done them proud. At this point, I must also extend my heartfelt gratitude to my wife, children, extended family and friends, who have graciously shared me with my constituents throughout my political journey. Their unwavering support has been invaluable.

Finally, I would be doing a disservice to my constituents if I did not mention in my maiden speech the plight of the Palestinians. As a lawyer, dealing with evidence is my expertise, but a law degree is not necessary to see the injustice that we are all witnessing. On Monday, I told the Prime Minister that self-defence is a moot point, but not because I do not believe that sovereign nations have a right to defend themselves—they do. Despite desperate calls for a ceasefire, those pleas have fallen on deaf ears. Words without meaningful action are hollow. The only real action that the Government can take is to immediately halt all arms sales. If we are to truly claim the mantle of human rights defenders, we cannot acknowledge the suffering of some while turning a blind eye to that of others. Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere. Our response must be comprehensive and principled.

I conclude my remarks with the words of Albert Einstein:

"The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything."

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Parveen and Iqbal will indeed be proud. Time limits are limits, folks. If you look at me or at the clock, you will know when it is time to stop talking. I call James Naish to make his maiden speech.

3.37 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) and the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on completing their maiden speeches. As the House will hear in a moment, I am used to being third, so this is an appropriate time to speak.

I have the honour of representing Rushcliffe in the south of Nottinghamshire. In these quarters, Rushcliffe is known for one thing: Baron Clarke of Nottingham. If politics were a beauty contest, Ken Clarke was Mr Rushcliffe for 49 years before being ennobled, despite remarking in his own maiden speech in 1970 that the constituency was a marginal. I am not sure that is how the local Labour party saw it for the next 54 years. During the campaign, though, my local campaign team—ever the optimists—actually knocked on Baron Clarke's door, and he graciously invited us in. We chatted about various local issues before he unsurprisingly concluded that he would still be supporting the Conservatives at the election. At that point, his daughter helpfully piped up from the next room, "Remember, Dad, you're in the Lords—you can't vote any more", condemning his party to one fewer guaranteed vote. I am honoured to follow in the footsteps of one of the great characters of this House. His pro-European views resonated strongly with the constituents of Rushcliffe, the only constituency in the east midlands to strongly support remaining in the EU. I will therefore endeavour to work closely with the Government to deepen ties with our European friends, neighbours and allies, as we must.

I also pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Ruth Edwards, who served on several Select Committees. She was passionate about the rural environment, chairing the all-party parliamentary group on geographically protected foods. She also fought hard for the east midlands freeport and championed a network of safe spaces for domestic abuse survivors. I sincerely hope that Ruth is enjoying her time away from this House in what can only be described as her own personal zoo—the farm that she shares with a Labrador called Clemmie, chickens, bees, donkeys, a tortoise called Geoffrey, and three alpacas.

Like Vera, Florence and Coco the alpacas, I was lucky enough to be born part of a trio, the youngest of triplets. While the House of Commons Library is not 100% sure, I am likely to be the first triplet to stand in this place. Having spent my whole life sharing birthdays, cards, parties, exam results days and much more, it is nice to achieve something unique that is not shared with anyone else in my family, including a well-known podcaster who seeks to stay relevant by disagreeing agreeably.

I thank the people of Rushcliffe, especially the 73.2% who voted—one of the highest turnouts in the recent election. Since being elected, I have met representatives from our three great sports venues: Nottingham Forest's City Ground, Trent Bridge, and the National Water Sports Centre. I have made several visits to the site of the Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station, the last working coal-fired power station in our country, which closed last week. Such was my commitment to visiting the site that on one occasion, running late, I decided not to fill up as I passed a garage, only to lose power three miles later as I was driving up the A453. I blocked the left-hand lane for an hour while waiting to be rescued—not the best place to be seen as the new MP for the area. Having worked in delivery in the energy sector for most of the past decade, I strongly believe that the advanced, clean, green energy agenda, through which we can build the technologies of the future, offers huge economic potential. I hope to speak regularly in this House on those topics.

Moving on to this debate, I draw the House's attention to my registered interest in a property from which I receive a rental income. Only last weekend, I saw a comment online from a lady who moved to my constituency with six-year-old twins. She posted anonymously on a community Facebook group about a leak into her flat: "It's one excuse after another, and nothing has been done for six months. For the past three weeks, my children have been ill as a result. Please, I need help and advice on what to do." She told me that the stress was causing high blood pressure and had resulted in changes to her routine medication. That demonstrates that a person's living conditions can have much broader implications for their health and wellbeing. I therefore welcome this Bill and its many provisions to promote longer-term secure tenancies, but as a former council leader, I encourage Ministers to consider how local authorities can be best resourced to take on extra enforcement work—a point already touched on.

It is an honour to represent the people of Rushcliffe, and I will seek to serve them as best I can for as long as I am in this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Hopefully, the Government Whips will know that the correct, elected triplet is in the Chamber and voting.

3.43 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on his maiden speech. He may be the first triplet I have ever met, so he can add that to his list of firsts.

I speak recognising that we want, understandably, to keep tenants safe and to ensure that those in the private rented sector have the security that we believe they deserve. However, I do worry that the Government's good intentions in what they are seeking to achieve will actually leave us with no homes left to rent, or at least a significant reduction. Having worked in a homelessness team 20 years ago, I have seen at first hand the impact on those who are evicted. More recently, as the cabinet member for homes and communities, I had responsibility for homelessness, building safety, disabled facilities grants and the cross-party plan for homes that Plymouth city council has proudly worked through over the years.

I speak for tenants and landlords. No one can be responsible for homelessness and not want to ensure that people in vulnerable situations have the best opportunities. However, I also speak for the many excellent landlords in the city that I represent part of, not least those who

[Rebecca Smith]

are members of the South West Landlords Association, whose training I participated in while I was a cabinet member. They provide the vital rented homes that the city and the surrounding areas need, the loss of which will have an impact on the very tenants we are hoping to support.

None of this Bill will be relevant if there are no homes left to rent. Rightmove is currently claiming that there are 50 inquiries for every rental property in Plymouth. We also have 365 households in temporary accommodation, with 162 of those households in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. I am sad to say that those numbers have not really moved much in the last couple of years, because of the lack of private rented property. With this Bill, we may therefore be ignoring the dangers of the impacts on those tenants in temporary accommodation.

We need to ensure that the private rented market in cities such as Plymouth and the surrounding rural areas is fit for purpose, and at the moment it is completely broken. The fact that the homes are not necessarily always fit to in live is almost the least of the problems, because again, as I have said, if there are no homes to live in, people do not have anywhere to be.

Markus Campbell-Savours: This issue of landlords removing themselves from the sector was also brought up in the speech of the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel). What does the hon. Member think happens to properties when landlords remove themselves from the sector?

Rebecca Smith: The hon. Member makes a very good point, and that brings me on nicely to the next section of my speech. One of my constituents has recently written to me to say that he is very sadly, having been a landlord for the same tenants for 25 years, selling his entire portfolio of 89 properties. Sometimes, we do actually see—*[Interruption.]* Will the hon. Member allow me to finish? Thank you.

We sometimes see some really constructive solutions to these problems. For example, while I was a cabinet member on a Conservative council under the Conservative Government, Plymouth city council, Plymouth Community Homes and Homes England were able to work together to purchase 86 three-bedroom properties from Annington Homes, which is the supplier for the MOD. So the hon. Member is correct that there are some options. However, although my constituent has approached the council, there has currently been no movement. The point I want to make in this section of my speech is about what more Homes England could do to ensure that when landlords leave the market as an unintended consequence of this Bill, their properties are bought by local councils, although they may need the grants that Homes England has so generously provided in the past.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): Does the hon. Member think that the houses disappear when the landlords move out of the market? The bricks and mortar are still there. The problems in our housing market are caused by the lack of supply and by private landlords taking advantage. Such movement of homes in a fixed market is not going to cause the problems that I think she is suggesting.

Rebecca Smith: My experience has been that this does impact on the market. That is why the market in Plymouth has failed, in the words of the chief executive of the city council, because those properties often get bought by a family who may not have been—*[Interruption.]* No, let me finish. Such a family may have been in a privately owned property, not a privately rented one. I feel that we are speaking to the same point, but ultimately the market in the constituency I represent is not working. I am speaking only about the evidence I have seen for myself, but the 89 properties that are going to be sold will mean 89 further households needing temporary accommodation. It they have to be found further accommodation when there are 50 inquiries for every rental property in Plymouth, there is clearly a problem, although I do take the points that Labour Members have made.

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Smith: I will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We need to reduce the number of interventions, because they eat into other Back Benchers' time.

Naushabah Khan: I will be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. Does the hon. Member recognise that a number properties are taken out of the private rented sector to be used as temporary accommodation because landlords are able to get a better deal, sometimes from councils, and that that also has an impact on the market?

Rebecca Smith: Yes, the hon. Lady is correct. That is part of the problem, and I go back to my point: it is why in cities such as Plymouth the private sector market is failing. Those temporary homes are needed for those who have been evicted from the private rented sector, and then we end up with them staying in temporary accommodation, rather than permanent homes. Ultimately, we are all seeking to achieve somewhere for people to live in the long term, not temporarily. I believe we all need that security, which is ultimately what the Bill is trying to achieve. I am just highlighting that if there is no supply, there are no homes for us to secure through this legislation.

I know that the Secretary of State recognises the important role of landlords, yet this Bill feels like a using sledgehammer to crack the nut of no-fault evictions and poor conditions, with significant unintended consequences, as the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), outlined. We will see properties leaving the market and therefore a further increase in the number of people not in accommodation. I take the House back to this figure: this Bill will increase, from 365 already, the number of households in the city I represent who are living in temporary accommodation.

3.50 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my colleagues' inspiring maiden speeches today. This is the first time I have risen to speak in a substantive debate, following my own maiden speech in the summer. I am proud to support this Bill, which is the most significant reform to the sector in more than a generation.

It will end the exploitative practice of bidding wars. It will offer security to renters, and it will enshrine a commitment to a decent home being the right of everyone in our country.

Private renters are at the sharp end of our housing crisis. According to English housing survey data, one in five live in non-decent homes. In my constituency, it is a scandal that 1,300 people are paying to rent non-decent homes. The majority of them live in Hatfield, where the average cost of a two-bed to rent is £1,200 a month. The private rental sector accounts for more than one in four properties. For all the good and responsible landlords in the sector, too many have not taken their responsibilities to tenants seriously. Sadly, the last Government did not take their responsibilities to renters seriously either.

This comprehensive Bill will act where the Conservatives failed. The journey starts with a commitment to those who rent property, but who have been locked out of the process by rental bidding and rental wars. As it stands, landlords are free to invite closed bids for how much rent people are willing to pay, playing them off against each other to maximise their return. It is plainly wrong, and like so much of our housing system, it penalises people who are less likely to have access to savings or family wealth. As set out in clause 55, we will end that practice.

The Bill calls time on rental bidding, but it also calls time on no-fault evictions. Private renting can never offer the same security as home ownership or social housing, which is why this Bill is tied inextricably to a broader Government agenda of building 1.5 million homes over this Parliament and making building homes for social rent a priority again. Ending section 21 and moving to periodic assured tenancies is a significant strengthening of renters' rights. If someone is moving into a rental home for the first time, they will have a year of security. It was two months under the last Government, but it will be 12 months under Labour.

The quality of our private rented homes is just as important as security of tenure. For too many people, once the battle to find a place to live is won, a new front opens with their landlord on the quality of their living conditions at home. There is a better than one in five chance that a private renter will be living in a non-decent property. The Bill will ensure that private renters are no longer second-class citizens and are protected by the decent homes standard.

I said in my maiden speech that I would always say where we agree with another party, and I congratulate the Conservatives on bringing in Awaab's law in the course of the previous Parliament, but it is absolutely right that this Labour Government extend the law to the private sector, so that every renter in England can challenge dangerous conditions in the home and, crucially, do so safe in the knowledge that they will no longer be subject to a no-fault eviction simply for having the confidence to speak out.

There are thousands of renters in my constituency and 4.5 million across the country. The Bill is a landmark moment for all of them. I am proud that it is a priority for our Labour Government and I look forward to working with colleagues as it progresses through the House.

3.54 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I congratulate hon. Members on their excellent maiden speeches this afternoon and declare an interest as someone who has been involved in the commercial and residential property sector for over 35 years.

The thing is, there are many good and noble intentions in the Bill. The Secretary of State outlined them and I think the whole House endorses them. She spoke about the need to balance rights between tenants and landlords. That is a matter of judgment, and I fully respect that the Government are making a series of judgments and decisions. The reality is, though, that in the last five years, the quantity of private sector properties available to rent in the United Kingdom has reduced by about 50%. As more restrictions and regulations are imposed, the quantity is going down. I think that is particularly so in Scotland, where there have been even tighter restrictions and the availability of properties for rent has reduced.

Of course, what we all want is the opposite—a greater supply of rental properties—but that requires additional capital for additional new homes to be built. That is a key objective of the Government that I think all of us support, but to ensure sufficient reward and attraction for that capital, landlords need to know that the balance of risks and rewards is appropriate and that vacant possession can be secured.

I am old enough, ladies and gentleman, to remember the '70s and '80s—[Hon. Members: "Surely not."] I know. A two-tier market emerged between what were called assured tenancies and assured shorthold tenancies, for which vacant possession could be secured. Properties with assured tenancies were worth approximately only 80% of those with assured shorthold tenancies. I say to the Minister, in the Secretary of State's absence, that the risk here is that if the Government get this wrong, the capital will disappear, the quantity of properties to rent will reduce and the quantity of supply to be built for the private rented sector will reduce.

I urge the Government to keep these measures under close review as the Bill passes through the House. If they get the balance wrong and it is made too difficult to secure vacant possession—particularly of properties with tenants involved in antisocial behaviour or not paying their rent—the supply will reduce dramatically.

Markus Campbell-Savours: I asked this question before and did not get a successful answer. Perhaps the hon. Member can tell us what will happen to those properties when landlords pull out of the market.

Richard Tice: It is a really good question, and I am happy to answer it. If the landlord pulls a property available to rent out of the market, it will go into the ownership sector and that property will not be available to rent.

We know that there is significant demand to rent, and I say to the Government that we want to increase the supply of properties available to rent. I therefore repeat the point that it is about risk and reward. The Government must make these judgments. I just say to the Minister that he should keep this closely under review. If the Government get the balance wrong, the market will reduce while demand will continue to rise, so rents will

[Richard Tice]

rise as the supply reduces. That is my concern. If the Bill passes—it is likely to—perhaps the Minister should review it in a year by looking at the data and seeing what is happening to rents, what is happening to supply and whether further tweaks and adjustments are needed.

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

3.59 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I congratulate all those who have made their first speeches today. I look forward to continuing to work with them in the coming months.

I am here in this place at the pleasure of the voters of Colchester. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"] I'll take that. Colchester was the very first capital of Britain. In the year 49 AD, it was the first place in the country to be given the status of Roman colonia. Unfortunately, we held that title for only a decade, before a woman from Norfolk laid waste to the city. The Romans decided that a muddy river crossing in a little place called Londinium would be a safer bet. That was almost 2,000 years before another woman from Norfolk, more precisely South West Norfolk, entered Londinium and laid waste to the British economy. We Essex folk could have warned you of the dangers. *[Laughter.]* On my way into this place, I often walk past the imposing statue of that first Norfolk woman, Boudica, standing proud in her chariot on the embankment, and I feel like she is spurring me on to step up to the plate as Colchester's first woman MP.

I am an historian by training and profession, and each day that I enter this House I remember that I am only here because of the commitment and effort of the generations who came before me—women and men who valued democracy and served their communities. I come from a family dedicated to service. My mother worked in public health and my father worked as a church minister. They taught my sisters and I the values of public service, and I have promised the residents of Colchester that, as their MP, I will put those into practice.

I am also very proud to be a member of a party whose leader has pledged to lead a Government of service. Those words mean a great deal to me—they are one of the reasons why I stood to be an MP. We are here only at the pleasure of those who put us here, and our job is to serve them.

I wish to pay tribute to my predecessors. Will Quince served as Colchester's MP for nine years. He worked very hard for his constituents and was dedicated to their wellbeing. In particular, I highlight the work he did on baby loss, a cause that still means a great deal to him. I know that he is continuing to serve in his life after Parliament, in particular as an Army specialist reserve officer.

The connection between Colchester and the Army began with the Roman legions, and it continues today in the form of 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team, which is the British Army's global response force and is able to respond to crises around the world at a few hours' notice. I pay tribute to its service and bravery.

Will's predecessor, Sir Bob Russell, was Colchester's MP for 18 years, and he continues to serve it today as High Steward and as chief letter writer to the *Colchester Gazette*. No one is more passionate than Sir Bob about celebrating our city's history, and I was proud to be at an unveiling of his most recent project, a statue celebrating the Colchester origins of the world's most famous nursery rhyme, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star". Please come to see it, and while there you can take in the country's oldest and longest Roman walls, its only Roman circus and one of the most impressive Norman castles, not to mention award-winning arts venues such as the Mercury theatre, Firstsite gallery and Colchester Arts Centre. On that matter, forget the hype around Oasis—Colchester Arts Centre and Stanway school together honed the rare talent of Blur. I am sure that sentiment is shared by the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), my constituency neighbour.

I would also like to recall one other predecessor, Charles Smith, who is the only other Labour MP in Colchester's history. He was elected 79 years before me, almost to the day. Charles Smith, later Lord Delacourt-Smith, was part of that great reforming Government of 1945 that gave us the national health service, national parks, new towns and so much more. Now that was a Government of service. They took office after years of destruction, with the country in mourning, debt and crisis, yet they still generated hope, took action and laid the foundations for a brighter future for us all. We have a lot to learn from them.

I am very proud to speak in this debate on a bold Bill, which is in that spirit. It will bring much-needed change to our housing sector and uphold the rights of thousands of tenants to live in the decent homes that they deserve. The case for the Bill has been eloquently set out by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, and other speakers.

I am not a career politician. I have spent most of my life researching, teaching and leading in higher education, much of it at the outstanding University of Essex. I worked in social history and social sciences. It is my firm belief that only by understanding what has worked and what has mattered in the past can we hope to build a better future. I have written about the history of work, criminal justice, social care and education. I have used that knowledge to help to lead present-day policy change in youth services, family courts, women's employment and victims' rights. There is a red thread running through my work, which has traced how modes of governing have changed over time and how we have come to govern in the name of freedom with the aim of enabling people to truly flourish. If our country is to flourish, everyone must have the opportunity to thrive. We need decent public services that give everyone the best start in life and support us through to life's end. That is a collective endeavour.

Colchester has been a wonderful home to me and my family. I stood for election first as a city councillor and then as an MP because I wanted to give back to that community that has given us so much. I thank my fantastic family and all the local campaigners who have been a brilliant support to me over the past few months and more. Old habits die hard: Members will be relieved to hear that I have resisted the temptation to circulate a reading list to go with this lecture, or speech, or to

speak for my customary 50 minutes—Madam Deputy Speaker is looking at me. I am looking forward to working as hard as I can for those who have sent me here: the people of Colchester.

4.5 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Colchester (Pam Cox) on her excellent maiden speech and her comprehensive survey of Colchester's history.

On the morning of Friday 5 July I was elected as a Member of this House. My result was declared at around 6.30 in the morning. Like so many of us, I had been awake for 24 hours and I was exhausted but elated. When I got home I had breakfast and a couple of hours' sleep. I was woken up by hearing something being put in my letterbox. That in itself was not unusual; my landlords received my post and put it in that box, as they lived just 25 metres away. I wondered what it could be: another magazine from a charity I support, a credit card bill or perhaps, even, a belatedly delivered Liberal Democrat election leaflet?

When I opened the letter, it was something even worse: a section 21 eviction notice stating that my landlords intended to retire, and giving me just over two months to move out and find somewhere else to live. I had been renting that home for more than four years. I have always rented, and up to that point I had generally had a good experience, so I have no particular axe to grind. But receiving that eviction notice via letter without any prior conversation or indication that it may be coming was not what I needed any morning, let alone that morning when my head was spinning from having been elected.

Receiving a section 21 eviction notice was tough for me, but it is far worse for many others—people with children, those who care for disabled or elderly relatives and those without the financial means to deal with the deposits and up-front rents associated with moving to a new place. Some tenants may seek a landlord notice period of more than two months, but the current market does not provide that, which shows that regulation is needed.

Exposure to many of these renting issues is, at root cause, driven by a lack of social or affordable housing to rent. In the town of Didcot in my Oxfordshire constituency, the average house price is 14.8 times the average annual salary. This significant disparity highlights the need for more homes that are cheaper than market rent, so that young people wanting to start families can afford to remain living in the area. More social and affordable housing would also ease pressures on some lower paid key worker roles in education and healthcare, which currently are hard to recruit.

There are many problems with the current renting arrangements, which I am pleased to say the Bill addresses. However, some organisations representing renters believe that it does not go far enough. For example, the charity Crisis feels that stronger action may be needed to protect tenants from unfair rent increases, and to remove some of the barriers that make it harder for low-income tenants to secure a private rented tenancy in the first place. Research commissioned by the TDS Charitable Foundation indicates that nearly half of private renters do not know where to turn if their landlord or letting agent fails to address a problem they may have. That highlights the need for better information for tenants on their rights and where to find support.

The Bill does not include a requirement for landlords to engage in dialogue or discussion with a tenant before issuing an eviction letter—something that would have helped in my case. As my hon. Friends the Members for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds) and for Taunton and Wellington (Mr Amos) said, more could be done to require landlords to improve energy efficiency, and local authorities and courts will need to be properly resourced to enforce the Bill's provisions.

In a free market economy people have the right to invest in property, but it is important to remember that a home is far more than a financial asset. Unlike stocks and shares, a home is a place of safety, security, shelter, warmth, comfort and privacy and somewhere to raise a family. That should always be our starting point.

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

4.9 pm

Torsten Bell (Swansea West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I praise the speech by the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), who powerfully made the case for change that the Bill will deliver. I should also start by thanking all hon. Members for their indulgence, because it is just possible that another maiden speech is not the gap in their lives right now. Even Members on this side of the House have realised that there is one downside to such a big landslide.

My immediate predecessor in the seat named Swansea West served his constituency diligently; he campaigned on important issues like air quality. And I feel great affinity for his predecessor, Alan Williams; like me, he was an economist before he was a politician, and he focused on the bread and butter issues of raising living standards.

But today, Swansea West is not very west at all. In fact, half of the constituency in the north and east was previously represented by my hon. Friend—and more importantly, formidable friend—the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I shall endeavour to emulate her passion and drive, but not her bold sartorial choices. In her maiden speech, she challenged Dylan Thomas' famous description of Swansea as an "ugly, lovely town", rightly noting that today it is "economically exciting, architecturally beautiful" and "culturally…groundbreaking".

As someone new-ish to politics, I am more concerned about another phrase attributed to Thomas, labelling Swansea the "graveyard of ambition". Fortunately, he never uttered such words, and the ambition of this great city is alive and well, as anyone who has watched the newly established Penlan under-10s team train in driving rain can attest. Perhaps there is an even more deeply held and widely shared ambition in the city, of our council, our business leaders and the myriad community groups that hold our city together—an ambition for a Swansea in which greater prosperity is created and greater prosperity is also shared. I shall play my part in realising that ambition and doing justice to the honour of being elected for this great city—the city in which both my parents started their inspiring careers of service.

[Torsten Bell]

But it was a person, not a place, that took a punt on me as a young man: the former Member for Edinburgh South West, Alistair Darling—an honourable Friend in here but always a friend to me. As the banks went bust, he taught me that politics is a vocation to be lived up to, not a game to be played, and that the MP's role is to combine service to a community and also service to a cause. There is no greater community than Swansea and no greater cause than rebuilding the prosperity of it and this United Kingdom.

I am very much not the first Jack to lack a local accent. The city has welcomed so many. Early 18th century records show Jewish names beginning to crop up, and today, our mosques are crucial institutions—ones the whole community rallied around when violence and Islamophobia were seen on the UK's streets this summer. Those fleeing the war in Ukraine have found Swansea a genuine city of sanctuary.

And while I may be the first Torsten to represent Swansea—and maybe anywhere—people with suspicious Scandinavian names are nothing new. Legend has it that a certain Viking provided the origin story of Swansea by settling on "Sweyns-ey"—Sweyn's island. More recently, the 19th century poet, Walter Savage Landor recognised that the frankly overrated bay of Naples has nothing on Swansea bay. Economists like to talk about comparative advantages and, well, this is ours—glittering from the industrial might of Port Talbot to the more genteel Mumbles. Never mind Naples; there is a far more important comparison with Cardiff. It is a contest long settled by the writer Jan Morris, who succinctly concluded that "Swansea is much the nicer".

It is, but it is no utopia. One in five children live in absolute poverty. The famous industrialist, Sir John Morris, founder of Morris Town—today's Morriston—lies under St Matthew's church. That building is today the base for Matthew's House, a wonderful charity doing work that should never be needed, feeding hundreds of the most vulnerable residents in a city were 340 households become homeless every month.

Like many places that drove the industrial revolution, Swansea's past offers much to be proud of, such as the schooners, built to sail around the horn carrying the copper nitrate that made the city rich, and the world's first passenger train, instigated by an 1804 Act of this Parliament. It was pulled by horses—an experience perhaps not much slower than on today's still inexplicably unelectrified main line.

We celebrate all this and more, but what my constituents are asking today is how we can build a better economic future—that is the question. The typical wage in Swansea is £536 a week, and House of Commons Library research shows that it has not risen by one penny since 2010. That is what economic failure on a colossal scale looks like. And while wages do not rise, insecurity does. A constituent recently opened her door to me, distraught at having seen her weekly hours cut from 15 to three overnight. None of us could live with that uncertainty, and no one should.

If mainstream politics cannot provide the very basics—decent homes, stable jobs and rising wages—many will turn away, from voting or to populists who seek to exploit these problems, not to solve them. Defeating populism also means rejecting fatalism, because we know that progress can be delivered; the minimum wage has proved it, and the employment Bill to be published tomorrow will do so again. Investment can be prioritised, potholes can be filled, and homes can be built.

Who owns the best view in Swansea? Not the owner of a mansion but the residents of Townhill, an estate for working people, built between the wars on the precious land in the heights above the city centre. Today we debate what are inexplicably delayed basic standards for the millions of renters squeezed out of both home ownership and social housing. The Bill bans landlords, in Wales or England, from discriminating against tenants who receive benefits or have children.

Swansea has many of the materials to build this shared prosperity. I will not list them all, but they include our great universities, a future and not just a past for Port Talbot, and the new opportunities to be seized from a tidal lagoon.

Service to a community and to a cause, to Swansea and to shared prosperity: to my constituents, I promise to give my all to that task. Finally, to hon. Members here I bring perhaps even more welcome news: that is one fewer maiden speech to go.

4.16 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I pay tribute to all the new Members who have delivered their maiden speeches, and I wish them well as Members of the House. I draw particular attention to the maiden speech made by the Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), my colleague in the Independent group.

The issue of housing that we are debating today should have been a huger issue in the general election than it actually was. A quarter of a million people in this country are homeless at any one time. In my own area, 2,000 people are living in temporary accommodation—or, sadly, sleeping rough—including 850 children. I pay tribute to the many organisations in my area that do a huge amount of work to try to alleviate the problems of homelessness, including Streets Kitchen, the Single Homeless Project, Shelter from the Storm, and Acorn, which represents private sector tenants.

I welcome the Bill. Much of it is very good. It is a huge improvement on what has gone before. Frankly, it should have been law a long time ago. However, there are one or two areas that I think we should consider. British renters, on average, spend 30% of their income on rent, and the proportion is far higher in London. One in five private tenants spend more than half of their salary on private sector rent. Young people, especially those moving into inner-city areas, for instance in London, Birmingham, Newcastle and Manchester, are saddled with student debt and, on top of that, are paying phenomenal amounts of rent, usually in shared flats. It is quite normal for young people in my constituency to be renting flats for more than £2,000 a month, which they have to share with three or four other people. They might be happy sharing for a short time in their 20s and 30s, but as they get older they want their own place. They have no savings and no ability to save, and they have no security of tenure either. Something has to change.

I made this point in my intervention during the Secretary of State's opening speech. I welcome the Bill, because ending no-fault eviction and providing security of tenure is a huge step forward. Providing for some

predictability when it comes to getting repairs done and rights of representation is good, and the role of local government in these measures is also good. However, unless we address the fundamental issue of very high rents in the private rented sector, we will not make any progress.

In my constituency, about a third of people live in the private rented sector—up from less than 10% when I was first elected to the House many years ago—and the figure is rising all the time. The rents are incredibly high. When somebody who is on universal credit and eligible for housing benefit looks for a flat in my area, none is affordable within the local housing allowance. It is simply far too expensive, so the only thing that happens is that people move out. We need to bite the bullet and introduce rent controls in this country. It would not be the end of the world, and they would not destroy the private rented sector. Rent controls have been introduced in Berlin, and they are quite common across much of Europe and in the United States. Unless we introduce rent controls, we are going to have a continuing long-term problem.

I want to finish by saying that we are dealing with a desperate housing shortage in this country, and it will be resolved only by the comprehensive building of council housing with secure tenure and genuinely affordable rent. That will deal with the scourge of homelessness.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): For the benefit of new colleagues, one does not stride past a Dispatch Box once a debate is taking place.

4.21 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and express my full support for the Bill. I welcome the swift action of the ministerial team in bringing forward this vital legislation, which is the most significant package of reforms to the private rented sector in over 40 years.

As the Member of Parliament for Luton South and South Bedfordshire, I am most frequently contacted about the issue of housing. Given that just under 35% of homes in my constituency are privately rented, the issues that tenants are facing in this sector are very familiar to me. Everyone deserves the dignity of a safe, secure and affordable home, but a lack of regulation and protections for tenants in the private rented sector means that this is currently not the reality for many.

Rental discrimination against tenants who are in receipt of benefits or have children is common practice, so I am pleased that this Bill will make it illegal for landlords and letting agents to discriminate on that basis, and give local councils strong enforcement powers to tackle this unlawful practice. Mortgage lenders and insurers will also no longer be able to impose restrictive, discriminatory terms.

A significant rise in section 21 no-fault eviction notices over the past year has further highlighted the precarious situation in which many renters find themselves. Data from the Ministry of Justice indicates that as of June this year there had been 176 repossessions in Luton due to section 21 notices, compared with 112 in 2023. Across the country we see a similar pattern unfolding, with over 32,000 no-fault eviction claims submitted to courts in 2023-24—the highest figure since 2015-16. Those figures highlight just how stark the situation is, so I am pleased that Labour is committed to abolishing section 21 notices once and for all. This legislation will also empower private rented sector tenants to challenge unreasonable rent increases, preventing unscrupulous landlords from using rent increases as a back-door means of eviction.

I am pleased to see many of the other measures set out in the Bill, including ensuring that there is a legal standard for property conditions. As it currently stands, 45% of private renters in England are experiencing damp, mould or excessive cold in their homes. This is completely unacceptable, and I am glad that the extension of Awaab's law will set clear legal expectations about the timeframes within which landlords in the private rented sector must take action to make homes safe where they contain serious hazards. That goes hand in hand with the creation of a new private rented sector database that private landlords will be required to join, giving tenants, landlords and local authorities access to key information, and giving councils the power to target enforcement where it is most needed.

I know that many councils across the country have faced significant budget cuts, with my own council in Luton having £170 million of funding stripped since 2010. That can constrain its ability to check properties proactively for non-compliance, and places greater reliance on tenants being aware of their rights and reporting problems. Although I am pleased to see plans to tackle these issues, I would encourage Ministers to work in collaboration with local government to ensure that the necessary resources are available for councils to carry out this enforcement and to effectively protect tenants.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech, and I am delighted to see that no-fault evictions will finally be banned. On the point about local government, does she agree with my party that it is imperative that local authorities are given the powers to regulate the numbers and locations of Airbnbs? We know that too many properties that are available for rent are taken out of the market for long-term renters and used for Airbnbs, because landlords can raise more money that way, and I think it is important that local authorities should have those powers.

Rachel Hopkins: I thank the hon. Member for that important point. I am sure that when the whole package of measures around housing is taken forward by this Government, that point will be well considered.

This Bill is designed not to villainise good and responsible landlords but to give renters much greater security and stability, so they can stay in their homes for longer, build lives in their communities and avoid the risk of homelessness. I look forward to working with Ministers to deliver this and make the private rented sector safer and more secure for my constituents across Luton South and South Bedfordshire, and indeed across the country.

4.25 pm

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I congratulate the new Members who have made their maiden speeches on the interesting and important points raised. I should declare that I am a member of Acorn Community Union, which campaigns on renters' rights. Indeed, I have personally campaigned on renters' rights for a long time now. This welcome Bill is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to recognise the rights of the 11 million people living in the private rented sector to have a safe, decent and secure home. In the words of activist Kwajo Tweneboa, we are facing

[Carla Denyer]

"the biggest housing crisis since the Second World War".

We have a generation who will never be able to earn enough to have a mortgage and cannot even afford their rents now.

The average rent in Bristol Central has hit nearly £1,800 a month, which is more than in several London boroughs, and a huge 47% of households in the constituency are in the private rented sector—that is 18,000 households. As the Secretary of State herself said, good landlords who are already acting fairly have nothing to fear from this Bill, but the rogue ones—like the landlord of my constituent who made countless reports of damp mould and leaks for months with no resolution until the ceiling fell in—need to be held to account.

I really recognise the many good parts of the Bill, but I hope the Government will go further on three key issues: security of tenure, rent affordability and energy efficiency. On security of tenure, the extension of notice periods to four months for landlord sale and moving in is progress, but we must have clear evidence thresholds for those grounds of no-fault eviction and measures to ensure that the 12-month "no re-letting" period is not broken. We also need an automatic right of non-payment of rent in the final two months to compensate a tenant for the disruption of being forced to move home.

The proposal to outlaw bidding wars is okay as far as it goes, but it is not likely to be effective in tackling rising rents. Landlords could still hike rents to kick people out, so we really need a cap on rent increases within tenancies, set at the lowest of either average wage growth or inflation. Rents in advance should be capped to one month—as a Labour Member suggested—to stop discrimination against people on low incomes. But rents are too high in the first place. To illustrate this point, if a 21-year-old living in Bristol rents a single room today at the average rate, they will have put £80,000 into their landlord's bank account by the time they reach their 30th birthday. We need a system of rent controls, carefully introduced with local flexibility, aimed at bringing rents down relative to incomes, alongside a suite of policies to address the housing crisis, including a major increase in social housing and real support for community-led housing.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I endorse all my hon. Friend's comments, particularly on the need for rent controls. In my constituency of Brighton, I have a very high population of renters, including myself. I have only ever been a private renter since leaving home over 30 years ago. My constituency has many young people and students renting, and my local Acorn branch and the National Union of Students have also raised the problems caused by well-off guarantors being required to secure a rented home. I have spoken with the NUS president about this. It fuels discrimination against working-class, estranged and international students, and fuels homelessness among students—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I am standing, so you must be seated. I call Carla Denyer.

Carla Denyer: My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) makes a good point about guarantors, and I would also like to see that issue addressed in this Bill.

Citizens Advice reports that almost half of private renters are living in homes plagued with cold, damp or mould. Winter fuel bills are due to go up by 10%, and the winter fuel allowance is being cut for millions of pensioners. It is good to hear that the Government's regulations will apply to social housing as well as private housing, but that commitment needs to be explicitly enshrined in this Bill, and let us get going on energy efficiency—there is no time for delay. There was a consultation on energy efficiency in the private rented sector in 2020, so let us not do another; let us just get on with it. We must properly fund our local councils, which will enforce these new rights. Councils that are on the brink of bankruptcy after 14 years of swingeing cuts will obviously struggle to deliver this part of the policy.

We need a shift in how we think about renting. In policy and practice, we should move away from viewing housing as an asset—as an investment for the wealthy—and towards prioritising and valuing the right to a stable home. Almost every point of improvement that I have suggested today has been raised by members and ex-members of the Labour party, so I hope that the Secretary of State and the Minister will give them very serious consideration.

This is such a welcome and important Bill. I hope it can be made even better to become truly transformative. My Green colleagues and I will be voting for the Renters' Rights Bill tonight.

4.31 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I support this long-overdue Bill. Almost a quarter of households in Dulwich and West Norwood are renting privately, and many of them live with the instability caused by an under-regulated market. I am contacted every week by constituents who are living in unacceptable conditions, facing unaffordable rent increases or threatened with a section 21 no-fault eviction. Private renting is fundamentally unsustainable and unstable.

Too many local renters are living in poor-quality accommodation, suffering with damp and mould, but with limited levers to hold their landlord or letting agency to account. Those who complain risk reprisal evictions, from which they have no protection. Tenants are forced by rent hikes and section 21 notices to move frequently, and they are denied the security of a long-term home. Parents put children into school not knowing whether they will be able to afford to stay in the area for the duration of their education. Increasingly, young families are being priced out of London, and that contributes to a dramatic drop in school rolls, so I warmly welcome this Bill.

Nesil Caliskan: I recognise the crisis that my hon. Friend describes. Does she agree that individuals and families are paying the cost of this crisis, not only with money but with the trauma of being moved from home to home?

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a good point. This crisis in private renting is taking an unbearable toll on the health and wellbeing, the financial security and the stability of families across the country, which is why this Bill is so welcome.

I will table an amendment to the Bill. Last year, constituents of mine tragically lost their son to suicide. He was in his first year of university and had signed a

tenancy for his second-year accommodation shortly before his death. The tenancy, which had not started when this young man died, included a guarantor agreement signed by his parents. After their son's death, the letting agency insisted that the agreement applied even in the event of a tenant's death and, shockingly, began pursuing my constituents for rent payments. While facing the unbearable loss of their son, my constituents were forced to find another student to take on his tenancy in order to be relieved of their responsibility for the rent. This type of clause is not in every guarantor agreement, and it is wholly unnecessary. Landlords can insure themselves against loss of rent in the event of the death of a tenant. My amendment would outlaw the pursuit of guarantors for rent owed by a deceased tenant, to protect other families from this cruel treatment while they are grieving.

I am grateful to the Minister for Housing and Planning for his positive engagement on this issue, both in opposition and since he has been appointed to the Department. I hope the Government can accept my amendment, which was drafted with assistance from lawyers at Shelter, as a straightforward solution. I hope Members from across the House can all agree that no one facing bereavement should have to worry that they will be pursued for their loved one's rent.

Finally, on affordability, rents in Lambeth and Southwark have grown rapidly in recent years. I welcome the measures in the Bill to ensure limits to rent increases under the section 8 process, and to ban landlords from accepting rents from prospective tenants above the asking price. However, the scale of the crisis in London is so significant that there is a need for further action on rent rises. I hope that as the Bill progresses through the House, my hon. Friends will listen to the calls of the Renter's Reform Coalition and the Mayor of London, and will consider what more can be done to stabilise rents and assist with affordability.

For too long, reform of the private rented sector has been neglected, leaving renters in Dulwich and West Norwood suffering with insecurity, poor accommodation and rising costs. The effect of this crisis in private renting is destabilising for our communities and harmful for health; I see the impact of the crisis every single week in my constituency. The Renters' Rights Bill will be transformative for my constituents, and I will be proud to support it this evening.

4.36 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): During the last Parliament, the Conservative Government betrayed tenants across the country. They committed to giving renters the right to a safe and secure home by abolishing section 21 evictions, and then delayed for five years. In that time, nearly a quarter of a million people had their life turned upside-down by a section 21 eviction notice, and quarter of a million more have not complained about disrepair for fear of having such a notice served on them, so at least half a million people have suffered because the Conservatives did not keep the promise they made in 2019.

As we speak, two of my constituents face the consequences of the Conservatives' inaction. They came to the UK seeking refuge from Putin and his illegal invasion of Ukraine. One is a full-time carer for his wife, who is physically disabled and suffers from multiple severe mental health difficulties. Over the past year, their landlord has repeatedly threatened them with eviction, leaving the couple in constant uncertainty regarding their housing situation. These threats have been accompanied by surprise increases in rent and verbal abuse so bad that one of my constituents was hospitalised after suffering a major panic attack. Despite paying their rent on time and acting in accordance with their lease, my constituents have been continually threatened with a section 21 notice. Now, they face an appalling Catch-22 situation. If they leave their property, they make themselves intentionally homeless and give up the housing safety net; if they stay, they risk having the life that they have begun to build torn out from under them at a moment's notice. Their case is just one example of how a bad landlord can dominate their tenants' lives, and why this legislation must be enacted without any further delay.

I join my Liberal Democrat colleagues in welcoming the Bill, not only for the security and confidence it will bring to our constituents, but for the broader measures it will introduce. I am glad to see proposals to give tenants the right to request a pet—a request that landlords must consider and cannot unreasonably refuse. We are pleased that the Bill contains a presumption in favour of keeping pets, as they are often an integral part of a family. I join colleagues in commending the Government for finally doing what the last Administration could not—banning no-fault evictions, increasing housing security and making the rental market fairer for all.

4.38 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The Renters' Rights Bill will bring much-needed security and safety to renters. I praise the Minister for Housing and Planning and the Secretary of State for bringing forward the Bill, which is much stronger than the previous Government's Bill.

As the MP for a constituency with one of the largest private rented housing sectors in the UK—it has 17,740 private rental properties, the majority of which are rented to students—I want to use the debate to highlight problems faced by student renters, both in my constituency and across the country. Students are shouldering the burden of 14 years of Tory mismanagement of our economy. The dual housing and cost of living crisis is being compounded by landlords making it increasingly difficult for many students to secure housing. This leaves many in increasingly precarious situations.

Students in my constituency have told me of landlords asking them not just for a UK guarantor—the criterion for which is that the guarantor must own a UK property—but for deposits of up to 100% of annual rent. Such requirements disproportionately affect working-class students, care leavers, and those estranged from their families—groups that are already more vulnerable to poorer economic, educational and health outcomes. International students, too, face significant challenges, as most do not have family members with property in the UK. As one of my constituents, an international postgraduate student at Leeds University, told me:

"My only viable option was using the guarantor service 'Housing Hand', which costs me an additional £50 a month on top of rent. I am a PhD student receiving the UKRI minimum stipend…The cost of living for food and rent alone is already difficult on this

[Alex Sobel]

stipend, and, during the final week before the stipend is paid each month, I often struggle to maintain a healthy and balanced diet due to financial strain."

Research conducted by students from the Centre for Homelessness Impact found that just 36% of universities provide help with rent guarantors, that even fewer provide a rent guarantor service for students, and that, as universities themselves are facing extreme financial difficulties, such a service will become ever more unlikely.

Renting as a student is already an uphill struggle. We know, for example, that student accommodation prices have increased by 61% since 2012. Information from the National Union of Students shows that two in five students have considered dropping out because of the cost of rent. When we are trying to encourage people to attend our world-leading institutions, which strengthen the skills potential of our country's workforce, why do we put up so many barriers?

Our universities are the UK's strongest source of soft power. International students in particular are left with nothing but bad choices: they must either find a UK guarantor or pay six months' rent, or more, up front to their landlord. As one student told the all-party group for students:

"International students often face more challenges than home students. We have heard stories of students paying months of rent, only to find out that they have been scammed, and that the place they thought they'd secured does not even exist."

It is for those reasons that I would like the Government to consider banning landlords from demanding either UK rent guarantors or huge up-front payments, and perhaps limiting deposits to just three months' rent. I would also like them to end the pressure for joint tenancies to be signed too early in the academic year, so that students need not commit to accommodation before they are ready, creating artificial panic in the market. Ultimately, we must remove barriers for care leavers, students and international students. We have heard from students that access to a rent guarantor is often a determining factor in their ability to continue their degree, or even access a university education in the first place.

Everyone deserves the opportunity to succeed in their academic journey without the added stress of housing insecurity. The Government have the opportunity, through this Bill, to break down a major barrier to all students' right to pursue higher education. I hope that they will work with me on this.

4.42 pm

Satvir Kaur (Southampton Test) (Lab): Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friends on their incredible maiden speeches, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), a good friend of mine with whom I have the privilege of sharing my Parliamentary Private Secretary position. It is clear that he will be a great asset to the people of Swansea West, as well to this Chamber.

I am a firm believer that a safe, secure, affordable home should be a basic human right, that it is intrinsically linked to better life outcomes, and that this should be the case whether a person owns or rents their home. For too long, renters in my constituency of Southampton Test have suffered from no-fault evictions, rot, mould, and damp or draughty homes. Parents stay awake at night, anxious as they put their children to sleep in hazardous environments. Some are ignored by their landlords, stuck where they are, with soaring rents and fixed-term tenancies. Others are too worried to raise concerns out of fear that they will be evicted and their children will not have a place to call home.

In Southampton, homelessness soared by more than 70% in the past five years under the previous Government. Two thirds of those who declare themselves homeless in my city do so as a direct result of no-fault evictions and insecure tenancies. Nationally, the charity Shelter warned that 172 families are threatened with homelessness every day for the same reason. That equates to one family every eight minutes—a shameful inheritance from the previous Government.

Renters have long deserved far better. They were failed by the previous Government, who clearly sided with vested interests, rather than keeping their promises. I am proud to be part of this new Labour Government, who will deliver for renters and who are finally consigning no-fault evictions to the dustbin of history, and, in doing so, improving the lives of thousands in Southampton and millions across our country.

I welcome plans to stop needless rental bidding wars and to ensure an end to fixed-term tenancies; so many renters in my constituency find themselves trapped into paying rent for substandard properties. I welcome the extension of the decent homes standard to the private rented sector so that families in Southampton can live without being exposed to issues such as damp and mould, and can sleep at night without worrying about their and their children's health. As a former leader of a council, I of course welcome greater enforcement powers for local authorities to ensure that rogue landlords are identified and that improvements can be made without delay.

New measures will also save the public purse vital funds—from local councils, which currently spend millions desperately trying to house those made homeless through no-fault evictions, to the NHS, which increasingly helps patients with conditions linked to issues such as damp or mental ill health, as people of all ages struggle with the everyday anxiety of living in an unsafe, insecure home.

In conclusion, for too long renters of all ages and backgrounds across Britain and particularly in Southampton have been at the mercy of rogue landlords. Today, Labour is saying, "No more!" Homes are where we raise our families, put down roots and find a sense of belonging in our communities. That is possible only if we know we are in a safe, secure and affordable home. With this new Labour Government and the Bill, that will finally be possible for renters, who have waited too long already.

4.46 pm

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I echo comments from others about the fantastic maiden speeches that we have heard across the Chamber today. I am proud to rise in support of this landmark legislation—the most significant reform to the private rental sector in more than 40 years. Like many new Members on the Government side of the House, I have seen at first hand the consequences of our broken rental sector. Just days

before Christmas, I received an email from my landlord having lived in my home for five years. I was told that he would be "willing" to let me stay if I accepted a 29% rent increase. Meanwhile, we went for days without hot water because of a faulty boiler that repeatedly broke down. My gym membership was not to keep fit but to ensure that I could have a shower each morning before heading into work.

However, the stories I heard from my constituents during the election campaign were so much worse than anything that I have experienced. I have heard of landlords converting homes into houses in multiple occupation, cramming strangers into what used to be families' living rooms. I have spoken to mothers in tears because they have been forced to uproot their kids once again because landlord decided that it was time to sell. I will not spend too much time dwelling on some of those problems, because other Members have spoken about them, but obviously the effect on families is pretty severe. But there is a much wider effect on our society as well. It affects our economy. A stable and productive workforce depends on individuals having security in their personal lives, which section 21 evictions undermined. We have also heard about the effect that the issue has on the funding of our local councils.

To be clear, the Bill does not seek to stop good landlords removing bad tenants. Tenants must, of course, always pay their rent, look after their properties and respect their neighbours. Under the Bill, all landlords will still be able to end tenancies if there are legitimate reasons, such as wanting to sell the property. However, I urge the Government to consider extending the protected period to two years and providing clear guidance on how landlords will need to prove their intentions on those grounds.

Obviously, I agree with the Bill's approach in not introducing rent caps, which we know can create unintended consequences, but we must ensure that landlords are not able to exploit that by excessively raising rents mid-tenancy as a back-door way of evicting tenants. It is right that the Bill stops landlords from raising rents above market rates, but I would also like to hear more about how market rates will be determined; I speak from personal experience.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the landlord database is a great opportunity for us to avoid clogging up our tribunals? If the landlord database had a tenants' portal, it could help to aggregate the data so that, at local authority or postcode level, people could see what the average rent really was in their area, thus avoiding more tribunals.

Chris Curtis: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I agree. In my experience, the 29% rent hike was deemed justified because right down the road there was a property being advertised on Zoopla at that new price—but of course that property was newly furnished and had not been agreed by a landlord yet, so it was likely to be inflated above market value. We should consider using the rental database to track actual agreed rents and give us a more accurate picture of market rents, not just speculative rents.

I have a minute and a half left, so I would like to make one final point—this is my first experience of trying to scribble bits of a speech halfway through. We have heard lots of heartbreaking stories, but I want to bring the House's attention to Zeke's story. Zeke was an adorable cat who, just one day shy of his first birthday, ended up in Battersea after his family faced an impossible choice. They loved him dearly but, when it came to finding a rental home that welcomed pets, they hit wall after wall. In the end they had no choice but to give him up. Can you imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker, having to choose between a roof over your head and a loyal companion you had raised as part of your family?

Zeke is not alone. Housing is now the second most common reason animals like Zeke end up in shelters—not because their owners did not care, but because the system failed them. We are a nation of animal lovers and nearly two thirds of tenants would love to own a pet—I know that feeling; I was one of them—but for many families it is simply not possible. Properties that allow pets are few and far between, and when they move, pet owners are often forced to choose between a place to live and keeping their pets. That cruel choice leads to heartbreaking stories such as Zeke's. I warmly welcome the provisions on pets in this Bill, and the many other provisions that I know will make life better for private renters across my constituency and across the country.

4.51 pm

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate everybody who has made their maiden speech today and made excellent points in this debate. I thank the Secretary of State, Ministers and everybody involved for their hard work in preparing this Bill. They have already demonstrated a greater level of ambition on tackling housing security than the Conservatives showed in 14 years.

I receive a significant amount of correspondence from private renters concerned about high rents, insecurity and poor living conditions. Nearly half of my constituents are private renters, many of them students. I have visited some of their houses and been horrified by the extent of the damp, mould and disrepair that many are forced to live with. Sadly, many have become resigned to accept that this is what they have to deal with. Far too many families live in appalling conditions, which in turn significantly influences their physical and mental health. That should never be acceptable.

I am reassured to hear the Secretary of State talk about safety first. Safety should come first and it will be a relief to many tenants that this Bill will extend Awaab's law to the private rented sector, to ensure that repairs are undertaken in a timely manner. The Bill will also make homes safer by applying the decent homes standard to the private rented sector for the first time. I welcome that but, as a lawyer who used to practice in social welfare law, I know that many people struggle to navigate the system and will struggle to take on landlords on disrepair cases. I urge the Minister to work with colleagues to look at how we can extend social welfare law legal aid to people who need support to navigate the system.

This legislation is a major step forward and I have no doubt it will help to tackle housing insecurity and affordability in the private rented sector. However, it clearly will not solve all the problems in the sector, because many are due to the wider housing crisis. I call on Ministers to go further and investigate the possibility

[Abtisam Mohamed]

of introducing legislation to cap in-tenancy rent increases at the lower end of either inflation or wage growth. We must make it a national priority to fix the housing crisis to ensure that everyone can live in affordable, safe and secure homes, so I welcome our Government's ambition to build more affordable homes. I am delighted that we have already started this process through our plans to reform the planning system and to reinstate home building targets, which the Tories scrapped. However, affordable must really mean affordable—for far too long affordability has come without a definition, and deposits have remained unaffordable for many.

These policies will make a difference in Sheffield Central, as home ownership rates are much lower than the national average and its constituents are among the youngest in the country. We need to build more green, sustainable and genuinely affordable homes so that more of my constituents, especially young people, can leave the private rented sector and get on the housing ladder. I look forward to supporting the Government in this House to deliver their mission of building the homes we need—affordable homes—so that people in Sheffield Central and across the country can benefit.

4.55 pm

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I would like to begin by warmly welcoming this Bill and declaring that until July I was chief executive of a homelessness charity. It is well known that section 21 evictions are the second highest cause of homelessness, so it is a delight to be able to speak in the debate and to support the Government. This Bill cannot come in soon enough.

I would like to read out a short excerpt from an email I received from a constituent who was recently issued with a section 21 notice:

> "We have lived in our home for over four years and were shocked to be told that we need to move out. We have been desperately searching for a new house to call home but due to a housing shortage and extortionate rents, we cannot find anywhere to move to and are facing homelessness. In the time we have lived at our current house, we have made a life in our community. We run a business and teach twice a week at our local hall. We help care for an elderly gentleman in the village to enable him to remain in his own home. The feeling of being powerless is overwhelming. We have been completely consumed by our housing situation for five weeks now. We feel powerless to protect our boys, six and eight years old. It is hard to function and it feels like an impossible situation...Our neighbour advised us last week of the Labour Government's plan to immediately abolish section 21 notices. We sincerely hope that this happens in the future so that going forward, people never have to feel the way we do now."

That family wrote to me at the end of August. Sadly, thanks to the inaction of the previous Government this Bill is too late for them, but for many others it is timely. The perilous rental market is an anchor around the necks of many families like these and this excellent Bill is a reminder that Government really can help those in need.

However, I would like to ask the Minister to look at two tweaks to the Bill. First, will he examine whether any new no-fault grounds for eviction could include a provision that exempts tenants from paying their last two months of rent? Research by Generation Rent shows that the average unwanted house move costs a typical two-adult household £1,709. That includes finding the deposit for a new home, covering rent on two properties, taking time off work and a host of other costs. Most people do not have £2,000 lying around, so that insecurity can lead to homelessness. I urge the Government to look at those situations.

Secondly, I ask the Minister to consider whether the permitted 12-monthly rent increases should be capped at the lower level of inflation or wage growth. Character matters, and some landlords—a small proportion—have spent years extorting and squeezing their tenants. An obvious loophole some landlords will exploit to manipulate tenants is to use their annual rent increase to push rent to unexpectedly high levels and create economic evictions by the back door. That is on top of the fact that landlords are clearly increasing rent beyond any sense of the common good, with rent inflation last year outstripping wage growth by 3% and inflation by 5%. I understand that first-tier tribunals are in place for just this scenario, but evidence suggests that these tribunals have not had the overall desired effect of bringing average private rent increases in line with affordability, let alone inflation.

I am proud that this Government are genuinely committed to ensuring that the 4.6 million households renting privately in this country are no longer dependent on the whims of another for their security. That is part of a comprehensive plan, along with nationwide house building and a cross-departmental homelessness strategy, that will transform what it means to have a place of belonging and security in this country.

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

4.59 pm

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), as well as all the excellent maiden speeches made this afternoon.

I grew up in Brighton, and my parents grew up in Peacehaven, so it is a huge honour and responsibility to represent the great constituency of Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven. It is also a privilege to speak in this debate, because of all the Bills in the King's Speech, this one will have the most immediate and far-ranging impact on my constituency. Why? Quite simply, housing is the single biggest issue there. It makes up around two thirds of the casework that I receive and dominates every constituency surgery, from overcrowding—typically a mum, dad and three kids crammed into a two-bedroom flat—to overpricing, with home ownership now beyond the reach of far too many, and landlords charging London prices in a city that does not pay London wages.

In Brighton, there is also a persistent problem of homelessness and temporary accommodation, especially in the western part of my constituency. There are at least 7,500 on the council house waiting list, while 1,600 households, 50% of which have children, are living in temporary accommodation. On top of that, my constituency has the among the highest numbers of high and medium-rise blocks outside London, with people trapped for years in unsellable and unsuitable homes. You can see why, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wanted to make my maiden speech on the issue of housing.

The Bill is a big step in the right direction. Justlife, a wonderful charity operating with people in temporary accommodation in Brighton, tells me that around a quarter of all homelessness applications in the city are a result of section 21 no-fault evictions. The Bill will finally outlaw that. As the Secretary of State said earlier, applying the decent homes standard to the private rented sector will also give renters the safety and security that they need. There will be new powers for renters to challenge the excessive rent rises that we see far too often in Brighton. Given that one in four people in my constituency live in the private rented sector, that is why the Bill will have an immediate and far-reaching impact.

I thank my predecessors. When Dennis Hobden won Brighton Kemptown for Labour in 1964, he did so by seven votes and became the first Labour MP in the whole of Sussex. I am pleased to report that there are now six Labour MPs across Sussex—we are so numerous that we have our own WhatsApp group. I also thank Lloyd Russell-Moyle, who represented Brighton Kemptown for the past seven years. In particular, I thank Lloyd for his work championing LGBTQ rights, an incredibly important issue in Brighton Kemptown, given that it has one of the largest LGBTQ communities in the country. I also praise Lloyd's campaign to ban the heinous practice of conversion therapy—a ban that I am proud to say this Labour Government will now pick up and take forward.

I am delighted to say that I am the first Member of Parliament for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven. Quite right, too, because a third of my constituency extends beyond the boundaries of the city and reaches as far east as Peacehaven. Named at the end of world war one, Peacehaven lies on the Greenwich meridian, perched high above the cliff of the south downs looking out at the English channel. It is a wonderful place—although I am contractually obliged to say that, because it is where both my parents grew up, in neighbouring streets, more years ago than they would like me to admit.

I am sure that many Members will have visited my constituency at some point, whether for a trip to the seaside; to see the bustling shops of Kemptown, the tranquillity of the south downs, Rudyard Kipling's house in Rottingdean or the wonderfully restored art deco lido in Saltdean; or simply to jet-ski around Brighton marina, as the leader of the Liberal Democrats prefers to do. For those who have not had the pleasure of going, the easiest way to picture my constituency is running from west to east, from Brighton pier to Peacehaven, and from north to south, from the Amex stadium, which is home to my beloved Brighton and Hove Albion—*[Interruption.]* Thank you very much. And through the south downs to the seafront.

In between, one can see the diversity and beauty of my constituency: the vibrancy of Kemptown, the proud working-class communities of Whitehawk and Moulsecoomb, the small towns known collectively as the Deans—Woodingdean, Bevendean, Ovingdean, Saltdean and Rottingdean—and the beautiful green spaces and sloping streets of Queen's Park.

But if we look closely, we also see something else: the inequality and injustice that holds back too many lives across my constituency. Behind the picture postcard view—the downs, the pier, the lido—one in four children in my constituency grow up in relative poverty. Whitehawk, a stone's throw from the bustle of Kemptown, is in the 10% of most deprived wards in the whole country, and Moulsecoomb—within sight of the riches of the Amex and the excellence of Sussex and Brighton universities—is the second most deprived ward in Sussex.

That inequality matters: it thwarts potential and holds back life chances. As the excellent local campaign group Class Divide emphasises, children from the poorest parts of my constituency are twice as likely to be excluded from school, three times more likely to be placed outside mainstream schooling, and half as likely to get good GCSE grades. Life expectancy itself varies by seven years between the poorest wards in my constituency and the rest. The Prime Minister often says that for him, politics is not about left or right; it is about who you have in your mind's eye when you make a decision. I hope that for the time I have the great honour of representing the constituency and community that I love, I will always have in my mind's eye those who are at the sharp end of that inequality.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Marvellous. I call Chris Vince.

5.5 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to this important debate and speak in favour of this Bill. Before I do so, let me take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward) for his excellent speech. As the Member for Harlow, I live in a town full of Spurs supporters, so he is not overly popular at the moment, but my chief of staff is a fellow Seagull, so he will be pleased to show my hon. Friend support.

This is a really important debate to me, because Harlow constituency has nearly 6,000 households in the private rented sector and suffered from the previous Government's ill-thought-out permitted development legislation. However, like many people who have already spoken, this debate also has personal resonance for me as somebody who worked for two years at a homelessness charity in Harlow called Streets2Homes. My role was generally to go out, sometimes into woodland and industrial areas, to find reported rough sleepers, get them registered with our charity and help get them off the street and, quite often, into the rented sector. That is why I personally welcome this legislation, which rejects the concept of no-fault evictions, and am looking forward to voting for it later.

The experience of working for a homelessness charity can often be challenging, but sometimes it can be baffling as well. It is unbelievable to me that in my previous role, I found it easier to house someone with an alcohol or drug addiction than someone with a dog. That includes guide dogs—we had one in this Chamber earlier—as well as emotional support dogs and assistance dogs. Those are animals who help people cope with and manage medical conditions, so that is not the kind of barrier that people with those conditions should be facing. It is like saying that we will not allow people with an inhaler for their asthma to have a house. While at conference this year, I had the opportunity to visit the Guide Dogs stall and talk to the wonderful people who support that wonderful charity. They highlighted this issue to me, and I was appalled by the lack of

[Chris Vince]

awareness of it. It is an issue faced every day by people who are already at a disadvantage; we should be making their journey into a home easier, not putting up walls and barriers against them.

As a dog owner myself—I am not sure I am going to introduce my dog to Jennie just yet, because he might get a bit carried away—I emphasise how important having a pet is to a family, and the emotional bond that they create. Being pushed to choose between a roof over your head and your family is not a choice anyone should have to make. Here is a statistic—

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Vince: I will.

Johanna Baxter: Does my hon. Friend agree that once consent for a pet is granted, that consent needs to remain for the duration of the tenancy, and that we could strengthen the Bill by making that explicit in it?

Chris Vince: Ultimately, I want to do what I can to support people who have pets in their home, and my hon. Friend is right to say that we do not want people to face the anxiety of potentially being in a situation where a pet could be forced out of their home.

As I was about to say, 62% of homeowners in the UK have a pet, and as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis), we are a nation of pet lovers. Let us be very clear: this is not about punishing landlords, and never has been; this is about protecting tenants' basic rights. There needs to be clear guidance on what reasonable pet ownership means, and I am glad that the Bill recognises that.

Furthermore, 57,340 households were threatened with homelessness due to the end of an assured shorthold tenancy, which is an increase of 4.6% on 2022-23. People cannot be treated with such a dismissal. Some 21% of renters live in what we refer to as non-decent homes—homes that are not fit for living in—and this is somehow allowed. Renters are not and should not be treated in a lesser way than homeowners. They should be entitled to the same security in their lives as homeowners.

5.10 pm

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest in that my husband works for an organisation that has allocated some funding to the Renters Reform Coalition. I would like to associate myself with the remarks by my hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), for Barking (Nesil Caliskan) and for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) about the experience of so many Londoners living in the private rented sector.

I warmly welcome this Bill, which will improve the lives of millions of people. I also commend the ministerial team for the speed with which they have brought it forward after years of prevarication and delay by the Conservatives. I am deeply concerned that the amendment moved by the Opposition reveals no understanding of the state of the private rented sector and thoroughly lacks contrition about the state of the courts that the Conservative Government have left us with. Do they really not understand the impact of their previous decisions?

Across the UK, about 19% of households rent their homes from a private landlord. In the Cities of London and Westminster, that rises to over 45% of households, or over 27,000 people. Many of the renters I have spoken to do live happily in well-maintained and modern buildings, but too many of them live in homes riddled with damp and mould, and face disproportionate and out-of-the-blue rent hikes. That goes to the heart of the matter: the security of your home should not depend on who owns it. This Bill will go a long way to changing that. I welcome the measures on ending section 21 no-fault evictions, bringing an end to bidding wars and strengthening rights for pet owners. I believe these measures really will stabilise the market and reduce homelessness.

I would like to focus on the ombudsman service for the private rented sector. One of the key issues in the private rented sector has been the long-standing imbalance of power that means tenants are unable to secure action from their landlords. The ombudsman will have powers to compel landlords to issue an apology, provide information, take remedial action and pay compensation. It is positive that tenants will be able to access the ombudsman service without the need for a referral. However, there is work to do to ensure that it is clear where the responsibilities lie between the new ombudsman service and other existing bodies. The ombudsman will need to establish itself within a current landscape that is complex, as councils, the police, trading standards and the courts all have a role.

I welcome the wording in clause 104, which establishes the duties of local authorities in enforcing landlord legislation. As the new ombudsman service is set up, information sharing with local authorities will be key to empowering them to enforce its decisions. I believe that the ombudsman service should also be accountable to Parliament and to the public. Almost a third of regulators were not scrutinised by Parliament from 2019 to 2024, which simply is not good enough. A formal timetable should therefore be established for the new ombudsman to be reviewed by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Renters should also have clear information on where and how they can seek redress. The Department should publish guidance for renters about lodging complaints, and information on complaints should be shared with other relevant bodies, including the police and councils. The wording of clause 63 is currently open to interpretation as to who will carry out the redress scheme, and I urge the Secretary of State to consider merging this service with the existing housing ombudsman.

The success of this Bill will of course depend on the ability of local authorities to enforce it. Residents of the Cities of London and Westminster, from the west end to Dolphin square, are likely to benefit from this, which I strongly welcome. Burdens should be lowered to enable local authorities to regulate without the interference of national Governments. I know that, along with strong support for the measures in this Bill, many in the House will join me in supporting this Government's mission to build 1.5 million new homes during this Parliament.

5.14 pm

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak in support of the Bill, which will bring a range of positive and necessary reforms to the private rented sector. I welcome it wholeheartedly. The private rented sector is growing rapidly, and it is imperative that tenants and landlords can operate the system safely and with appropriate protections. I am particularly pleased to see the application of the decent homes standard to the rented sector, which will ensure that tenants have the tools to challenge unsafe housing conditions and hold landlords and letting agents to account. I know that renters in Doncaster Central will be pleased to hear that.

I take this opportunity to ask the Government to address the issues that care leavers face in securing housing in my constituency and across the country. It was welcome to hear the Prime Minister say in his conference speech that we will provide homes for all young care leavers, because that has never been more important. That is a group who continue to face discrimination from some private landlords. A survey by Centrepoint found that one in 10 care leavers have been refused accommodation by private landlords. The same survey revealed that 40% of care leavers have insufficient savings for a deposit. Those factors can often force care leavers into unsafe living situations, such as poor-quality properties or living with other adults who are older and unfamiliar. Ultimately, these barriers lead to a lot of care leavers becoming homeless.

Prior to entering this House, I was a prison officer, and I worked with many care-experienced men, who were there disproportionately, because care leavers represent just under a third of the prison population. Lack of access to safe and affordable housing limits employment and education opportunities and prevents access to financial and health services. This is contributing to the poor outcomes we see with this group, and we must change those outcomes.

It is my hope that the Government will consider taking up some of the recommendations offered in the latest briefing from Barnardo's to ensure that care leavers have the unique legal protections and resources they need to access housing in the private rented sector. That includes the provision of rent deposit and guarantor schemes across all local authorities and the addition of care leavers to the groups against whom landlords cannot discriminate when letting out property. I also hope that the crucial reforms in the Bill will be accompanied by the accelerated building of more social homes in the UK to ensure greater access to secure housing.

I am glad that this Government are introducing crucial protections for tenants, and my next hope is that their efforts will ensure that all UK residents, including those who have left care, can access the safe accommodation that they need and deserve.

5.17 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): I welcome this Bill with warmth. It will ban section 21 no-fault evictions for new and existing tenancies and introduce a number of standards for the private rented sector, including—crucially—Awaab's law. There is no doubt that the no-fault eviction ban is testament to the work of campaigners all over the country, and it has the potential to drastically improve the situation facing private renters.

I would like to probe a little bit more about the balance in the Bill, especially regarding the extended possession grounds for landlords to reclaim their properties. Many of us would like to see the new eviction grounds being more favourable to tenants. Will the Minister elaborate on the evidence that landlords will be expected to provide to prove that they are genuinely moving in or selling, so that the provision is not abused?

It is welcome to see that the Bill will make it illegal for landlords to discriminate against tenants in receipt of benefits or with children. My constituents would also have liked to see the Bill end the immigration right-to-rent rules, which are part of the disgraceful hostile environment. Those rules force landlords and agents to check tenants' immigration status, disproportionately impacting people of colour.

One might argue that the level of rent itself is the most discriminatory factor. The Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), and others have mentioned that the evidence is overwhelmingly clear that an effective measure to stop renters being evicted would be rent controls. All too often a 20% rent hike is simply a no-fault eviction under a different name.

The availability of housing that people can actually afford is key. It is not just that affordable homes are in short supply; they are also, in fact, not affordable. In east London we know that well. People are also concerned about gentrification. It is my strong view, and that of many constituents who have contacted me over the years, that development should be focused on solving the existing housing crisis and driven in the interests of local people. We really need investment in our communities. We need a mass house building programme.

We need to be honest about what the private sector can deliver. It makes little sense, if the housing crisis is to be effectively tackled, that for every affordable home —which is not, in fact, affordable—two, three or even more luxury flats continue to be built. Building a new generation of social housing, and particularly council housing, is the only true long-term solution to the housing crisis.

Campaigners and tenants' unions have rightly welcomed the Bill. It is an important positive step, and I look forward to engaging with it constructively during its journey through the Commons, because housing is a right, not a commodity.

5.21 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Let me start by congratulating the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), for working relentlessly on these matters in opposition and carrying that momentum into Government. This far-reaching Bill will end section 21 no-fault evictions, which for too long have been a major factor in driving up homelessness. It gives real protections to those who have been left to the whims of the market and have borne the brunt of the housing crisis and a protected period at the beginning of the tenancy, brings an end to discrimination faced by those in receipt of social security, brings an end to the bidding wars, and rolls out the decent homes standard across the private rented sector.

[Paula Barker]

The Government will no doubt face stiff resistance from the usual suspects, who will endeavour to pick away at key aspects of the legislation, not least the four-month notice period that the homelessness sector and charities such as Crisis have welcomed. I urge the Government to stand firm, knowing that they are on the right side of history.

Since 1980, the private rented sector has more than doubled in size, overtaking social housing to become Britain's second-largest form of housing tenure. The PRS is the most expensive of all forms of housing tenure, and rents are increasing. In 2023 the Centre for Policy Studies noted:

> "Since 2010, the cost of renting has gone up by 44.5% according to the Halifax. During this period, wages have risen by 30.4% and inflation has risen by 24%. This is hardly a sign of a functioning market."

Not only in London but in our great northern cities, including Liverpool and Manchester, the private rented sector has lost all sense of proportion as a cabal of landlords and letting agents has sought to jack up rents again and again. Young adults are particularly affected.

Remaining on rents, the Government must go further. I urge them to look at rent stabilisation methods, including tagging rents to the lowest of local wage growth or inflation to guard against further hardship being faced by our communities. On enforcement of the decent homes standard, I urge the Government to resource local authorities adequately to ensure that that work is carried through effectively. I also raise a small but significant absence in the Bill: reform of the deposit system, which is routinely abused in too many instances. I will look to work with the Minister on a constructive amendment in that regard.

The national database is a game changer with the potential to properly regulate the sector across the piece. I would like to see more information available on the national database, including information on letting agents managing tenancies being tagged to properties. As we move into this new phase to protect the millions living in the private rented sector, education and information being readily available is crucial to tenants knowing and understanding their rights. Maybe we could use the national database as a portal for resources available to tenants.

I end by once again paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister. I know that he has a steely determination to see the Bill through. I hope that Members across the House will back him in doing so.

5.24 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Affordability is a huge issue for private renters. As a nation, we spend more on rent as a proportion of our income than most of Europe. World Health Organisation guidelines state that housing is unaffordable if more than 30% of income is spent on housing costs. Here in the UK, the average renter pays more than that. The private rented sector currently provides the least affordable housing of all tenures, and most renters settle on a place they can just about afford. That is exacerbated by some landlords and agents asking for more than the advertised price, which pits prospective tenants against each other in a bidding war. The tenant who wins out, paying more than expected, then has no way to vet their landlord.

Some 21% of privately rented properties do not meet the decent homes standard—a far higher proportion than in both owner-occupied and socially rented homes. With no landlord register, there is no way of knowing how well a given landlord treats their tenants and properties. Tenants are expected to leap into the unknown and just hope their property is up to scratch.

If they move in and find their property is not up to scratch, the chances are that they would be unlikely to complain because, with section 21 no-fault evictions still in place, they do not have security. They can be kicked out for no reason. The last Government sat idly by on this. Almost a million renters have been given no-fault evictions since the Conservatives first pledged to scrap them. Once they are evicted, the whole frustrating process starts again.

With all this in mind, it is no wonder that housing insecurity in the private rented sector is higher than for other tenures. Renters are more likely to move often, staying in a property for an average of four years, compared with 12 years for those in social housing and 17 for homeowners. That insecurity means a greater risk of homelessness. Nearly a quarter of homeless people, or those most at risk of homelessness, cited the end of a private tenancy as the main cause of their homelessness or risk.

Stress from insecure housing affects job prospects and health outcomes. It can lead to mental health problems and difficulty sleeping, and it can contribute to physical illness, too, particularly in children. It is astonishing how under-regulated the private rented sector is. The decent homes standard is not applied, and neither is Awaab's law, which sets clear legal expectations about the timeframes within which landlords must take action to make homes safe where they contain serious hazards. By passing this Bill, we will fix both those loopholes.

More than one in five of my constituents in North West Cambridgeshire are private tenants, and the chaos in the sector affects all age groups. The stereotypical renter is often portrayed as younger, but let us not forget the significant proportion of older people and pensioners who rent in the private sector—there are more than 1,000 in North West Cambridgeshire, according to data from the last census.

The Bill will tackle the sector's problems head on. It means strengthened rights to challenge unreasonable rent increases. It means an end to rental bidding, to landlord anonymity and to frightening, sudden and unjustifiable section 21 evictions. The Conservatives failed to protect private renters despite promising action for so long, so I am particularly pleased that we are introducing the Bill so soon into our time in office.

The Bill's measures build on the Government's plan to create a housing sector that works for all, regardless of tenure. Manifesto commitments to make housing more affordable, to support first-time buyers and to prioritise the building of new socially rented homes are exactly what we need, and I look forward to the publication of the Government's long-term housing strategy, which will set out these objectives in more detail.

I know how important this Bill will be for my constituents in North West Cambridgeshire. They deserve stronger rights and protections and, above all, security of housing, and we will deliver that.

5.28 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The rental sector is not working. Nearly one fifth of households in England are in the private rented sector, and today these 4.6 million renters might be turfed out of house and home with little notice and minimal justification. They are subject to steep rent increases, bidding wars and discrimination for starting a family or being on benefits, and too often they have to choose between giving up a beloved family pet and being turfed out on to the street. Too many live in substandard or even dangerous accommodation, with limited recourse to hold landlords to account.

As rents tick up above inflation like clockwork, saving in any respect for renters has become a Sisyphean task, meaning that home ownership, parenthood and a basic sense of stability become impossible dreams. In the past year, rents in Bracknell Forest have shot up by almost 12%—a figure far higher than for the rest of the south-east and the UK. That is yet another damaging consequence of the Conservative party's shocking mishandling of the economy, and the inevitable result of 14 years of failure to address the housing crisis. That is why my constituents, including a young couple who reached out to me recently, are keen to see the Bill passed. They have just had their first child, a daughter, and even after years of working, they cannot afford a deposit while paying rising rents and meeting increasing food, energy and fuel bills.

There cannot be a growing future for a country that denies too many of its families the basic right to security and a decent home. The Bill brings forward long-overdue common-sense changes to increase safety and fairness. It asserts the right of tenants to make more decisions about their home, and introduces a fairer arbitration process for disputes and the right to request a pet—a welcome new right for the many animal lovers in my constituency.

The Conservatives said for years that they would end no-fault evictions. That claim was in both the 2019 and 2024 Conservative party manifestos, though the shadow Secretary of State has today disowned those commitments. The Labour party will not just talk about ending no-fault evictions; we will deliver on that. The Bill will also end rental bidding. This desperately needed measure will stop private renters, who already have the shortest notice period in which to find accommodation of any household type, from being undercut at the last minute and left scrambling around for a replacement property, with the risk of having to pay more for something worse. The Bill introduces a mechanism through which renters can challenge unfair rent increases, while ensuring that landlords can increase rents in line with market increases. It prevents tenants from being hit by multiple rent increases in a year.

The Bill will also extend Awaab's law to the private sector for the first time, requiring private landlords to address issues such as damp and mould swiftly. The Government are bringing in a new decent homes standard, so that no one is forced to live in unsafe accommodation. These measures will save lives and end the discrepancy between the social and private rented sectors. Importantly, they will also level the playing field for the many decent landlords across the country who already do right by their tenants, and who are too often undercut by far less decent landlords.

These issues are found in my constituency and across the country, so it is a shame to see so few Conservative Members standing up for the renters in their constituency. The Bill will make renting easier, more affordable and more secure for tenants, while providing clarity and assurance to landlords. It will reset the balance between tenants and landlords, so that the system is fairer for everyone. After five years of Tory talk about rental reform, Labour is getting on and delivering real change for working people and renters in Bracknell Forest, and real change across England.

5.32 pm

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I draw to the House's attention to the fact that my lovely husband works for the housing charity Shelter. I pay tribute to everyone who today made their maiden speech, which is nerve-racking. Well done; they have been excellent contributions.

I welcome the Bill and thank the Minister for his diligence and personal determination to bring it to the House. It is a truly transformational piece of legislation that will dramatically improve the lives of nearly 10,000 of my constituents in private rented accommodation in Darlington. The Bill delivers on our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity for everyone. In our manifesto, we pledged to offer families security, and I am proud that three months into our Government, we are already forging ahead with that.

In my constituency, we have really wonderful historical housing, from Georgian mansions created to house the giants of the railway industry, to rows of lovely bungalows built to house retired railway workers. Across the town, people take pride in their houses. The creativity shown in people's gardens, especially as we approach spooky season, brings joy to many of us who live there. That said, while most people live a decent life in my town, too many renting privately are struggling to get what I believe is a fundamental right—a secure and safe home. This Bill will help them.

I will highlight a couple of stories from my constituency to illustrate why we need this legislation. On a dark and rainy evening, I met a woman who was a carer for a family member. She had paid her deposit, and paid her rent on time every month, yet she was not given a legal tenancy. She knew she was vulnerable, but had nowhere to turn. The Bill will give her the right to contact, for free, a new private rented sector ombudsman, who will help her to sort out her situation. The Bill will give our councils the power to administer fines to landlords who refuse to comply with the law.

Another of my constituents' stories highlights that the Prime Minister's support for better veterans' rights is desperately needed. My constituent, a father and a veteran, has been served a section 21 notice, meaning that he will be evicted without grounds. He already has mental health challenges, and his elderly mother has offered to take him in, but she lives in a small bungalow, and fears that that might jeopardise the agreement that gives him shared custody of his daughter. That is a wholly unacceptable way for anyone to be treated, let alone those who have served our country. The Bill will help this family. Banning section 21 no-fault evictions would give him more security.

While I have chosen to highlight two difficult cases, it is vital that I commend the majority of landlords, who do right by their tenants. The Bill will help them, too.

[Lola McEvoy]

I ask the Minister to use the full potential of the landlord database to support tenants and good landlords alike. The landlord database could have a tenant portal, allowing those who are looking for rented property to see the tenancy advantages of having a good landlord. That would put those who do right by their tenants at a competitive advantage. The landlord database could also show aggregated average rents by postcode and property type, and at local authority level, so that tenants and landlords know what a fair rent rise would be; that would alleviate the pressure on tribunals.

I also want to highlight the provision ending discrimination against those in receipt of housing benefit when it comes to renting certain properties. That is long overdue. Those who have been unfairly banned from renting properties—often working mothers—will be helped by the change. Making that discrimination illegal is necessary, given the hugely depleted social housing stock in constituencies such as mine, but I am proud to say that the Government will rebuild the housing stock. On the discrimination clause, I ask the Minister to give due consideration to indirect forms of discrimination, such as the requirement from some landlords for several months' rent in advance. That is unaffordable for many working people in my constituency. Anything that can be done to stipulate a maximum of a reasonable number of weeks, such as four, would mitigate that.

Finally, the many pet owners and animal lovers across the House will applaud the Bill. I welcome it, and the right of all tenants to secure tenancy, fair rent and good-quality homes for their family and their furry friends.

5.37 pm

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for bringing forward this legislation, which will have a significant impact on many of my constituents in Gillingham and Rainham, where the number of people living in the private rented sector has increased by 162% in the last two decades. It is vital that the law catches up with the reality of people's lives. That is why I am so proud that this Government have brought in the Bill at this point, when the previous Government failed to do so.

The rights of tenants do not have to be pitted against those of landlords. Having a system that is inherently fair, gives renters stability and offers them the right to live in a home of a decent standard should not be seen as an attack on landlords, many of whom are doing the right thing. It should be seen as an opportunity to create a healthy and stable private rented market that plays a fundamental role in tackling the housing crisis, rather than adding to it.

Like many colleagues who have spoken, I find that housing is the No. 1 issue that my constituents contact me about. Some have raised the appalling conditions that they live in but are too scared to raise with their landlord for risk of eviction. Others are concerned about the significant rent hikes that they face, which they cannot afford, while many have received a section 21 notice and have been forced to leave the property that they have lived in for decades, with no alternative.

An insecure rental market places significant pressures on local councils. My local authority, Medway, faces budget pressures when it comes to temporary accommodation—the costs are £3 million above what was forecast—and other authorities are in a similar situation, or much worse. That is an unsustainable position for cash-strapped councils to face year on year. With that in mind, I welcome the strides that the Bill makes in ending rental discrimination; it makes it illegal to discriminate against those on housing benefit, and empowers tenants to challenge unreasonable rent hikes. There is also the much-needed end to section 21 notices. I campaigned for that while working for a homelessness charity, and the sector was deeply disappointed when the previous Government failed to deliver it.

However, further safeguards are required to ensure that protections are robust, and there should be clear evidence thresholds that enable tenants to understand better how they can benefit from the changes in the law. That should also apply to the exemptions that we have specified for landlords. For example, if a landlord chooses to sell their property and, as a result, evict their tenant, the legislation should include a clear evidence baseline, setting out the parameters for what is considered to be a genuine intention to sell. Finally, local authorities will be crucial to the Bill's success; it places new regulatory and enforcement responsibilities on them, so proper resourcing will be necessary to support that work.

This important, much-needed Bill has the ability to reform the sector robustly, and I hope the Minister will continue to review opportunities to ensure that it is strengthened as it progresses.

5.40 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Some 38% of households in my constituency are in the private rented sector. In England, there are 11 million renters, and the number keeps growing. They have been stuck in a failed system for years. About one in three are in poverty once their housing costs are taken into account, while no-fault evictions are a leading cause of homelessness. Renters need greater protections, security and rights, but their voices and their interests have been ignored by previous Governments.

The Conservatives first promised to end no-fault evictions in 2019, but their Renters (Reform) Bill, already much delayed, stalled in the last Parliament—in no small part because of the influence of landlords in their party, some of whom we have heard from today—so this cruel threat of eviction, as the Secretary of State rightly described it, is still hanging over renters. The fact that we are on the precipice of banning no-fault evictions once and for all is a huge cause for celebration. I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister on introducing the Bill so swiftly, and I thank all who have campaigned for this change for so many years, from tenants unions to homelessness charities.

The Bill will also extend the decent homes standard and Awaab's law to the private sector for the first time. It will allow tenants to challenge above-market rent increases, and will give local authorities stronger powers to crack down on unscrupulous landlords. It will create a national landlord register, give tenants more time to find a home if landlords evict them in order to move in or sell, and introduce the right to keep pets. These

measures are vital, and the Bill must pass into law, but we need to go further still if we are to fix a system that is broken to its core. We cannot leave it to markets to stop rents being hiked to unaffordable levels, so we should look seriously at rent controls. We must also ensure that landlords cannot get away with ignoring the measures in the Bill. Local authorities need not only the power but the resources to investigate breaches and enforce these measures, and not just the ability but a duty to issue civil penalties to landlords who illegally evict their tenants.

Renters want a home, not just a house in which to live temporarily. They want to build lives in their communities, not feel that they will soon be priced out. Given that one in three disabled renters live in homes that are unsuitable for them, I urge the Minister to make it explicit in law that landlords cannot unreasonably refuse home adaptations. Reforming the private rented sector is not just about doing what is right for tenants; it is about doing what is best for our whole society. We will not tackle homelessness, poverty or inequality without it.

5.43 pm

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to support a Bill that finally ends section 21 no-fault evictions and strengthens the rights of the 20% of households in the Medway towns who are renting privately, and who have experienced rent increases of, on average, 11% in the past year alone. As a number of Labour Members have mentioned, the last Government failed repeatedly to end no-fault evictions, despite that being a manifesto promise. They therefore presided over a situation in which rents skyrocketed, pushing even renting a home, let alone the dream of home ownership, out of many working people's capacity.

I really welcome this long-overdue rebalancing of the relationship between landlord and tenant. From now on, unscrupulous and exploitative landlords will no longer be able to ignore the concerns of tenants, impose unreasonable rent increases or evict families because they ask for repairs to substandard and often deficient homes, often to remarket at a higher rent. I welcome the Government's focus on reducing homelessness and the number of households in temporary accommodation. Local authority data shows that about 509 households in Medway are currently living in temporary accommodation, including about 818 children.

There must be greater understanding of the detrimental impact on society of people being stuck in cramped and unsuitable accommodation, and greater recognition of the waste of valuable public resources that councils are forced to spend on temporary accommodation for those who have been made homeless by landlords using section 21 evictions. This is money that we should instead use to build the new, high-quality and sustainable social homes for rent that the country sorely needs.

Our aim must be to protect families from eviction from their homes of many years, and from being uprooted from their local communities and social networks. Anchorage House, in my constituency, is a perfect example of where an east London borough has placed many people who have been evicted in temporary accommodation. The children's ability to learn and the adults' ability to work have been disrupted, and the health and wellbeing of entire families has often dramatically worsened. The steep social and financial costs of section 21 evictions are paid by councils, schools, workplaces and the NHS, and this cannot continue. We have to end the unhealthy reliance on a temporary accommodation system that really is not temporary for many people.

The Bill strikes the right balance by still providing landlords with reasonable grounds for possession while ending the constant churn. I have been greatly concerned by the treatment of constituents who have been served with section 21 notices and the huge challenges they face in securing new accommodation, and I really welcome the increase in the notice period for some of the mandatory grounds for possession from two to four months. Members should recognise that losing one's home creates huge upheaval and that, with high demand for rental properties, it can be very difficult to secure a new home. I can certainly speak to my personal experience of that.

I echo Members' calls to make sure that local councils have the right resources to enforce some of the new powers, which I greatly welcome. I believe that I heard the Secretary of State indicate in her opening remarks that there would be ringfenced funding for that purpose, and I encourage the Minister and the Secretary of State to ensure that the details come forward before the Bill receives Royal Assent.

My constituents in Rochester and Strood really cannot afford not to have this Bill become law. It will help so many individuals and families, and create a better, fairer private rented sector for tenants and landlords alike.

5.47 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate all Members who have given their maiden speeches today, and the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), for all his hard work on this Bill.

If I am honest, I am disappointed that the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), is not still with us—looking at the faces of Conservative Members, she appears to be unexpectedly busy—because she seemed to argue that the challenge that the Government are creating is to intervene poorly in a market. In the limited time available to me, I want to take on the challenge that she created, because I am not sure that she actually understands what this market is. That may well show in Conservative members' voting if they think they are voting for somebody who understand market economics.

Let us look at what we are talking about. In my constituency, we have had the biggest growth in affordable housing in London, yet we have also had a 55% increase in homelessness. This is not a healthy market where there is effective competition, and where every participant has the tools to operate equally. Let me try to explain through some of the stories from my constituency. My constituent Kate, who works in the NHS on a nurse's salary, has had to move every single year, because landlords are selling properties and putting up prices. That is not healthy—it is an overheated market. It means that the state picks up the pieces, through the salaries we need to pay and to deal with the consequences for her and her family.

[Ms Stella Creasy]

My constituent Claire, who is self-employed, started renting her home for £1,750 a month in November 2019, and it had increased by £200 by 2023. She has now been threatened with another £400 a month raise, putting her total rent up to £2,350 for the same property within five years. What powers do my constituents have in that market, apart from to exit? That is not a healthy, functioning market.

We are seeing mould in properties, so the quality of goods in this market is not good enough. Emily, a mum from Walthamstow, was scrubbing mould from the walls of her three-month-old son's room every single day. She eventually walked out because she found mould on the underside of her son's cot mattress. But she was afraid to complain because she was afraid of section 21 eviction powers, so she does not even have the voice of exiting the market. Albert Hirschman would be horrified. We have to end the scandal of no-fault evictions, and we have to deal with the mould.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Creasy: Of course I will let the hon. Gentleman in. If he is going to make a declaration of interest, obviously I will let him intervene.

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Lady is making some excellent and valid points, but does she agree that the London borough of Waltham Forest should ensure that its residents who are homeless—our heart goes out to those people—are cared for and looked after in Waltham Forest? At the moment, her borough council is sending her homeless constituents to the London borough of Havering. They are living in Harefield Manor in Romford. Surely Waltham Forest should look after its homeless people in its own borough.

Ms Creasy: I know that the Conservative party is about to go down a rabbit hole about immigration, but honestly, moving people from Walthamstow to the hon. Gentleman's constituency is not the challenge here. We have a broken rental market where the rights of renters do not allow them to compete fairly.

Let me give the hon. Gentleman another example so that I can explain the problem. The reason we need to tackle bidding wars is that there is a straight-out conflict of interest affecting the consumer. How can the person who represents them to the landlord also represent them fairly in a rental agreement? It is little wonder that Catherine, one of my constituents, found that she had to offer £300 over the asking price to secure a flat in a bidding auction. That is why people from Walthamstow are being moved out, and the hon. Gentleman would do well to think about sorting that market out, rather than trying to build a blockade on the A406.

Discrimination against single parents is widespread in the market, by definition because of what happens when households need to rent property. Ruth, in my constituency, is a single mum with two young children. She was told by agents, "Don't even bother applying." She could pay the rent and she was entitled to housing, but she was not even entitled to compete in this market.

In the final minute I have, I want to make a plea to the Minister about the credit rating of those in our private rented sector. It is not true that renting in the private sector automatically damages someone's ability to get a mortgage, but if they are having to move time and again, their credit rating clock goes back to the start because lenders look at their addresses, they have to re-register for all their utility bills and they have to keep building up their good record. That gets taken into account by some lenders. People are finding that this affects other forms of credit, including the credit cards that many of them are using to pay their bills. In my constituency, the average percentage of people's income spent on rent is 44%. If they have kids and are trying to pay for childcare, it does not take a rocket scientist or Ayn Rand to realise that this market is not working for them.

I believe we could do more if we came up with a good credit score passport to help those constituents of mine and others, who are paying their bills but who have been evicted through no fault of their own, not to lose their precious good credit rating. I hope the Minister will be willing to listen to some ideas about how we can do that with the companies.

Thank goodness for this legislation. It is long overdue, because tackling unfair markets is absolutely what good co-operators like myself and good people who care about social justice wish to do, and I shall vote wholeheartedly for it as a result.

5.53 pm

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I welcome the new Bill put forward by the Government. I only wish that Conservative Members had expressed as much interest and passion in this subject as they did yesterday when it came to defending tax breaks for private education. Politics, as they say, is about priorities, and the priorities of this Government are clear. In my constituency of Crewe and Nantwich, I have been deeply saddened by the number of constituents I have spoken to who are affected by this policy area, and shocked at some of the individual stories I have heard since taking office.

Being able to rent in comfort and stability is a luxury for many of my constituents, which is why I support the ending of section 21 no-fault evictions. According to reports in Cheshire East, we have seen 74 accelerated repossession orders made this year alone, with 15 having been completed. One of the first cases that I dealt with after becoming an MP related to this matter. My constituent Kerry, a single mother of two young children, had been threatened with no-fault eviction and was on the brink of homelessness. She was able to find accommodation with the support of my office, but this issue is neither isolated nor uncommon, as we have heard from many Members today. These are the real, lived consequences of 14 years of Conservative failure.

I am immensely proud that this Government are willing to take action where the previous Government dithered and delayed. Had the previous Government enacted their proposals rather than bowing to the interests of their lobbyists, many vulnerable people across the country could have been spared both the mental and physical toll.

The Bill also applies Awaab's law and introduces a decent homes standard for the private sector. In 2022, 32% of private rented sector homes in the north-west would have failed the decent homes standard, the highest proportion of any English region and higher than the English average of 21%. Around 21% of those homes in the north-west contained a category 1 hazard, which is higher than the English average of 12%, and around 6% of rented homes contained damp or mould. This is nothing short of a crisis.

The previous Government completely failed renters in my constituency and across the north-west of England. They failed, and they have left it for this Labour Government to make the right decisions so that we change people's lives for the better. I believe that all the Government's proposals—ending no-fault evictions, strengthening tenants' legal protections, implementing the decent homes standard and establishing a database for the sector—are important and sensible policies. They will be truly lifesaving in some cases, so I will be glad to vote for them.

5.57 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Recent statistics show that 50% of the private rented sector in Cornwall does not meet the decent homes standard, way above the average of 21%. Less than 20% of homes in Cornwall were in the private rented sector four years ago, yet a quarter of our children and young people were living in those homes, including a third of our under-fives.

That has been evidenced by the noticeable uptick in recent years of section 21 evictions that affect families with young children. Cornwall now has more than 800 households in emergency or temporary accommodation, and many of them are young families who have struggled to find somewhere else to live because of the cost, their children or even their cats. Because of our geographical spread, many of those families have ended up in holiday parks, caravan sites or hotels up to an hour and a half's drive from home. With poor rural transport links, this often leaves families completely cut off from jobs, schools and support networks.

In September 2020, Cornwall council's economic growth committee published an inquiry into the private rented sector in Cornwall and recommended a number of measures to extend licensing powers. It also recommended data gathering on landlords and tenants in the private rented sector, Disclosure and Barring Service checks, longer terms and the limiting of annual rent increases. However, covid happened, further local government cuts affected officers' capacity and the council changed to a Conservative administration that was wary of upsetting landlords following covid, so none of the recommendations was enacted.

Regardless of the council's caution, the private rented sector has still been decimated in Cornwall, with many landlords selling up or flipping to lucrative short-term holiday lets. Prices have skyrocketed, and many people are struggling to find a home, which is why I am so pleased and relieved that the Government have prioritised this Bill. It will bring in many of the measures proposed by that Cornish report—at last, we will end no-fault evictions, introduce longer protected terms and limit annual rent rises. Awaab's law will force landlords to follow strict timescales to inspect and repair homes, including those with damp and mould, and the decent homes standard will apply to the private rented sector for the first time, with local councils given the power to fine landlords who fail to address serious hazards.

Many people are shut out of the market if they have children or pets, or are on benefits. Changes to stop that happening will prevent the most vulnerable in my constituency remaining unhoused, and the heartache as people have to decide to give up treasured pets.

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Lady is making some compelling points and mention pets. Does she remember the Dogs and Domestic Animals (Accommodation and Protection) Bill of 2020, which I put to the House all those years ago? I am glad that the measures in that Bill now being brought into legislation. Does she agree that this Bill needs to be extended further, so those in social housing, as well as those in freehold accommodation, can have a pet, so everyone can have a pet at home, and not lose their home because they love and care about their cherished animal?

Jayne Kirkham: I was not here when the hon. Gentleman introduced his previous Bill, but I am sure the Minister has considered the importance of pets to people living in all types of housing.

The court system and local authorities will need extra capacity to deal with the extra work created by the legislation. I was pleased to hear the announcements about digitisation and the ombudsman. The proposed changes will support the security of privately renting families in Truro, Falmouth and across Cornwall. As I have said, many people in Cornwall have been evicted from their rented homes with two months' notice, so they can be used as short-term or holiday lets. We know that Cornwall council is the local authority with the largest supply of short-term lets outside London.

There are 24,300 holiday let properties in Cornwall, up 30% on 2019. Statistics from the council tax base tell us that over 13,000 second homes are registered in Cornwall, which is nearly 5% of the total housing stock and five times higher than the average across England. There are also 27,000 families on the waiting list for social housing, but Cornwall has only 10,000 council houses and 22,000 housing association homes.

I am pleased that the Minister is considering a toolbox of measures that could be made available to local authorities to discourage the further depletion of the private rented sector and full-time residential housing in Cornwall, such as the higher council tax that is coming in, licensing and registration, planning restrictions and closing the business rates council tax loophole.

In conclusion, I very much welcome the Bill. It provides many benefits for the people in Truro and Falmouth who rely on the private rented sector for their home, and certainty for the landlords who provide those homes.

6.2 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I congratulate Members from across the House on their excellent, humorous and moving maiden speeches.

Most landlords are good landlords and play a vital role in the housing market. I am glad that the Secretary of State changed the name of the Bill from the Renters

[John Slinger]

(Reform) Bill to the Renters' Rights Bill, because decent housing is a human right. However, making that right meaningful to private rentals has been rendered meaningless in recent years. Bizarrely, but perhaps not surprisingly, that is because the rights of those with vested interests have been allowed to trump those of millions of hard-working people, families and, especially, young people.

It is part of what I call "the moon landing paradox": human beings can land a man on the moon and, here in the UK, we can build the Elizabeth line under London, but we cannot provide decent, affordable private rented accommodation. We can do the spectacular, but not the simple. In previous Parliaments, I imagine constituents who asked their MPs about the issue were often given the answer that providing such accommodation was too difficult. That is why I am delighted that this new Labour Government are simply not accepting that something so fundamental to human dignity is too difficult.

I wish to touch on a couple of areas raised by my constituents in and around the town of Rugby. First, ensuring that rent increases are more controlled and predictable will greatly help my constituents who have suffered from landlords demanding rent increases with as little as 10 days' notice. That is wrong and this Bill will protect people by reinforcing the rule that rents can be increased only once a year and with at least two months' notice.

Secondly, abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions will help protect constituents such as mine who have been evicted from their private rented properties at short notice for no other reason. This has left some of them on the street, rendering them homeless, which is shameful. Supporting this Bill will give them greater protection and peace of mind. Preferencing the interests of ordinary working people over the vested interests of others requires that we overcome what I term the "moon-landing paradox" and achieve something that is obviously much needed, that is a right and that should be possible in the year 2024 in a country as rich as ours. I know that this Government can and will do it for the renters of Rugby and across the country.

Finally, when a constituent comes to my next surgery, I am glad that I am one of an intake of MPs who will be able to say, after many decades and thanks to the efforts of my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, and her Ministers, that it is not too difficult, that it is doable and that soon it will be done.

6.6 pm

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): It is an honour to stand here today. I have worked on these issues for more than 15 years. A decade ago, I ran the "Evict Rogue Landlords" campaign at Shelter. I spent a decade on the board of the Nationwide Foundation, funding renter groups and campaigners such as the Renter's Reform Coalition, and a happy year on the board of Generation Rent, which was ended only by my election.

There is so much to welcome in this Bill, but I am so sad that the Opposition Benches are so empty and that Conservative Members have wasted so much time. I thought that the shadow Secretary of State's speech was curious, trampling on previous Conservative promises on section 21, citing stats sourced from landlord lobbyists about landlords leaving the sector, and rewriting history about why the previous Tory Bill failed. It was quite a performance.

Representing Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley, I stand to speak for those renters who use housing benefit to pay their rent. I am so glad that the Bill will end the disgraceful "no DSS" policy. In the long term, the answer for most of my constituents who rent privately is a social home, and I would like to see the proportion of private rented properties in my constituency reduce as we build the social rented homes that we have promised.

There is so much that is so good in this Bill. I think my second favourite measure is the application of the decent homes standard to private renting. Over the past 15 years, I have met renter after renter living with damp dripping down the walls, infestations, faulty electrics, and landlords who just do not care—they do not fix it, but still take the rent every month—with temporary accommodation landlords often the worst. Bringing in Awaab's law and decent homes, and supporting councils to enforce the law will make the change and make every home safe.

I wish to associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh). At Shelter, a decade ago, I worked with the Lullaby Trust to make sure that babies were safe in temporary accommodation and I am sad, angry and shocked to hear of the deaths of 55 babies in temporary accommodation in the years since. But, without doubt, my favourite measure in the Bill is the end of section 21. For once and for all, we will end the ability of landlords to throw people out of their homes "just 'cos". For 40 years, the cards have been stacked in favour of the landlords. Today, we bring forward plans to rebalance the rules, so landlords can run their businesses, shouldering the appropriate level of risk, and renters know their home is theirs for as long they want it.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an incredibly salient point about families losing their homes under section 21. Like other Members, I am sure, I have an inbox full of such cases—for example, a family with two children were chucked out of their home with no other options. Does she agree that this Bill, brought in within the Government's first 100 days, will give the basic security of a family home to my constituents and others up and down the country?

Antonia Bance: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I do agree. I have met many of his constituents in Southampton Itchen while campaigning with him over the years. I have seen the conditions that many of them and families in my own constituency live in, and I look forward to the security that the Bill will give them.

I am so pleased and proud that we will bring this Bill forward straight away—no delay, no hold-ups. Loads of renters out there are saving for their next unwanted house move; it takes, on average, £1,700 to move house. They are worried that they may lose their homes and be forced out of the area where their kids go to school. I say to those renters today, "We've got your backs. You will be able to stay in your homes—this will be law inside the year. Take heart!" If the landlord tries to raise

the rent so high as to amount to a de facto eviction, renters will finally have recourse: they can go to a tribunal and stop a rent rise above market rates.

I gently say to the Minister that it would be good to understand how the tribunal will find out what market rates are; as we all know, looking at Rightmove will not help—that covers only new lets, not all lets in an area. But that detail is for later stages. What matters is this: no more no-fault evictions; security and predictability for renting families; rights rebalanced between renters and landlords; safe homes; and proper action on rogue landlords. This has been a long time coming, and I am so proud.

6.11 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): It is a great privilege to follow that excellent speech. The Renters' Reform Bill is potentially transformative for Kensington and Bayswater, as it is for the whole country. Nearly 45% of my constituents are now private renters—a huge increase in the last decade and now the biggest tenure type by some distance. Those renters pay the highest rents in the country: an average rent of £1,600 per person. A rental property in my constituency now averages £3,400 a month.

Yet despite the fact that those renters pay an increasing proportion of their take-home pay each month in rent, I have been inundated since the general election with cases of constituents facing the major challenges that colleagues have already highlighted—section 21 evictions, damp and mould, slow repairs, unaffordable rent hikes, bidding wars and a feeling of insecurity and lack of power that never leaves a person under the current rules.

I think of my former constituents Jean and Jack Franco, who lived with their mum in a rental flat in north Kensington. After eight years of never missing a rent payment, they were served a section 21 notice by an anonymous overseas landlord and given just weeks to leave. All their attempts to challenge the decision and engage the landlord failed. Their request for just a few more weeks to find a new home was denied. The council were unable to help them, so Jack and Jean had to leave with their mum for a new part of London as rents in my constituency are so unaffordable.

The letting agent told the Francos that the owner wanted to sell the property, but today that property is still being rented out, but at twice the rent that the previous family were paying—a back-door eviction by an anonymous landlord that this Bill would have stopped. I also think of the constituents who I met, along with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister, around the table in north Kensington; they could not even bring themselves to report the challenges with the condition of their flats for fear of a section 21 notice that could leave them on the streets, sofa surfing or scrambling for temporary accommodation. This renters' Bill is also for them. I want to focus on one critical area of implementation, the landlord register, which is a huge opportunity to give renters, landlords and local authorities the information they need to ensure that standards are upheld and new rights can be enforced. I note here my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I have worked on a number of new government registers in recent years, including the public register of beneficial ownership and the register of overseas entities. It is crucial to design them in a way that is as transparent as possible and does not create loopholes.

I ask the Secretary of State and the Minister to look at the detail of what will be in that register, including landlord and agent contact details, details of past enforcement action, eviction notices, safety information, information about accessibility and the rent being charged. If we include all those things, we will have a genuinely useful register that will promote accountability and genuinely drive up standards.

This game-changing Bill should also not be seen in isolation. The most exciting thing about today is the Government's commitment to attacking our housing crisis from multiple angles: planning reform to build 1.5 million new homes, including the biggest increase in social housing in a generation; learning from Grenfell, and speeding up the remedial work up and down the country; accelerated implementation of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, including Awaab's law; a new decent homes standard for social and private housing; a crackdown on dirty money in luxury property; and an end to the feudal leasehold system. This is a comprehensive—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Member will know that there was a time limit, on which he is beginning to stretch my patience.

6.16 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): You will be pleased to know that I will keep it short, Madam Deputy Speaker. I join colleagues in saying that this is long-overdue and important piece of legislation. I commend my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench for bringing it to the House. For too long my constituents have endured insecure and inadequate private rentals and the constant threat of no-fault eviction. Last year alone, Bolton saw the highest rent increase of any area in the UK, at 14.8%, according to Zoopla's UK rental market report.

However, with the current proposals pegging rent increases to out-of-control market rates, this Bill risks failing to protect lower-income tenants in my constituency, where such rent increases can be an eviction by the back door. The introduction of in-tenancy rent caps, preferably tied to wage growth, would increase security of tenure and keep more tenants in their homes for longer. I urge the Secretary of State and Ministers to take that into consideration.

I conclude by joining colleagues in welcoming the Bill to the House and commending this Government for the steps we are taking to ensure that everyone has a safe and secure roof over their head.

6.17 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I, too, praise all the brilliant maiden speeches that we have heard today. As I am one of—I believe—only three Welsh MPs in the Chamber at the moment, right hon. and hon. Members will be pleased to know that I do not intend to speak at length on this matter, which is devolved in Wales.

[Steve Witherden]

I welcome this transformative Bill, which provides private renters in England with the long-term security and protections already granted to those in Wales. We heard the shadow Secretary of State speak earlier about delivering on manifestos. Well, we have managed that in Wales, which shows that if there is a sincere and genuine will to implement such measures, it can be done.

Abolishing section 21 is crucial to reducing the threat of unfair evictions and the risk of homelessness. However, there are concerns that landlords will still have the power to evict tenants without cause through excessive rent increases. What measures are the Government introducing to safeguard tenants from such processes?

6.19 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to wind up for the Opposition in what has been a comprehensive debate. I add my thanks to all Members who made so many interesting points about different aspects of policy, but I would like to start with the contribution by the hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger), who said that most landlords are good landlords. The English housing survey's most recent set of statistics, published on 18 July 2024, sets out that private renters in England are the most satisfied of tenants in all types of tenure, more so than in social rented or any other kind, where the highest levels scored between 51% and 65%. While all Members will see in our constituency casework dozens of examples of people in great difficulty as a result of problems in the private rented sector, on the whole this sector remains one that those who use it find to be valuable and a source of appropriate and affordable housing. Therefore, the spirit in which we approach the Bill is that we need to ensure we put right the more egregious examples of tenants or landlords being abused and their good will or vulnerability being exploited in different ways.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), in her opening speech for the Opposition, set out some robust criticisms of different aspects of the Bill and a strong defence of the previous Government's position on the implementation of the Renters (Reform) Bill, as was. It is clear that our approach during the passage of this legislation will be to work constructively to address those shortfalls and deficits that we perceive in it, while recognising, as we did in the previous Government and as we have in manifestos—and as I think, from the speeches, has been the case across party—the importance of getting this right for renters.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I have seen the reality of such measures in Scotland, because these matters are devolved. They have driven up costs for renters, reduced choice, and made it exceptionally difficult to get that first home and almost impossible to get student accommodation in our wonderful university cities. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that we get this right, and if we are to do so we are going to need changes?

David Simmonds: My hon. Friend represents Dumfries and Galloway and therefore knows a great deal about the impact that these measures have, because he has seen at first hand the impact on his constituents. I agree with him entirely, and it is important to draw out his point that they will have an impact not simply on those who are private renters in the traditional sense; this is part of a wider rental market, as many Members have noted, which includes everything from temporary accommodation to short-term lets, which is to a degree an unregulated market into which some landlords are moving. There will be a huge impact on students across our university towns. The private rented sector is used by local authorities to find accommodation for those in social housing need, and the social rented sector and our housing associations will be impacted too. Of course, there will be a degree of impact on owner-occupation as well.

Reflecting on the speeches of Members, it is clear, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) said in her contribution, that we are increasingly reaching many of the key milestones in our lives later on, including acquiring our first home as an owner, having our children and getting our settled career. That is one of the reasons why we in the Opposition party, as we did in government previously, recognise the importance of getting things right in the private rented sector, because it will represent an increasing proportion of tenure in our country in future.

I will try to draw together a number of the points made—I appreciate that the Minister will do the same for the points made by his colleagues; I will endeavour to do my best for those on the Opposition side. As well as the points made in the introduction by my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) shared the experience of being a local authority cabinet member in a part of our country with a combination of high-density modern housing in cities and surrounding rural areas, something more characteristic in the market of the United Kingdom than is the case in London, where my own constituency is located. Indeed, the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) spoke of similar experiences.

That illustrated a point that some scoff at: landlords exiting the private rented market means not that the bricks and mortar disappear, but that the home is no longer available to the private rented market. It may be available to owner occupiers, it may be available to short-term lets, and it may be converted into other types of accommodation, but it represents a net reduction in the supply of private rented homes in that location. It is absolutely correct to draw attention to the impact of that on our communities.

Rachel Blake: You make the point that you think the property might change into home ownership or another form of tenure. What evidence do you have that the property would not remain in the private sector under a different type of landlord? The argument that you and other Conservative Members continually make is that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that when she says "you," she is addressing me. I have not made any points in this debate.

Rachel Blake: The argument that has been made by those on the Opposition Benches is that private rented homes are at risk of being lost to the sector, but that does not really stand up if other landlords purchase those homes.

David Simmonds: In Scotland, where similar regulations have been implemented, there has been an exodus from the market of smaller private landlords in particular, and those properties have fallen into other kinds of tenure. If the supply of homes remained the same and it had a zero-sum impact on the market, there would of course be no requirement for a Renters' Rights Bill at all, because everybody would find a home on one kind of tenure or another, but we know, because of the increasing proportion of people in the United Kingdom looking to the private rented sector to access the kind of home they need, that this will be incredibly important.

Antonia Bance: Does the hon. Member agree that it is precisely those small individual landlords who struggle to keep up with decent renting regulation, even as minimal as it is now? They make up the majority of the rogue landlords that many of us have heard about in our constituency surgeries. Frankly, it is often a good thing that small landlords who are unable to provide decent properties and keep up with legislation get out of the market in favour of those who can.

David Simmonds: The hon. Member raises a good point about rogue landlords. Let us reflect on some of the complaints that we have heard. Ant infestations, widespread evidence of mould causing health problems, the dilapidation of communal areas, a prohibition on tenants seeking to rent while on benefits and a failure to comply with licensing laws—just some of the complaints made by the tenants of the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), but they are widely represented across the market. They are the reason we need to get enforcement action against rogue landlords such as that Member right.

On enforcement, the Secretary of State said in opening the debate that she is keen to ensure that there is an effective fining regime so that those who breach the rules can be held to account. We in the Opposition have a genuine concern about getting that right. There are a number of different areas of local authority activity in which enforcement is essentially a net cost to the council tax payer, because even when costs are won and fines levied, they are nothing like the cost of carrying out investigations, building the evidence base and taking the required enforcement action. If we are to ensure that rogue landlords acting in breach of existing laws are held to account by local authorities using those powers, we need to ensure, during the passage of the Bill, that the resources that are expected to arrive through the method of enforcement and fining are sufficient to make the process self-sustaining, or that the Government have alternative measures in mind to ensure that local authorities can access those resources by other means.

That is a long-standing issue and has been a factor for Governments of all parties. It was certainly a challenge in my 24 years in local government, under Labour and Conservative Governments. We need to ensure, in the interests of our tenants, that we get this right as far as we can.

Ms Creasy: As the hon. Gentleman will know from his experience in local government, the challenge is that the existing legislation relies on our constituents having the confidence to come forward, whether they are facing mould or unfair practices, and the evidence shows that the threat of a no-fault eviction means that many do not come forward. Does he therefore recognise that simply opposing no-fault evictions and relying on the existing enforcement regime means consigning people in an unfair market to silence and suffering?

David Simmonds: As a constituency Member of Parliament and former councillor, I entirely recognise the hon. Lady's point, but what the hon. Member for Rugby said was significant because we need to recognise that 76% of tenants in the private rented sector report a high level of satisfaction, a much higher level of satisfaction than is found in other forms of housing tenure. If we are to strike the appropriate balance in this debate in the Parliament of the nation, we have to recognise that the vast majority of landlords provide a good, important and high-quality service, and make sure that the legislation we take through to address the difficulty and challenge that our constituents—citizens—experience is proportionate.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Simmonds: I will make some progress and move on to another area that has been debated. I know that the Minister will wish to have time to sum up on many of these points as well.

A number of Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), highlighted the need for appropriate measures to support students in the rented sector. A good many landlords' organisations have made the point that the Government's intention to change the tenant and landlord's full freedom of contract will have an impact, especially on students who wish to rent a property for the entire duration of their course. We need to ensure that there is appropriate flexibility in respect of student properties, so that students at university can find the housing that they need and landlords are not discouraged from entering that market, and so that the points raised by my right hon. Friend are addressed. We do not want a situation in which a landlord, wary of a two-month notice period, decides to take the property off the student market and put it somewhere else, in a way that perhaps addresses housing need less, and fails to support the local economy in the way that student housing would have.

That leads me to a point that I know we will explore in Committee: how freedom of contract particularly impacts constituents who struggle to pass the kind of credit checks and landlord insurance checks that are common in the private rented sector. We all have examples of people who have faced bankruptcy proceedings and entered into individual voluntary arrangements to address significant financial difficulty, and who then got themselves back on their feet; but who, when facing eviction, have found it impossible to find a landlord willing to rent to them. Those people are not eligible to access social rented housing, because they have a job and an income, but cannot access the kind of housing that locks them into a regular payment contract. However, they may be able to offer a significant up-front payment of rent—potentially many months' rent, or even a year's rent—to secure a property. That gives the landlord the certainty they need, and it also gives the person the guarantee of the home they need. We need to address that issue, because the implementation of a number of financial

[David Simmonds]

arrangements by previous Governments has created both an opportunity for people to get back on their feet after financial difficulty, and a challenge in accessing a long-term home in the rented sector.

As we proceed with this Bill, it is clearly important that policy is based on evidence. Having spoken to the Minister and many of his colleagues about the Bill, I know that there will be a high degree of cross-party agreement on some of the points that are discussed. However, I would like to bring this debate back to the key concern that we in the Conservative party have, which has been expressed by a number of Members: we need to ensure an appropriate supply of housing in the private rented sector, so that citizens who need to access those homes can do so.

We remain a party that respects and supports the aspiration of home ownership. Just like all other important life stages, our constituents are reaching that life stage later in life than has been the case historically. We are in a world where people do not typically leave school or university and spend 40 years working in the same business and living in the same town. People moving around and moving home to adapt to changing needs is a key issue that we need to address. Even those wishing to downsize and looking for a smaller property later in life—the last-time buyer market, as the industry likes to describe it—have their equivalent in the rental sector: people looking for accommodation that comes with a package that provides sufficient care and support. The choice to move into high-quality accommodation of that nature in the private rented sector can free up family homes that are in short supply. All these things need to be seen in the round.

Of course, most Members of Parliament are tenants—not all of us; those of us who commute are not—and will have experience of the London rental market. Luckily, Members of Parliament in that situation have the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to back them up, but that experience highlights the significant differences we see across the regions and geographies of the United Kingdom. My outer London constituency is dominated by owner-occupiers, but has a vibrant rental sector and a significant number of retirement homes. The population and the need are significantly different from the population and need in a university town full of young people looking to secure student accommodation, or looking for a good-quality private rented home for a short period while they get their first job and get their foot on the property ladder. We need to support that market effectively, and to get it right. We need a balance that avoids over-regulation and the unintended consequences about which my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex spoke so eloquently.

Regional variation was highlighted by a good many Members. Places being converted into holiday homes does not tend to be a significant issue in the London suburbs. However, we have heard from colleagues in this House, as we did during the last Parliament, about the massive impact that that has in many of our coastal towns and cities. The impact is not just on those in need of social housing, and those struggling to access, through social rent, accommodation in the private rental sector, but on those in other parts of the country where the local economy has been significantly changed as a result of those issues.

No debate about housing can be allowed to pass without mention of the impact of our Home Office contracts to secure accommodation for those in our asylum system. We know from feedback that many Members of Parliament have provided from around the country that in some areas, that has a significant impact. The initial very good intention behind those Home Office contracts was to disperse asylum seekers awaiting a decision to privately rented accommodation in parts of the United Kingdom where there was accommodation surplus to the needs of the community. That was why those contracts—run now by three private organisations, but run previously by the Home Office, and originated by the now Mayor, Andy Burnham, when he was a Home Office Minister—use that supply of accommodation.

However, we are beginning to hear, as we learned in debates about the use of migrant hotels and so on in the past, that the policy has, in some areas, taken a significant share of accommodation that would otherwise be available to the private rented sector. While it is absolutely right that we seek to reduce the cost to the taxpayer of people staying in hotels, we need to ensure that decision making does not simply tick the "out of hotels" box, and respects the needs and expectations of the community. In particular, given that it is always the lowest-cost accommodation that the Home Office will seek to rent, we need to ensure that the policy does not have an inappropriate impact on those awaiting housing through the local authority, or seeking the least expensive accommodation in the private rented sector.

All these different issues—temporary accommodation, short-term lets for students, accommodation for asylum seekers and owner-occupation—are impacted by this debate. I hope that the Minister will accept that we approach this topic in a constructive spirit, and that our challenge, as we go through the next stages of the Bill, aims at addressing the issues to get the Bill right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) all brought their direct personal experience to this debate, and set out why the points raised at the very start of this debate are so significant.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech. Does he agree that it would be very helpful for the whole House if the Government published an impact assessment on the effects of the Bill, and does he understand why that has not happened?

David Simmonds: I am sure the Minister will have heard that question and will address it, but there is a consistent pattern. A number of Members referenced yesterday's debate on VAT on school fees, in which that point emerged, too. While we can see, for example, that there is a significantly higher proportion of pupils from ethnic minorities in private schools than in the state sector, the Government cannot supply an equalities impact assessment for their policy on VAT on schools. There seems to be a similar trend emerging with the winter fuel payments, and with the Renters' Rights Bill; the Government say that it is very important that we get

the policy right, but cannot supply evidence that they have properly considered the equalities impacts and the wider impacts, although much of that was enshrined as a legal requirement under the previous Labour Government.

In winding up—*[Interruption.]* I hear a cheer. That is the first, but I hope not the last, cheer I enjoy in this Chamber in my parliamentary career. This Bill is an opportunity to get things right for renters. We know that is a high priority for all political parties in this Chamber. We can all see the impact that the private rental sector has on housing supply in this country. We want to make sure that the sector continues to be an important, supportive and appropriate source of homes for people, and that it interacts effectively with other sources of accommodation. If we are to do that, we need to get this legislation right. Dare I say that the acid test will be future housing surveys? If the high satisfaction rates remain buoyant, perhaps the legislation has been right. If we fail to get it right, private tenants will be considerably less satisfied, and that will require the House's attention again.

6.40 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a real pleasure to close this Second Reading debate, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who participated in it. Members from all parts of the House have spoken with passion and clarity, and there has been a large number of outstanding contributions. I pay particular tribute to the six Members who made their maiden speeches this afternoon, including my five hon. Friends on the Government Benches. The quality was uniformly high, and I wish each of them well in their parliamentary career.

I am encouraged by the broad support expressed today for the main principles of the Bill. The current system for private renting is broken, and renters have been demanding change for years. That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made clear in opening the debate, the case for fundamentally reforming England's insecure and unjust private rented sector, and taking decisive action to drive up standards in it, is as watertight as they come. The experience of renting privately must be improved. It already would have been, to an extent, had the previous Government not buckled under pressure from vested interests in the dying months of the last Parliament.

This Labour Government will succeed where the Conservative Government failed by finally modernising regulation of the sector. In contrast to the previous Government's attempt, we will do so in a way that truly delivers for renters, as well as for good landlords, by addressing the numerous defects, deficiencies, omissions and, most importantly, fatal loopholes that the previous Government's legislation contained.

Chris Vince: Does the Minister agree that this legislation will help not only the many people in the private rented sector, but charities, such as the one I worked for in Harlow, which helps people who are homeless to get into the private rented sector? Would he also agree that this legislation could have come much sooner?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We think that the legislation will take the burden off advice charities. The database provisions will ensure that tenants and landlords have access to information, and know better what is required from them under the new system. It is absolutely right that we move at pace to get the legislation through the House.

During the many hours we have debated the Bill, an extremely wide range of issues have been raised, and I will seek to respond to as many as possible in the time available to me. First, I want to address the reasoned amendment tabled by the Opposition. My opposite number, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), struck a constructive tone, but when the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), made the case for the reasoned amendment, we were treated to a bizarre spectacle; she chid us for copying and pasting many of the sensible provisions in the previous Government's Bill, but then told us that those provisions would have "added to the chaos". The problem is that she supported that legislation at every stage. She voted for its Second Reading; she supported it through Committee; and she voted for the carry-over motion to see it progress. She voted for it on Report and Third Reading, and took it into wash-up. She now asks us to accept that she believed it was flawed all along. Well, party leadership election contests can do funny things. She may not have confidence in her manifesto—which, let me remind her, stated that the Government at that time were committed to passing renters reform along the lines of their previous legislation—but we have confidence in ours and we are determined to deliver it.

Mrs Badenoch: Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: No. The right hon. Member has had her time.

We strongly refute the central contention in the reasoned amendment that the Bill fails to provide security and affordability for private renters or to respect the property rights of landlords and that it

"will reduce the supply of housing in the private rented sector".

The Bill strikes the right balance between the interests of landlords and tenants. While we acknowledge that it will take time for the sector, including build to rent providers, to adjust to a significant change in regulation, we do not believe that this legislation will have a harmful impact on future rental supply—which, by the way, we are taking steps to boost, not least by providing more opportunities for investment in a growing build to rent sector. The reasoned amendment is weak and disingenuous. I urge colleagues to vote it down when we arrive in the Lobby in a few minutes.

Let me turn to a set of specific issues referred to in the reasoned amendment and raised by a number of hon. Members in the debate: namely, tenancy reform, fixed-term tenancies and court improvements. The move to a new single system of periodic tenancies is at the heart of the Bill. The introduction of the new tenancy regime will see the end of fixed-term tenancies and the long-overdue abolition of section 21 no-fault evictions. As a result, tenants will enjoy greater stability and security, and landlords will benefit from clear and expanded possession grounds to evict tenants in circumstances where that is justified and reasonable.

To avoid confusion and to ensure that renters on existing tenancies do not have to wait even longer for the threat of arbitrary evictions to be lifted, we intend

[Matthew Pennycook]

to apply the new system to all tenancies in a single stage. We will appoint the commencement date by regulations at an appropriate interval after Royal Assent. Our intention is to give the sector as much notice as possible.

A number of hon. Members mentioned fixed-term tenancies. I want to be clear that it is the Government's firm view that there is no place for fixed terms in the future assured tenancy system. Fixed terms mean that renters are obliged to pay rent regardless of whether a property is up to standard, and they reduce renters' flexibility to move when they need to. It is right that the Bill ensures that all tenancies will be periodic in future, ending the injustice of tenants being trapped paying rent for substandard properties.

Good landlords have nothing to fear from this change, either. Tenants simply do not move houses unless it is absolutely necessary. When they do leave, they will be required to provide two months' notice, giving landlords sufficient time to find new tenants. Nor will the PRS become an Airbnb-lite, as some have suggested. Tenants will still have to pay up to five weeks' deposit, complete referencing checks and commit for at least two months. Locking tenants in for longer with fixed-term tenancies would mean people being unable to leave dangerous situations and being trapped in situations, for example, of domestic abuse. We are not prepared to accept that.

Ensuring that the Courts and Tribunals Service is prepared for the implementation of the new system is essential. I take on board the challenge that many hon. Members, including Opposition Front Benchers, put to us in that regard. In considering the potential impact of the Bill on the county courts, it is however important to bear in mind that most tenancies end without court action being needed. It would also plainly be wrong to assume that all evictions that presently occur following a section 21 notice will in future require court proceedings under section 8 grounds.

One of the main effects of the Bill will be to reduce the number of arbitrary evictions that take place. That said, we recognise that landlords need a reliable and efficient county court system to ensure that they can quickly reclaim their properties when appropriate, and that we need a well-functioning tribunal process to resolve disputes in a timely manner. We agree that improvements to the courts and tribunals are needed to ensure that the new system functions effectively. As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said at the outset of the debate, we are working closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to ensure that they are made, and exploring options for improved alternative dispute resolution so that only cases that need a judgment come to court.

Mr Amos: Does that mean there will be more funding for the courts?

Matthew Pennycook: I will bring forward further detail as the Bill progresses, but those conversations with Ministry of Justice colleagues are ongoing, and they are constructive. We want to get to a place where the system is ready to take the new tenancy provisions forward. We will not act precipitously, and what we are not prepared to do—this is the most important point on courts—is make the necessary and long-overdue transformation of the private rented sector contingent on an unspecified degree of future court improvements subjectively determined by Ministers, as the last Government proposed in their Bill. We are determined to move quickly to give renters the long-term security, rights and protections they deserve.

A number of hon. Members raised the issue of standards, and many shared horrific stories of tenants trapped in substandard properties. It is essential, in the Government's view, that we take decisive action to tackle the blight of poor-quality, privately rented housing and to ensure landlords are required to take swift action to respond to serious hazards.

Gareth Snell: The Minister is giving an excellent speech. Landlords in Stoke-on-Trent have told me that they welcome any move that drives the rogue landlords out of the system. That is because rogue landlords undercut the market and prey on the vulnerable and those locked into low-income jobs by offering relatively low-rent accommodation, safe in the knowledge that if they complain or seek any form of improvement, they are simply out, to be replaced by somebody else who is desperate. While my hon. Friend is talking about improvements to the landlord system, will he say more about how good landlords welcome the Bill?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is right. We have engaged constructively and intensively with tenant representative groups and with landlord bodies. Most of them will say that what he describes is part of the problem, because they represent the better end of the market, and that good landlords welcome the new system because it forcefully targets the unscrupulous landlords, mainly at the bottom end of the market, who bring the whole sector into disrepute. That is one reason why the characterisation of this Bill as overly pro-tenant and harmful to, and unwelcomed by, landlords is misplaced. Good landlords should welcome this legislation.

I welcome the support expressed on both sides of the House for the provisions that will see a decent homes standard applied to the private rented sector and Awaab's law extended to it. It is important that we get the detail right, and I assure the House that we intend to consult on the content of the decent homes standard for both social and privately rented homes, and on how Awaab's law will apply to the latter, given the obvious differences between the private and social rented sectors.

I want to respond briefly to a question posed by the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Mr Amos). I thank him for his kind remarks about me in his speech. The approach we are taking in this Bill to applying and enforcing the decent homes standard to the private rented sector is not, in our view, suitable for the unique and distinct nature of Ministry of Defence accommodation, but I hope he will welcome the fact that the MOD is reviewing its target standards so that we can drive up the quality of that accommodation separately from the Bill.

A large number of hon. Members raised concerns about affordability, and several argued forcefully for rent controls to be incorporated in the Bill. While we recognise the risks posed to tenants by extortionate within-tenancy rent rises, we remain opposed to the introduction of rent controls. We believe they could make life more difficult for private renters, both in

incentivising landlords to increase rents routinely up to a cap where they might otherwise not have done, and in pushing many landlords out of the market, thereby making it even harder for renters to find a home they can afford. However, we are introducing a range of measures in the early part of the Bill that will empower renters to challenge unreasonable rent increases and prevent rent hikes from being used as a form of back-door eviction.

Measures in the Bill will prevent unscrupulous landlords from using rent increases in this fashion. All rent increases from private landlords will take place via the existing section 13 process, so the tenant can challenge them if necessary. That will protect landlords' rights to achieve market rent while preventing abuse. We will also give tenants longer to prepare for rent increases, and allow only one rent increase per year. For too long—this is reflected in the low numbers of tenants going to tribunal—tenants have feared challenging a rent increase at the first-tier tribunal. We will end this situation by ensuring, by contrast to the previous Government's legislation, that a tenant will not pay more than the landlord asked for in circumstances where a tribunal might determine otherwise.

We are going further: we will end the practice of backdating rent increases, to stop tenants being thrust into debt if they take a case to tribunal. That would have acted as a powerful disincentive for tenants to take such cases to tribunal. Let me be clear: we do not want the tribunal overwhelmed, but we want more tenants to take a challenge against unreasonable rent increases to the tribunal. The tribunal will play an important role in looking at what a reasonable market rent is in their area, and assessing whether a particular rent increase is reasonable. To protect the most vulnerable residents, in cases of undue hardship, the tribunal will be able to delay the start of the rent increase for tenants caught in those particular circumstances.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank the Minister very much for his brilliant synopsis of what has happened today. How will tenants and landlords be able to put their cases to the ombudsman without having to go through the courts? How will that give tenants more reassurance?

Matthew Pennycook: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I am about to come to the ombudsman, but I would like to make a point about affordability. Concern was expressed by several hon. Members about rent in advance. I would like to assure the House that we have long recognised that demands for extortionate rent in advance put financial strain on tenants and can exclude certain groups from renting all together. We think that the Bill as it stands protects renters against requests for large amounts of advanced rent, but I will happily continue to engage with individuals and organisations who have concerns that it does not, and I am entirely open to keeping that under review as the Bill progresses.

My hon. Friend mentioned the ombudsman. The database is also a feature of the Bill, and both are integral to the functioning of the new system. We want the database and the ombudsman to be operational as soon as possible and we think they could be transformative—particularly the database, for the information it can give tenants about landlords' previous behaviour. All that detail is to come in secondary legislation, and I look forward to engagement from hon. Friends and colleagues across the House about how we should implement both the database and the ombudsman.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), Chair-elect of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—I say that carefully as she does not have a Committee yet—asked specifically which organisation will deliver the new PRS ombudsman service. No final decision on a provider has been made, but the Government remain of the view that the housing ombudsman is currently best placed to take on the role, given that it would allow us to move toward a streamlined cross-tenure redress service.

A number of hon. Members raised specific issues relating to the impact of the new tenancy system on the student rental market. The provisions that we ultimately alighted upon enable students to benefit from the new system while protecting the supply of student accommodation. However, this is an area where the judgments are finely balanced. I have heard various concerns, and I look forward to future discussions as the Bill progresses.

Lastly, a large number of hon. Members rightly raised concerns about the ability of local authorities to enforce against landlords and letting agents who flout the new rules. The enforcement of all the measures in the Bill will not begin immediately, but I recognise the resourcing challenges that many local authorities face and the impact that they could have on effective enforcement. We think that these are offset to an extent by the ringfenced civil penalties that councils can levy when landlords do not comply with the new rules, but we accept that those alone will not be sufficient, so in accordance with the new burdens doctrine, we will ensure that additional burdens on local authorities resulting from our reforms are fully funded.

It is now five and a half years since England's 11 million private renters were first promised the biggest overhaul of the sector for a generation and the abolition of section 21 evictions. Those 11 million private renters were badly let down by the previous Conservative Government, who decided under pressure from their Back Benchers to weaken and delay the introduction of their own legislation before abandoning it all together. They are being badly let down today by the official Opposition, who, in arguing for yet more delay, would see thousands more renters unnecessarily put at risk of homelessness because of an unfair eviction, and would prolong the uncertainty that responsible landlords across the country have experienced in recent years. We will not allow that to happen.

Today, we have the opportunity to progress legislation that will overhaul the private rented sector and level decisively the playing field between landlord and tenant. Our Bill will empower renters by providing them with greater security, rights and protections so that they can stay in their homes for longer, build lives in their communities and avoid the risk of homelessness. Everyone deserves a decent, safe, secure and affordable home in which to live. With a view to taking an important step towards making that a reality, I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 104, Noes 424.

Division No. 18] **[7 pm**

AYES

Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Burghart, Alex
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Davis, rh Sir David
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McMurdock, James
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, Rebecca
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mike Wood and
Mr Louie French

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, Mr Douglas
Alexander, Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Amos, Mr Gideon
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Aquarone, Steff
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Babarinde, Josh
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brewer, Alex
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Cane, Charlotte
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carns, Al
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coghlan, Chris
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Victoria
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Darlington, Emily
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Bobby
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
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
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Franklin, Zöe
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
George, Andrew
German, Gill
Gibson, Sarah
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Goldsborough, Ben
Gordon, Tom
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Gwynne, Andrew
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise

Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Harding, Monica
Hardy, Emma
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Jarvis, Liz
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Clive
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Ayoub
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
MacAlister, Josh
MacCleary, James
Macdonald, Alice
MacDonald, Mr Angus
MacNae, Andy
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Martin, Amanda
Martin, Mike
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mathew, Brian
Mayer, Alex
Maynard, Charlie
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
McMorrin, Anna
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moon, Perran
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Morrison, Mr Tom
Mullane, Margaret
Munt, Tessa
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Murray, Susan
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan
Olney, Sarah
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
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
Roome, Ian
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sabine, Anna
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mr Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Shannon, Jim
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slade, Vikki
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Sollom, Ian
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Swann, Robin
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Luke
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Wilkinson, Max
Williams, David
Wilson, Munira
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Wrigley, Martin
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Gerald Jones and
Anna Turley

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),

That the Bill be now read a

Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

RENTERS' RIGHTS BILL: PROGRAMME

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Renters' Rights Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 28 November 2024.

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

Consideration and Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed. —*(Chris Elmore.)*

Question agreed to.

RENTERS' RIGHTS BILL: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Renters' Rights Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided. —*(Chris Elmore.)*

Question agreed to.

RENTERS' RIGHTS BILL: WAYS AND MEANS

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Renters' Rights Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees under or by virtue of the Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund. —*(Chris Elmore.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (NOVEMBER AND CHRISTMAS RECESSES)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Wednesday 6 November 2024, do adjourn until Monday 11 November 2024; and at its rising on Thursday 19 December 2024, do adjourn until Monday 6 January 2025.—*(Chris Elmore.)*

Question agreed to.

Higher Education: Staffordshire

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Gerald Jones.)*

7.17 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to lead my first Adjournment debate as the Member of Parliament for Newcastle-under-Lyme. I would like to wish my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) a very happy—if I may say—40th birthday, and I am pleased that she is spending it in the Chamber with us this evening. There is no better way to spend a birthday than talking about the wonderful county that we represent in this House.

Newcastle-under-Lyme is home to many excellent places of learning, and with higher education in mind, none more so than Keele University. I consider it a real privilege to be Keele's Member of Parliament, and that is why I applied for this debate tonight. Higher education in Staffordshire is primarily delivered through two universities: Keele University in my constituency, and the University of Staffordshire based in Stoke-on-Trent. I will broadly focus my remarks on Keele, where I look forward to welcoming most of my Staffordshire colleagues tomorrow.

This has been an important year for almost everyone in this House, and for people across our United Kingdom. We have had a change of Government—I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), to her place—and we have begun the work of getting our country back on track. However, 2024 is also important because Keele University in Newcastle-under-Lyme marks the 75th anniversary of its foundation as the first new university of the 20th century.

Keele University was born from a pioneering vision of a different kind of university. It was established in 1949 by Lord Lindsay, the former vice-chancellor of Oxford University, in a country still recovering from the second world war. The university's founding aim was to produce graduates who not only had the technical and specialist knowledge to move society forward, but who understood the social and political landscape that drove this need.

Fast-forward 75 years, and this original ethos remains at the core of the university's mission. A global network of over 100,000 alumni in 120 countries is creating a positive impact across the world in a range of diverse careers, including serving in this House. I am personally pleased that one of my cousins is studying medicine at Keele. He has just started his second year, which means he was able to vote for me in July—at least he told me he did! Keele currently ranks in the golden quadrangle of the top 15 universities in England that excel in both teaching and research. All have a gold award in the teaching excellence framework and high research intensity in the most recent research excellence framework.

I am pleased that Keele, and therefore Staffordshire, is a sector leader in sustainability, tackling the world's biggest problems through its research and educating tomorrow's leaders to help shape a brighter future. Keele's research expertise and passion for sustainability are renowned around the world, which is why the university was named global sustainability institution of the year in 2021.

Keele's economic impact is created not only by directly employing about 2,000 people, but by spending with local suppliers and contractors, with neighbouring businesses and residents being the primary beneficiaries. Keele is one of the largest employers in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and it is a local employer, too. Thirty-nine per cent of its workforce live in the ancient borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, with a further 31% living in Stoke-on-Trent. Keele has a real commitment to being a good neighbour, and it has provided more than 2,000 support interactions with local organisations since 2016.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. As he says, our area is blessed with many exemplary higher education institutions, many of which are connected by the A50/A500. Does he agree that upgrades to this road are essential to allow our constituents easier access to universities, and to enable greater collaboration across our local universities?

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend and near neighbour has made an excellent submission ahead of the Budget, and I am sure the Minister will relay that point to Treasury colleagues. He makes an important point about connectivity, accessibility and the importance of a transport network that allows people both to benefit from our higher education institutions and to contribute to our local economies.

Keele's legacy and commitment to the wider community is why it was named among the UK's best universities at contributing to local growth and regeneration in the recent iteration of the knowledge exchange framework run by Research England. Keele, working with the Bar Council, has advanced the "Keele in Town" programme, which will see the transformation of an empty 19th-century building in the heart of Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre into a mixed-use facility for the community. It will be kitted out with modern working and meeting spaces, offering digital connectivity to the community and helping to drive productivity.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Adam Jogee: I will happily give way to another good man from Staffordshire.

Dave Robertson: It is wonderful to contribute to this debate. I had to intervene when my hon. Friend spoke about university campuses, and about university buildings in city centres. My Lichfield constituency does not have a large university campus, but we do have a small satellite campus of the University of Staffordshire that supports our local economy and ensures that much of Staffordshire's learning is reinvested through its business village.

Does my hon. Friend agree about the importance of making sure that the wealth of these institutions is shared across the entire county, so that everybody can benefit from their investments?

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson)—it is an honour and a privilege to say those words; I do not think many on the Labour Benches thought we would be able to say

[Adam Jogee]

them. What an excellent decision the people of Lichfield made on 4 July. He raises an important point, because ensuring that people from all backgrounds and communities can access and benefit from education is something that I know this Government will advance. I thank him for making such a powerful point.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Adam Jogee: I will happily give way to my constituency neighbour.

David Williams: I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Will he join me in recognising the excellent work done by organisations across our area to help young people access higher education? For example, my former employer, the YMCA, received the Queen's award for promoting opportunity for the work it does with the University of Staffordshire's "Step up to higher education" programme. The YMCA now gets around 10 young people off to university every year and, under the leadership of Danny Flynn and his committed team, it shares our values of promoting opportunity for all.

Adam Jogee: Another example of the great decisions the people of Staffordshire made is that my hon. Friend is now sitting on the Government Benches as the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, which we are all grateful for. He raises an important point for two reasons: first, Danny Flynn is a constituent of mine, in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and has spent many years doing amazing work with his team at the North Staffordshire YMCA, based in—

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Based in my constituency.

Adam Jogee: I was just about to say that it is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). Secondly, the organisation has an undiluted and clear commitment to ensuring that people from many different backgrounds are able to access the opportunities they need and deserve in order to meet their full potential.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for his presentation. I have watched him during his time in the new Parliament and have been greatly impressed, not just because of what he does but because of our friendship long before he came to the House. He married a girl from Northern Ireland so that makes him part Northern Irish. It is great to hear about what is going on in education in his area, but I have concerns about the pressures on our young people in higher education. Does he agree that those pressures are greater than ever, including financial pressures and societal expectations? We need greater mental health support for our higher education students, as well as financial help for a generation of students whose student loan debt is higher than at any time in the past.

Adam Jogee: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—it would not be an Adjournment debate without it. He raises an important point that I will come to later in my remarks. It is not just the financial pressures that young people face that have an impact on their mental health. Other pressures include the inability to secure affordable, accessible and safe places to live, as well as trying to keep down a job and study at the same time, which is pushed and caused by some of the financial pressures that he referred to. I thank him for his kind comments—I am not sure whether that is better for his street cred or for mine, but I take the compliment.

The "Keele in Town" programme will see an empty 19th century building, in the heart of Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre, made into a mixed-use facility for the community. I have already touched on this, but it is important. It will have meeting spaces offering digital connectivity to the community, helping to drive productivity and boost skill levels. The programme includes working with our brilliant local FE institutions.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and promoting my ex-employer, Keele University, which is an interest I declare. I recently had the great honour of visiting the Burslem campus of the prestigious Stoke-on-Trent College, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams), to meet with apprentices, including inspirational young people such as Robbie and superb employers such as Carson Powell Construction. Does my hon. Friend agree that apprenticeships, including degree-level apprenticeships, provide an excellent alternative route for young people and career changers to access higher education, in our FE colleges and universities, and that such apprenticeships provide a real benefit to our local employers and economies, by developing the workplace skills of the future?

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In previous years she has worked and lived in Newcastle-under-Lyme, so she understands the power and importance that the issue has for a wider north Staffordshire family.

I was talking about the excellent Newcastle college, which is further education rather than higher education, but it is important because it is from there that our wonderful institutions at Staffordshire and Keele get their young people. I was there last Friday, presenting the student of the month awards and meeting young people who look forward to staying in Staffordshire for university.

Let us focus on students for a minute. In 2022-23, 34,535 students enrolled for a degree at a higher education provider in Staffordshire. These are young people to whom we will be looking for leadership and inspiration in the years ahead. Following our departure from the European Union, the proportion of EU students in Staffordshire has decreased, while the proportion of overseas students has more than tripled, from 2.3% to 7.8%. That speaks to the challenges facing the sector not just in Staffordshire but right across Great Britain.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): As my hon. Friend has made clear, the higher education sector is incredibly important to the skills and education landscape of Staffordshire. Sadly, Stafford itself lost its university campus a few years ago, although there is one just across the border. The thing that higher education also

does is provide opportunities for research, development and sector-leading expertise. However, there are considerable issues in this space, to which my hon. Friend has just alluded. Only this week I have been on the phone to a constituent, a Unison member, who works at the University of Staffordshire. They told me that they are currently experiencing their third restructure in three years. Does he agree that working in such an insecure environment provides little benefit to staff or students?

Adam Jogee: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for such an important point. Stability, certainty and structure are what we all want in our lives. I expect that is why our party received such a mandate from the people. But on a serious note, making sure that our higher education institutions have that stability and focus will benefit all of us.

In Staffordshire, students of black African ethnicity have, at 81%, the highest progression rate to higher education. Progression rates for students eligible for free school meals have increased in Staffordshire over the past 10 years, from 13.3% in 2011-12 to 19.3% in 2021-22.

In 2021-22, students with special educational needs in Staffordshire were also much less likely to progress to higher education than those with no identified special educational needs. Both those figures were lower than the national average and, in my view, speak to the need to get a grip of SEND provision in Staffordshire and across England. The system is broken and it is leaving our young people and their families behind.

During the election, I met many of the young people who studied at Keele. I mention Molly, Martha, Olly and Bayley, who were just a few of the young people who had the wisdom both to study at Keele and to help on my campaign. From all my visits and meetings with the students, it was clear just how much they had made a home in north Staffordshire, and that is something we all want to hold on to.

Gareth Snell: I find myself somewhat conflicted, as a graduate of the wonderful Keele University but also representing its rival in the local varsity in the University of Staffordshire. My hon. Friend's point about young people going to university and making their home in the area is absolutely right. I am a testament to that. But does he agree that one thing we now have to do collectively, as a group of MPs representing that part of the world, is ensure that those high-value, good-quality jobs are then brought to the area, so that the graduates we have can stay in north Staffordshire after they graduate and make a life and a family there?

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is something that we have discussed and that we will keep working on together. Keele, which is a subject for another debate, is home to many brilliant local businesses, and we want to facilitate more such businesses. I hope those on the Treasury Bench will look favourably on us as they look for places in which to invest in the coming months and years.

At Keele, the number of higher education staff stands at about 2,000. Like all our public services, we rely on brilliant public sector workers, and I want to pay tribute to all the wonderful people who educate, inspire and support the leaders, the vets and the doctors of tomorrow. I would like to acknowledge my constituents. It is always dangerous to start naming people, but I just want to say a couple of things. Madam Deputy Speaker, your eyes are on me, so I shall be brief. My constituents are: Rosi Monkman; Professor Peter Lawrence; Ant Sutcliffe, who is also chair of governors at St Luke's primary school in Silverdale; and Dr Robert Jackson, who, after almost 40 years working at Keele, has just retired—a good stint that certainly demonstrates more career stability than most of us will have in this House. Our thanks also go to all those who work at Keele and at Staffordshire University. Through Professor Trevor McMillan, the vice-chancellor at Keele, and Professor Martin Jones, the vice-chancellor at Staffordshire, I want to extend our real and meaningful gratitude to all of them for the work they do.

The future of our country is in many ways dependent on the future of our universities. Although I do not expect the Minister to second-guess the Chancellor ahead of the Budget, I do want to say on the Floor of the House that we must give serious consideration and thought to our universities as final decisions are made on the Budget. As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), the current situation sees universities launching voluntary redundancy schemes and carrying out constant restructurings as they seek to balance the books. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) noted, the issue is also about our young people: the household income level at which a student qualifies for the maximum level of support has remained unchanged in cash terms since 2008. That means a real-terms fall of about 39%, making students from lower household income levels less likely to be eligible for a full loan and more likely to be pushed to the brink.

When those of us in this place were students, some longer ago than others, most people were able to scrape by, but now our young people are being forced to rely on food banks or worse—go hungry if the bank of mum and dad is not an option. That should never be an option, in my view; our country should work properly, fairly and decently.

I congratulate Keele University on its 75 years of groundbreaking research, thought, ideas and change. It is an important milestone that I did not want to pass the House by. Thanks to the staff, the communities and most importantly our young people, higher education in Staffordshire is in good shape, but it can and should be made much better, and that is where this new Labour Government must come in. They will have my full support.

7.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing this debate on the valuable contribution of the higher education sector in Staffordshire. This is personal, given that this year Keele University—as we have heard, the first new university of the 20th century—celebrates its 75th anniversary. I would also like to mention the many significant interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams), for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth

[Janet Daby]

Snell), and from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I appreciate all those contributions, and I will address many of them in my speech.

It is right that we celebrate the success of our higher education sector, the value it brings to our economy, the valuable skills it gives to people who choose to study at our universities and colleges as well as the people who choose to work in the sector and within the regions they serve. Our universities are autonomous, vibrant and independent. We value that, as does the sector. The Government are committed to ensuring a sustainable funding model that supports high-value provision, powering opportunity and growth and meeting the skill needs of the country.

Staffordshire is home to some of the most dynamic and innovative universities in the UK, as I am sure my hon. Friends agree. Each contributes significantly to the academic and social fabric of the community. They have also played a pivotal role in shaping the future of countless students. The University of Staffordshire and Keele University foster environments where creativity and critical thinking thrive, preparing students to tackle the challenges of tomorrow. That is due to the dedication of universities and their staff in maintaining high academic standards and nurturing a culture of continuous improvement. Those universities play pivotal roles in driving local economic growth and innovation. Through strategic partnerships and initiatives such as those in Stoke-on-Trent and elsewhere in Staffordshire, these institutions collaborate closely with local industries, fostering advancements in the medical technology, healthcare and digital sectors. Those partnerships not only offer valuable learning experiences for students but have contributed significantly to the prosperity of the area.

Too many people across the country do not get the opportunity to succeed. We will act to address that. We will support the aspiration of everybody who wants to attend higher education. Higher education providers registered with the access and participation plans outline how they will support under-represented and disadvantaged student groups.

Gareth Snell: Keele University hosts the Uni Connect hub for North Staffordshire Higher Horizons. On average, 18% of our young people go to university; for those who have interacted with Higher Horizons, the figure jumps to nearly 64%, yet the funding for the scheme is questionable for the next year. I know that the Minister cannot comment on the Budget, but could she take back to her colleagues in the Treasury the importance of securing the funding for that scheme, so that the young people she talked about in north Staffordshire get the opportunity that they deserve?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for his significant contribution and for advocating for students and for the university. I will bring the issue to the attention of my noble Friend the Minister for Skills in the other place and I am sure my hon. Friend will receive a response.

Interventions can include tutoring, summer schools and student bursaries. Both Keele University and the University of Staffordshire have revised their access and participation plans, implementing new ones in September 2024. They have addressed risks identified in the Office for Students' equality of opportunity risk register and through assessment of local risk. We see that reflected in their initiatives, such as Steps2Medicine at Keele and the Staffordshire Children's University. The Steps2Medicine initiative provides aspiring medical students with the support they need to pursue a career in medicine, ensuring that students from disadvantaged and deprived backgrounds can explore and prepare for medical education. Equally, the Staffordshire Children's University engages young learners outside the traditional classroom, fostering a passion for learning and academic ambition early on.

Meeting the skill needs of the next decade is central to delivering the Government's mission across all regions and nations. That is why we are building a flexible and high-quality system that breaks down the barriers to opportunity and drives growth. We have established Skills England and tasked it with providing authoritative assessments of skills needs. We envisage Skills England's role in higher education closely mirroring its role in the wider skills system. Skills England will ensure local, regional, and national systems, including higher education providers, are meeting skill needs. It will work with those providers and other partners to ensure it is aligned with our industrial strategy.

All that will be backed by a new post-16 skills and initiation strategy that will set out a coherent vision for the skills system. It will support adults and young people, ensuring they have access to valuable work experience, giving them access to opportunity through our youth guarantee and supporting their ambitions to access higher education.

This Government are transforming the apprenticeships levy into a new growth and skills levy, which will offer greater flexibility to employers and learners, help more people to develop high skills at work and fuel innovation in businesses across the country. As a key step, the Prime Minister announced shorter-duration apprenticeships and new foundation apprenticeships for young people in areas such as construction, green skills and digital.

Those measures will support our mission to break down barriers to opportunity and to help to get young people to achieve. That is why I am delighted to see the work of Keele University and the University of Staffordshire in delivering degree apprenticeships. Keele collaborates with a diverse range of employers, including the NHS and Unilever, and has been recognised as outstanding by Ofsted for its climate change skills bootcamps, while the University of Staffordshire, through its state-of-the-art, £40 million Catalyst building, supports more than 2,000 apprenticeships, partnering with more than 150 employers, including police forces and the NHS.

Both universities are receiving significant funding from the Office for Students degree apprenticeship development fund, which will help them do even more to improve access. Skills England will work closely with employers, training providers, unions and other key partners to identify priority skills gaps, helping to ensure that levy-funded training, including degree apprenticeships, delivers value for money, meets the needs of businesses and drives economic growth.

Mental health and wellbeing have been mentioned and are extremely important. The Office for Students is providing £15 million in funding for mental health support this year. Many higher education providers, including the universities of Staffordshire and of Keele,

have demonstrated their commitment to student mental health by joining the universities mental health charter programme. But we need to go further and that is why the higher education student support champion Edward Peck is working closely with students, parents and mental health experts and the sector through the higher education mental health implementation task force to drive meaningful change in mental health practice and improve the lives of students. We must do all we can to support our students and to prevent tragedies.

Both Keele and Staffordshire universities maintain robust partnerships with local industries. For instance Keele's science and innovation park is home to numerous businesses and promotes collaboration between academia and industry. This synergy not only stimulates the local economy but offers students valuable work experience. The value that these collaborations provide to regional economies cannot be overstated and we would encourage all universities to pursue them.

We should not forget the valuable contribution of further education providers such as Burton and South Derbyshire College. These institutions play a crucial role in ensuring that every person who meets the requirements and wishes to pursue higher education can do so.

Finally, I thank all the Members who have contributed to this debate and again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme on securing it. I hope, as I have explained, that it addresses the issues that have been raised but also celebrates the success of higher education in Staffordshire and shines a light on the sector throughout our country.

Question put and agreed to.

7.46 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 9 October 2024

[Derek Twigg *in the Chair*]

Government Support for the RSPCA

9.30 am

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the RSPCA.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. It is fantastic to be able to open today's debate on Government support for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and to recognise its history, praise its work and celebrate and thank its volunteers and supporters in its 200th year.

Two hundred years ago on 16 June 1824 a group of people met in a London coffee shop determined to change animals' lives for the better. They created the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which sparked a movement that spread around the world. With kindness at the heart of the mission, they boldly set out to

"alter the moral feelings of the country".

Since that first meeting the RSPCA has taken the lead in advocating for animal welfare, including working with politicians and decision makers to secure laws that have transformed the lives of millions of animals in the UK and beyond. Alongside that, the RSPCA, and its wide network of branches and partners, has played a significant role in changing attitudes and behaviours to animals through its education, prevention and scientific work.

The society was the first animal welfare charity in the world. Before that time, there was little discussion about whether animals could suffer and therefore animal cruelty was widely prevalent or not even considered an issue. Animals played a very different role in people's lives. Few people kept pets. Animals were used for work, transport or even entertainment. Bear and bull baiting were common. Even Parliament Square contained one of the most notorious dog-fighting pits in the country, which was eventually closed in 1830.

Since then caring for animals has gradually become woven into the fabric of British society and our laws. People now recognise that many animals are sentient beings who deserve our respect and kindness. I am very pleased to say that Parliament recognised that two years ago in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, but there is still a long way to go. Animals face some of the biggest challenges of the past two centuries as climate change, habitat loss, the cost of living and the pandemic take their toll. That means the RSPCA is needed now more than ever.

In 1840, Queen Victoria gave her permission for the then SPCA to add the royal prefix to become the RSPCA. At that time there were five full-time inspectors who were paid a guinea a week. Today the RSPCA has the equivalent of 361 full-time frontline officers, including 233 inspectors and 128 animal rescue officers. Those officers cover all of England and Wales, meaning the RSPCA has just one inspector or animal rescue officer for every 167,000 people.

The RSPCA was an early adopter of digital education and now has four education and community engagement hubs across the UK. Furthermore, it offers animal welfare education to schoolchildren, young people and families, with opportunities to engage with pets and wildlife. As part of the Pet Education Partnership, a collaborative initiative between eight of the UK's leading animal welfare organisations, the RSPCA aims to make animal welfare education accessible for every child aged between five and 11 in the UK.

In 1835, bear and bull baiting were abolished and dog fighting made illegal, but we know it still continues as an illegal activity today and is investigated by the RSPCA's undercover officers. Despite that, the killing of animals for sport in society has continued. Fox and stag hunting and hare coursing were popular pastimes in rural areas, but through a combination of campaigning, investigations and legal action, the RSPCA works tirelessly with other organisations such as the League Against Cruel Sports and the International Fund for Animal Welfare to end those practices.

In 1911, inspired by the RSPCA, the Protection of Animals Act was passed. That important law tackled almost every type of cruelty to animals. The RSPCA was a pioneer in recognising the need to work closely with politicians and decision makers to secure policy and legal change and in 1924 employed its first public affairs officer and first woman: Gertrude Speedwell Massingham. She was a real trailblazer for animal welfare and was the founder of the Council Against Bullfighting. This year, the RSPCA honoured her through the Speedwell Massingham advocacy award, which is part of the PawPrints awards scheme. It has been running since 2008 and awards local authorities and public sector organisations for going above and beyond for animal welfare.

Sir Robert Gower, MP for Hackney Central and chair of the RSPCA trustees, set up the parliamentary group on animal welfare in 1929, the first in the world and the first such group on any issue in this Parliament. The RSPCA still provides a secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group for animal welfare, or APPGAW, as it is known.

More recently, arguably one of the most important legislative changes for animals, the landmark Animal Welfare Act 2006, was introduced under a Labour Government. The Act introduced the concept of prevention of cruelty to animals, rather than only acting after cruelty has occurred. The overwhelming majority of convictions secured by the RSPCA in 2023 were under that very Act, but more work remains to be done.

Currently, more than 100 million animals around the world are still used in research and testing annually. In 2023, 2.6 million procedures were carried out in Great Britain on animals such as mice and rats. The RSPCA has always campaigned strongly for those animals to be replaced with humane alternatives, and data shows that 77% of people agree that the UK Government should commit to phasing out the use of animals in scientific research and testing.

The RSPCA supports the Government's manifesto commitment to accelerate the phase-out of animals used in science and to set up a strategic advisory board,

[Ruth Jones]

which will bring together stakeholders across academia, industry and charities to work towards that goal. That could have a meaningful impact on how we view and use animals used in scientific experiments, and I commend the Government on setting that goal. I hope that the board can be set up quickly. Perhaps the Minister can set out a timetable in his response.

Moving on to pets, today nearly 60% of households in the UK have at least one pet, with a total of 38 million pets being kept—

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. On pets, does she agree that we are a nation of pet-lovers? She is making a significant contribution to that commentary, but the pet-loving nature of our nation is often seen in examples of cruelty to pets, with outrage and indignation across the nation, indicating and vindicating the support that she and I hope the rest of us will express for the RSPCA and the need to support it and all its work.

Ruth Jones: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As MPs, we know that the amount of emails in our inbox every week and month testifies as to how much the public care about animal welfare. I thank him for his intervention; he made a valuable point.

In recent years, as owning a pet has become more popular, unfortunately we have also seen an increase in extreme designer dog breeding. For example, dogs such as French bulldogs have risen in popularity recently, but such types of dogs have welfare issues. They are known as brachycephalic or flat-faced dogs, and they can suffer from breathing problems, are often unable to regulate their own temperature and have difficulty with exercise.

Such trends will continue, however, until we have stronger regulations on the breeding of pets. Social media platforms also have a role to play, as extreme breeding trends are often exacerbated by what is promoted on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Under the Animal Welfare Act licensing conditions, it is illegal to breed an animal if its breed conformation causes welfare problems—but the wording is vague and has never been used to stop breeding animals that have welfare problems once they are born. The RSPCA hopes to see the Government clarify that point soon, perhaps as part of an animal welfare strategy.

We have had some successes, however. Only earlier this year, Parliament decided to phase out the private keeping of primates, showing how attitudes to pets are changing. In 2019, similarly, Parliament agreed that keeping wild animals in circuses was no longer appropriate in England as their welfare could not be guaranteed. I hope that we will now turn to reviewing the legislation governing the control, exploitation, welfare and conservation of wild animals in England and Wales, which has turned into a complex patchwork of overlapping and sometimes conflicting provisions.

In 2015, the Law Commission carried out a review into wildlife legislation, concluding that the legislative framework covering wildlife was outdated and in need of reform. The RSPCA supports the recommendations of that report and is calling for consolidation of wildlife law in England and Wales.

As attitudes change and people increasingly understand that animal welfare matters, they also recognise that they can do something about it. Shoppers are becoming more interested in the origin of their food and the wellbeing of the animals involved, and that affects what they choose to buy. That is why the RSPCA has been calling for the introduction of easy-to-understand, factual labelling on the method of production for all animal products. The consultation on that closed in May 2024. I appreciate it was under a different Government, but would the Minister set out when the Government will publish the results and a timetable for the introduction of such a scheme?

We have seen fantastic progress this year in farm animal welfare, after a 100-year campaign by the RSPCA. The exporting of live animals for fattening and slaughter was finally banned earlier this year, but there is still more that can be done to improve the lives of farm animals. The RSPCA is calling for an end to cages for laying hens and farrowing crates for sows in the UK. In the UK, enriched cages are still permitted; they house about 10 million egg-laying hens. They provide just 9% more usable space per bird than battery cages—basically, space equivalent to the size of an A4 sheet of paper for each bird.

About 6 million pigs raised for slaughter every year are born in farrowing crates—metal crates within a pen in which pregnant sows are placed one week before giving birth. Sows can have multiple litters in a year and can spend up to 15 weeks in those crates. The previous Government committed to a consultation on ending the use of cages for farmed animals, and I hope this Government will restart it.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to the RSPCA for its amazing work in the past, currently and in the future.

9.41 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for leading this debate and for setting out the detail and information so well. She obviously has a passion for animals, which I share.

The RSPCA is celebrating its 200th birthday this year. It is the first animal welfare charity to be founded in the world, so the impact of what it has done over 200 years is incredible. With its network of agencies and branches, it paved the way in tackling animal cruelty and neglect and worked closely alongside Government to change laws and create a better place for all kinds of animals, so it is great to be here to celebrate and support it.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): In my area, the Brent Knoll animal centre, a wonderful part of the RSPCA, rehomes dogs, cats, rabbits, ferrets and other small animals, and it is always full, but a lot of people do not understand that such centres are not part of the RSPCA's main structure and are not funded centrally. Would the hon. Gentleman comment on the fact that they are locally funded through donations and the time and money of volunteers?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Yes, I am well aware of the volunteers and the fundraising. We attend many events in our constituencies for giving

to the RSPCA. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said that we are often called a nation of animal lovers, and of course we are. In all my life—and it is a pretty long one—I cannot remember not having a dog. I am from Ballywalter, and we had Pekinese, collies, terriers and latterly springer spaniels. It has almost been an evolution from house dogs to dogs that we use for hunting.

The RSPCA has the equivalent of 361 full-time frontline officers, 233 inspectors and 128 animal rescue officers. Many of us have been touched by the advertisements on TV about cruelty against animals; it really breaks our hearts. The hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn is right that the cruelty is inconceivable. We cannot understand why anyone would want to harm or carry out cruelty against animals.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Would the hon. Member agree that a huge animal cruelty issue in Northern Ireland is badger baiting? Far too often, sentencing for such crimes is too lenient. Does the hon. Member agree that the law and sentencing on animal cruelty needs to be looked at, as badger baiting is a big issue for me and my constituency?

Jim Shannon: I thank my friend and colleague for that intervention: I am well aware of those issues. The lady in the Police Service of Northern Ireland who looks after animal crime and welfare is Emma Meredith and I have known her all her life. She was a flower girl at my wedding, which was 36 years ago. She is now the police officer assigned to this area, and she is very aware of badger baiting. There is a need to come down hard on those involved. I think there has been some action on badger baiting over the past few years, because it is very much on the radar.

The situation in Northern Ireland is slightly different from that of the RSPCA. We are managed and supported by the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the second oldest animal charity in the world. It was founded in 1836 by Commander Francis Anderson Calder, a retired navy officer. The charity's first initiative gives an idea of its history and purpose. It erected water troughs across the city for the sustenance of the heavily burdened working horses in industrial Belfast. That was the purpose of the movement at that time.

The USPCA also supports Northern Ireland schools by bringing the importance of animal welfare to life and understanding the needs of animals within the classroom. It runs an educational programme, although I am not sure whether that is run on the mainland. Many schools in my constituency and others frequently host the USPCA, which comes to them to engage with children. The fact is that children love animals and it is good to engage them, to engender in them an early interest in animals and their welfare. Many young people have a goal to work with animals in future. It is fantastic to offer to teach them how to do so. It instils a love of animals and an interest in animals for years to come.

Ahead of this debate, I read in the Library briefing that there were concerns about kitten smuggling across the UK. The week before last I met with Alice from the Cats Protection Centre in Dundonald. Kitten smuggling was one of the main topics of discussion, and the statistics I was shown that day were incredible. The centre takes in and rehomes a number of cats. It is not just about lost kittens. The purpose of Cats Protection—and all cat charities—is to try to find them another home. They are neutered to ensure there will be no more kittens coming along when they are given out. Some of the cats and kittens there had been badly treated. Again, it is inconceivable to understand how anyone could do that.

There have been significant changes in the cat market in the past five years, as highlighted in the CATS Report 2023 published by Cats Protection. There has been a significant rise in purebred and pedigree cats. In addition, pet smuggling poses risks to both humans and animals. There are risks not just to the cats but to humans, as well, and we need to be aware of those issues. Cats Protection and other charities are very much to the fore on that. Smuggled cats may carry transmissible diseases such as rabies and tapeworm, which can be dangerous.

When I got married 36 years ago, I was not that fond of cats, as I had always had dogs, but my wife was a cat lover. There was a very simple, "Love me, love my cats." It brought about a complete change and now we have three cats in the house—it might be four cats. One of them stays outside all the time because we live on a farm and it hunts continuously. The other three like the warmth of the Aga cooker. I again make the point about how we have to look at things today.

I very much look forward to the Minister's comments. Perhaps he can clarify whether he has any plans to engage with the devolved nations, including the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland, as I know he does regularly, on what steps we can take to tackle cat smuggling.

There is a need for stronger legislation. We know that the back door to the Republic of Ireland is through Northern Ireland, and that the back door to the United Kingdom is through Northern Ireland. To be fair to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), the last Conservative Government were very active in trying to change the legislation and get on top of this issue, so it would be reassuring to hear similarly from the Minister that legislation can be made tighter to ensure that dog and cat smuggling is not taking place.

The Minister will be aware that Northern Ireland still has to follow EU pet travel legislation, which complicates things a bit, and EU legislation regarding the transportation of animals, including pregnant animals. I look forward to hearing about plans that will ensure that Northern Ireland can align with the rest of the United Kingdom, and I hope that what we discuss will be something we can all grasp.

The RSPCA has proven itself in going above and beyond. Last year, it convicted 447 defendants, including two youth offenders, with a prosecution rate of 91.7%—wow. That tells us that when the RSPCA takes on a case, it wants to win it; if it can do it that well, it is worth doing. That rate is even higher than the rate in 2022, and higher again than 2021. The work it undertakes is incredible, and we are grateful for it. I look to the Minister to say how we can further support these societies and charities, because we are truly in debt to their fantastic efforts.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): If Members want to be called in the debate, they need to bob.

9.51 am

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship during my very first contribution to a Westminster Hall debate, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for securing such a timely debate, speaking so well about the achievements of the RSPCA over its 200 years and setting out some of the challenges that it faces.

I will focus my comments on the issues currently surrounding the microchipping of dogs and what more can be done to ensure the system is fit for purpose and properly enforced. I should declare an interest from the start: as a proud owner of a rescue Staffordshire bull terrier, animal and dog welfare is close to my heart.

Last week, in preparation for today's debate, I visited Almost Home Dog Rescue, near Mold in my constituency of Clwyd East. The team at Almost Home do a fantastic job and are a credit to our community, but they were clear that there is a huge, UK-wide problem. In their words,

"the pounds are FULL, the rescue centres are FULL and hundreds of puppies and healthy young dogs are being put to sleep on a weekly basis."

Their frontline experience is that the situation is becoming a crisis, and that Lucy's law, which effectively makes it illegal for third-party and commercial traders to sell puppies and kittens, is not working as it should. After 40 years in rescue, they have never known pressure like this before.

I welcome the fact that I stood on a manifesto that committed to ending puppy smuggling and farming, and I welcome any update from the Minister on that issue. I also welcome the fact that the Welsh Labour manifesto committed to the UK and Welsh Governments working together on animal welfare issues, including microchipping. I also thank Dogs Trust for meeting with me and providing a briefing on the importance of microchipping.

I think everyone here will recognise the benefits of microchipping pets, and dogs in particular. When it works effectively, microchipping allows people to rapidly identify a stray or lost dog and return it to its owner, reducing kennel time and the cost for local authorities. A rapid return also allows local authority officers to re-emphasise the importance of responsible dog ownership, which deters people from abandoning these pets irresponsibly. In addition, microchips being traceable reduces the problem of puppy farming, as well as the incidence of infectious diseases and inherited defects. Importantly, it also provides a strong deterrent to dog theft.

The effective operation of the microchipping system depends on accurate records. Stray dogs that are microchipped and have up-to-date microchip records are more than twice as likely to be reunited with their keepers as dogs without a microchip. However, without properly maintained databases and proper enforcement, microchipping can never deliver everything that it set out to do.

In March this year, the previous Government published their response to the consultation carried out on the operation of cat and dog microchipping systems. The consultation ran from March to May 2022 and garnered more than 1,500 responses. The headline findings were that the overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that we should introduce a single point of search portal to improve access to microchip records for approved users; that we should stop pets being registered on more than one database at a time; that the existing keeper should have an opportunity to object before the microchip record is transferred to a new keeper; and that the database operators must record whether a pet is missing or stolen.

On making it easier for approved users to access the database records, the Government agreed to

"support the development of a single point of search portal, working further with database operators and key user groups."

When it came to the requirements of databases and maintaining the accuracy of records, the Government agreed that they would

"require database operators to send reminders to their customers at least once a year to ensure their information is up to date."

On the transfer of keepers' records, the Government said that they would

"require database operators to have robust transfer of keepership processes in place and allow, where appropriate, the current registered keeper up to 28 days to object to the transfer."

Crucially, on enforcement, the Government said that they would

"require dog breeder information to remain as a permanently accessible part of the microchip record for enforcement purposes."

Those commitments were clearly made under the previous Government, so I would welcome the Minister's comments on these issues and an update on whether actions, such as those I set out, will be taken forward.

I would also be more than happy, as I am sure others would be, to work with the Minister on ensuring that we get this system right and build on some of the important progress that has been made. The UK and Welsh Governments are working together closely on this issue, particularly when considering future changes in relation to microchipping databases for both dogs and cats, including accessibility and a single point of entry, and I welcome any update that the Minister can give on those discussions and the way forward.

Finally, as other hon. Members have done, I pay tribute to the work of the RSPCA, the world's first and oldest animal welfare charity. I look forward to working alongside it and other animal welfare groups to raise the standards of dog welfare during the course of this Parliament and beyond.

9.57 am

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for securing this important debate.

It is a pleasure to speak on this topic, as protecting and advocating for the voices of animals that cannot speak for themselves is hugely important to me both personally and politically. It is important personally because care for animals is one of the things that I can remember, back to my childhood, first caring about the most. As a 15-year-old, I took the decision not to consume any animal products, which I have stuck with ever since. Like other Members, I have a rescue cat, called Bella. Our relationships with our pets often open our hearts to how we think about other species. It is important politically because animal protection issues

are some of the top issues that I hear about from constituents in my inbox, as I am sure is the case for other Members. The British really are a nation of animal lovers. Of course, animal protection is core to Green philosophy and Green party politics.

I join others in recognising the vital work done by the RSPCA over the 200 years since its formation in a London café. It is the first and oldest animal welfare charity to be founded, and as a nation of animal lovers we know that it has been keen to foster that reputation, as well as helping to care for the hundreds of thousands of animals each year that are abandoned, neglected, tortured, or harmed or which simply need rehoming. The RSPCA has also been key when it comes to securing some of the strongest animal protection laws in the world, and I pay tribute to its remarkable achievements in that respect. It is no exaggeration to say that without the RSPCA, animals in this country and worldwide today would be far less protected from cruelty. I thank everyone who has been part of that successful track record, from the early founders to the frontline inspectors and from the protection officers who make a tangible difference on a daily basis to those who successfully bring such a high number of prosecutions for breaking laws such as the Animal Welfare Act 2006. That work really matters, and I hope that the Government will continue actively to support it.

Much has changed in the 200 years since the RSPCA was established, including the context in which it operates. For example, our understanding that suffering occurs when all types of animals are subject to testing has grown massively, and I very much hope that the RSPCA and the Government get behind promoting modern, more effective and cruelty-free methods of testing that do not involve animals. Our attitude towards animals has also changed: 61% of the British public feel some discomfort about the way animals are treated on farms, and factory farms in particular, according to research from this time last year by the Social Market Foundation.

Sadly, though, animal exploitation continues, from the treatment of the 15 Gentoo penguins at Sea Life London Aquarium, which are currently kept in an enclosure with no natural light or fresh air and only six or seven feet of water in which to dive, to the continued use of greyhounds in racing, where dogs face the constant risk of injury or death. I am incredibly proud that compassion towards animals has always been core to the Green party, and that at our autumn conference we became the first party to pledge a ban on greyhound racing—a position that the RSPCA supports, as does the majority of the public. I invite the Minister to comment on the Government's plans for ending cruelty to animals in so-called sport.

Animal abuse is sadly endemic in considerable parts of our food and farming system. That includes the proliferation of huge chicken sheds, some holding tens of thousands of chickens in incredibly cruel, unnatural conditions, which is a big cause of the river pollution scandal. In my area in East Anglia, in Norfolk and Suffolk, we are seeing a proliferation of these huge industrial sheds, including in Methwold. The World Wildlife Fund has highlighted the real climate, environmental and animal welfare impacts of the project there, and suggested that it needs to be stopped due to the climate impact and the cumulative impact of the number of these projects, including on nutrient pollution and water quality. I challenge the Government, and invite the Minister specifically, to comment on what will be done to address the proliferation of huge industrial chicken sheds and its huge impact on basic standards of animal welfare, as well as on environmental pollution and other issues affecting local communities.

The RSPCA has sought to tackle the treatment of farmed animals specifically with the RSPCA Assured scheme, originally known as Freedom Food when it was created 30 years ago. The scheme seeks to hold certified producers to higher welfare standards than are required under UK law. However, as has been widely reported, it has fallen short of its own high standards, with concerns about overcrowding, poor hygiene and, in some cases, physical abuse of livestock by farm workers on certain farms. I therefore welcome the RSPCA's decision to conduct an internal review of the scheme, which must be done to ensure that the RSPCA's reputation is not used as a cover for such issues. I note that the president of the RSPCA, Chris Packham, and the vice-president, former Green MP Caroline Lucas, are closely monitoring the outcome of that review.

As we get to the 200-year anniversary of the RSPCA and warmly welcome and congratulate it on its many achievements, I encourage the RSPCA and the Government to consider the ways in which we need to strengthen protection for animals going forward. That includes addressing the cruelty involved in the proliferation of huge industrial chicken sheds and their impact on the environment and animal protection; addressing the smuggling of puppies and kittens, as other Members have mentioned; introducing stronger regulation on breeders to ensure high welfare standards for dogs and cats; and, in particular, clamping down on the trend of breeding for extreme traits in dogs, which causes huge concerns in terms of breathing, walking and basic welfare standards. I would like the Minister to respond on that specifically.

I also call on the Government to ban the manufacture and use of snares, and to address the cruelty that can occur with the use of animals in sport. Members may not be aware that there were 175 horse deaths on racecourses in 2023. The horseracing industry needs to show how it will stop deaths of horses on racetracks.

We have come so far, haven't we? We are a nation of animal lovers. We are proud of the RSPCA's work to support particularly dogs, cats and other animals that are our beloved pets. Yet there is so much more to do, and I look forward to seeing the RSPCA being central to that work. I would welcome hearing from the Minister at the end of the debate about some of the specific animal abuse issues I have highlighted, which I know the British public want addressed.

10.5 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Twigg, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones)—I hope I have got that right—on securing today's debate and on her excellent speech.

The RSPCA is not just the UK's largest animal welfare charity, but one of our nation's most treasured and recognisable institutions. For a startling 200 years, it has been kept afloat thanks to the generous donations

[Gill Furniss]

of the British public, which just goes to show that we truly are a nation of animal lovers and cherish the work done by the charity to help animals. The RSPCA's work stretches across every part of the country, and I look forward to visiting my local branch on Friday. It is a shame that the life of an MP is not more compatible with pet ownership, otherwise I would not be leaving there empty-handed; in fact, I would probably leave with an armful.

The RSPCA's workload is staggering. Last year, it averaged more than 2,500 calls every single day, received more than 20,000 abandonment calls and rehomed 27,000 animals. We appreciate all that it does. It is heartbreaking to hear stories of pets being abandoned by their owners. Sadly, the cost of living crisis and the surge of so-called pandemic puppies have created a perfect storm, whereby more and more people cannot afford to properly care for their beloved companions.

Tessa Munt: That is counterintuitive, isn't it, because having a pet can be one of the things that keeps people's mental health so fit and together. As I mentioned earlier, the cost of running my local centre is £1,300 a day, but where they can match pets with people, those people often benefit enormously from improved mental health because of the company of an animal.

Gill Furniss: I thank the hon. Member for that pertinent point. Throughout covid, which was stressful for everyone, people's pets were their comfort and also their form of exercise. It is proven that dogs will calm us down when we are in distress and give us something to get up for in the morning.

As difficult as it can be, the RSPCA is always there if owners can no longer afford the cost of owning a pet. There is never an excuse for abandonment, but however the animals get to the RSPCA, it is there for every one of them. I am an animal lover; my father adopted a dog for me when I was a child and I adopted a cat some years ago. When I adopted the cat, I was surprised at the thoroughness of the vetting: we were interviewed, and someone came to my home to check the garden, to see whether we were on a busy road and to do the matching mentioned by the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt). It is comforting to know that pets that have sometimes been abandoned are going to the right people in the right places who can look after them. I imagine that looking after a Chihuahua and looking after a Great Dane are different things—I have not had either, but I imagine there are different focuses and different housing abilities when doing that.

The ban on puppy and kitten smuggling is long overdue. The previous Government dragged their feet on it for far too long and animals have suffered as a result, so I look forward to hearing from the Minister about his plans in that area.

I also welcome our manifesto commitment to work towards phasing out animal testing. Although it has been vital for many of our most important scientific and medical discoveries, technological advances mean we can look forward to an age where it is no longer needed. I hope the Minister can outline the way forward for us.

I am confident that the Government's work on these issues will extend beyond our manifesto commitments, to ensure that we remain world leaders in animal welfare. Given the RSPCA's expertise, we must listen when it calls for legislative changes. Colleagues have mentioned regulation, and the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn should be listened to. I will be interested to hear what the Minister says about establishing an animal health strategy, which I feel would have the support of Parliament, should it proceed.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn—I have said that so many times now that maybe I will remember it—for giving us the opportunity to celebrate 200 years since the RSPCA was formed. This debate has been a great chance to reflect on how far we have come and to discuss what more there is to do, and I look forward to seeing real progress in the years ahead. Most of all, I thank all those associated with the RSPCA—the donors, the workers, the board members and the fundraisers. I really want to congratulate them and wish them a happy 200th birthday.

10.11 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your guidance, Mr Twigg. It is a tremendous honour to follow so many great speeches, most of all that by the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones)—the hon. Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) gave us a masterclass in how to pronounce Newport West and Islwyn. The hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn made a really great opening speech and we ought to be very grateful to her for securing this debate.

It is incredibly important that we mark the RSPCA's 200th anniversary. It was the first charity of its kind and it is still the leading one, as the largest animal welfare charity in the United Kingdom. There are no two ways about it: how we treat animals—wildlife, livestock, pets or whatever—is a mark of the kind of culture and society we are. Are we a people who are kind? Are we a people who are considerate? Are we a people who consider those who are more vulnerable than us, whether they be humans or animals? That is a measure of whether we truly are a civilised society, and we have to thank and praise the RSPCA for being one of the cornerstones of what it is to live in a civilised country today.

From a local perspective, we have so much to be grateful to the RSPCA for. I represent 1,500 farms, and the RSPCA inspectors help farmers and support animal welfare right across our huge and beautiful communities of Westmorland and Lonsdale, and specifically at the annual Appleby horse fair. We are very grateful for the RSPCA's focus on that event and in the towns and villages around Appleby, such as Kirkby Stephen, where there is great need for its intervention. RSPCA Westmorland is a wonderful branch, and we praise the inspectors, the volunteers and all the people who make that outfit so very successful, from their base in Kendal to the shops in Bowness and Kendal itself.

As we have heard from many Members today, the RSPCA relies on donations—0.1% of its income comes from a Government source, leaving the rest of it to be raised by hard-working volunteers. That funding is

spent incredibly effectively: 82p out of every pound that it raises goes on direct interventions to preserve animal welfare; 1p out of every pound goes on governance; and the other 17p is invested in raising the next pound. It is so important to remember that a really significant part of what the RSPCA does is raise money to be able to do its fantastic work. That is both practical and political, and it is important to reflect on that and to praise the RSPCA for both.

This has been a really great debate, and I will not cover everything that has been said, because of time constrictions, but let us start with the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn. She talked rightly about the lack of breeding regulations and the immense suffering that can be caused by specific bred characteristics. I had the pleasure—although it was a very sobering experience in many ways—of visiting Battersea Dogs and Cats Home last year, and I saw the tiny fraction of animals, including a dog, that have been lucky enough to have medical interventions to undo the consequences of such breeding—respiratory problems, great suffering and shorter lives.

That was a reminder of why it is important that we look to regulate ownership as well as breeding. When I were a lad, we had the dog licence, and I am not convinced that it is not a good idea to go back to such a system. We often talk about dangerous breeds, but we are generally talking about poor owners. We need to ensure that we have a licencing system that regulates these things, so that our animals are cared for and well reared.

The hon. Member made a wonderful point setting out the advances and reminding us of the many great things Parliament has done, both recently and over a longer period, including on animal sentience and preventing primates being kept as pets. Many if not all of those things happened because of RSPCA pressure, and we are grateful for that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about a number of issues, but specifically about how much the RSPCA does with so little. He also rightly focused on the RSPCA's educational work, ensuring that young people know from an early age how important it is to value animals and to treat them with kindness. I am the opposite of the hon. Member in that I was the one brought up with cats and my wife was the one brought up with dogs—and she won. We had a wonderful couple of ginger toms called Eric and Ernie when we were first married; they were terrorised by my toddler, who is now 23. They moved next door and lived long and prosperous lives as a result—there was no need for RSPCA intervention. Sadly, they were the last cats that I owned.

The hon. Member for Clwyd East (Becky Gittins) made a brilliant speech, and I welcome her to this place and to the Westminster Hall family. She talked about the importance of rescue centres and how many of them are full. There are too few resources available and so many healthy and otherwise happy animals are tragically put down. She talked about the importance of microchipping and of tackling puppy and kitten smuggling and farming, something that the last Government were shaping to do but did not. There was an animal welfare Bill in the 2019 Conservative manifesto that was good and ready to go, but they took it to bits and did some of it. That was a terrible waste, because there was absolutely a majority in the last Parliament to pass that Bill. I hope the new Government will now finish the job and go further. The hon. Member also made some other excellent alongside that.

I was pleased to hear the excellent and impassioned speech from the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay). He talked about the hard side of what the RSPCA does and the importance of bringing prosecutions. There must be justice: when people treat animals unfairly and cruelly we should do more than just wring our hands. We are grateful to the RSPCA and its inspectors and officers for ensuring that justice is done and prosecutions happen.

Tessa Munt: I do not want to say that people who have been violent to others start here, but there is a lot of research that indicates that cruelty to animals is often a precursor of cruelty to people. The RSPCA is well placed in its work to identify people who are capable of doing the most dreadful things to animals and who might then go on to offend against other people.

Tim Farron: Tragically, my hon. Friend is correct. There is much evidence to back up the idea that many people who abuse human beings started off or learned their trade with how they treated animals. That is shocking, but as the hon. Member for Waveney Valley pointed out, in dealing with prosecutions the RSPCA may end up protecting humans in the long run by tackling those who abuse animals. He also spoke about the impact of animal welfare issues on pollution, and in particular the huge industrial-style chicken sheds and what they mean for water quality. He spoke of the importance of the welfare of farmed animals, which I will come back to in my conclusion if I have a minute.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) spoke about many things, including the RSPCA's commitment to rehoming and ensuring good homes for those animals that have been abandoned. We need to support it to do that because in many cases, as the hon. Member for Clwyd East said, not enough of those animals are being rehomed because of a lack of space in shelters.

In an earlier intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) talked about the clear and attested benefits of pet ownership for our mental health—there are no two ways about it. Having lost to my wife, we now have dogs. We have a chocolate Lab called Ted, who is my running companion. I have a running lead and he pulls me up the hills—it is awesome. We also have an elderly and decrepit springer spaniel, Jasper, who used to be my running companion. He improves my mental health by reminding me that I am not the most decrepit member of our household—bless him, but put him in water and you would think he was a seal.

Tessa Munt: I would like to offer some balance, because it comes to me that the RSPCA was involved in an amazing project working with young offenders on the south coast. Young people who had often effectively ended up in the prison system, who had never been loved or had anything to love, had the opportunity to work with horses—big, powerful animals that could hurt them more than the other way round. It was an

[Tessa Munt]

amazing project that allowed the recovery of those young people, which gives a bit of balance to my previous point.

Tim Farron: My hon. Friend makes a good point; that is absolutely true. Animals are good for us, so we should be good to them. The RSPCA has been great at encouraging both sides of that.

We have rightly paid tribute to the RSPCA for its practical and political work lobbying to make this place and our society kinder to animals. It has a list of ambitions, and we have gone through many of them, but I will name a handful: to stop illegal puppy and kitten trading, to improve farmed animal welfare, to end the severe suffering of animals used in science, to secure legal protection for animals and establish an animal protection commission, to achieve statutory powers in England and Wales for RSPCA inspectors and, internationally, to secure a UN declaration for animals. To go further and meet the high standards that the RSPCA sets us, we in this place should be banning puppy and kitten farming and smuggling; ending the use of inhumane cages on an industrial scale, particularly when it comes to laying hens; and moving away from animal testing for medical and other forms of science where it is safe to do so.

There are broader things as well. In the last Parliament, we had a Government who did trade deals with countries with poorer animal welfare standards than our own, effectively exporting problems to other countries and, in the process, undermining our farmers, who have relatively high animal welfare standards. They rewarded those overseas producers with poorer welfare standards and penalised our farmers with higher welfare standards. That was wrong, and I hope this Government will do something about it.

For all the problems with the new farm payment scheme, I will praise the last Government for the farming in protected landscapes programme—FiPL—which provides grant support to farmers in places such as the lakes, the dales and other protected landscapes. It allows farmers to move towards accommodation and other capital kit that allows them to keep their animals at a higher welfare standard. That money runs out at the end of March; I would love the Minister to address that. FiPL has been one of the few good things so far to come out of the botched transition from the old farm payment scheme to the new one, and it is good for animal welfare and farmers.

More generally, let us remember that one reason we in this country have higher animal welfare standards in farming than in other places such as Australia and the US is because we have a tradition of family farming and close husbandry. Put bluntly, the first time an Australian or American farmer knows their livestock is unwell is when they find its sun-bleached bones the next year. The reality in the United Kingdom is that we have a closeness and therefore a tenderness and a practical way of being able to care for our animals.

We need to ensure in the farm transition that huge landlords are not the ones who benefit, as is currently happening thanks to the mistakes of the last Government, and instead that we support smaller farmers, who currently cannot get into those schemes. In yesterday's debate, I mentioned a hill farmer I spoke to recently who has lost £40,000 in farm payments; he has gained £14,000 under the sustainable farming incentive to replace those payments, and even that cost him £6,000 for a land agent to try to get him through the hoops. People like him will potentially go out of business, and we will end up with ranch farming, rather than the family farming we need if we really care about animal welfare in farming in the UK.

In short, 200 years is absolutely something we should celebrate, but the RSPCA lacks resources, and we need to support it to have more. There are many laws that do not support animal welfare as we would like them to, including Government policy that advantages those who mistreat animals both at home and abroad. The RSPCA has done so much and wants to do so much more; it is our job as a Parliament to support it.

10.25 am

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) on securing this important debate. Having interacted with her many times in the previous Parliament, when she was a shadow Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I know that she cares deeply about animal welfare issues. It is good to see her championing those issues again—what better way than by securing an important debate on the RSPCA in its 200th anniversary year? It is thanks to the hard work of bodies such as the RSPCA, covering enforcement, education and campaigning, that the UK is the G7 nation highest on the world animal protection index. I welcome Chris Sherwood, the chief executive of the RSPCA, and his team to the Public Gallery.

The RSPCA's work is truly staggering in scale and spans more than two centuries of dedication. In 2023 alone, the RSPCA responded to more than 110,000 incidents and provided more than half a million hours of care to animals needing treatment or rehabilitation. We must not forget that the RSPCA receives a call on its cruelty and advice line every 32 seconds. Nearly 10,000 people offer their time as volunteers to the RSPCA, which is truly commendable. This monumental effort provides thousands of wild animals, pets and livestock with care and protection from cruelty. Vitally, the RSPCA also conducts much work with animal owners to deliver important advice on how best to care for their animals.

I agree with all Members present who have made positive comments about the RSPCA. It is a real success story, showing how people across the country can come together to make a difference on something they care deeply about. It is fantastic that we live in a country where people are empowered to make a difference and feel free to act on their convictions without relying solely on state inspectorates. As has been highlighted, the RSPCA receives almost no Government funding, operating through charitable donations and its internal fundraising operations.

The RSPCA plays a vital role in the enforcement of our animal welfare laws. Through private prosecutions, every one of us has the right to bring forward a prosecution where we feel a crime has been committed, and the RSPCA regularly does this through a sponsoring individual. I hope the Government will continue to support private

prosecutions; they are a vital part of our legal system, ensuring the law is owned and accessible to us all, and not just the state.

Of course, the RSPCA carries out this work under the law, and I will take a moment to highlight the previous Government's work to strengthen the legal protections for animals. Since leaving the European Union, we have had greater freedom to determination our own animal welfare laws, including passing the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022—a landmark piece of legislation. The Act created the Animal Sentience Committee, which provides expert advice to Government on animal welfare reforms. The Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024 also delivered on the previous Government's commitment to ban the export of live animals, ending the unnecessary stress, exhaustion and injury caused by their export. Several Members have already spoken in this debate of the Act being a good piece of legislation.

In 2016 and 2023, the Conservative Administration made changes to the law requiring dogs and cats to be microchipped in England, ensuring that they can be reunited with their owners. It was good to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Clwyd East (Becky Gittins), whom I welcome to Westminster Hall, on microchipping specifically. In 2019, wild animals were banned in circuses, and the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021 increased the maximum possible sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years.

I shall pick up on the points raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) around the work that the previous Administration were doing collectively and with our devolved nations. I hope that the Minister continues the dialogue with all devolved nations—I am sure he will—to ensure that we can work at pace on improving animal welfare legislation.

I urge the Government to continue at pace with the key areas of work that we were doing on livestock worrying. In particular, we need to ensure that the toughening of regulations through the implementation of the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill continues to receive support from the Government. Too often, time and time again, we hear that farmers are seeing their own livestock being killed or seriously savaged—seriously injured—as a result of people taking their dogs across fields. This needs to stop. I therefore hope that the Government will introduce that piece of legislation, and that it can become law. I seek confirmation from the Minister that that will be the case. It is only right that those who are irresponsible with their pets, when privileged to pass across someone else's land, feel the full consequences of their actions.

I thank the civil service team for their assistance not only to me but to previous Ministers in the work on the pieces of legislation that we introduced.

For some time the RSPCA has been campaigning on the distress caused to animals by the irresponsible use of fireworks. That issue is particularly relevant in my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley, where fireworks are regularly set off throughout the year, late into the evening and sometimes at all hours of the night. That causes huge distress to pets and other animals—not to mention their owners, struggling to sleep. I therefore take the opportunity to ask the Minister what work the Government plan to undertake to enforce our existing firework laws, and whether he believes that it is necessary to toughen up existing legislation in this area.

As all Members have highlighted through their contributions today, we are a nation of animal lovers, and what better way to celebrate that than by holding today's debate and celebrating the work of the RSPCA over the past 200 years? Again, I would like to champion the work that my hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), has been doing on raising animal welfare matters. I hope that she will continue to champion that cause from the Government Benches, and I hope that, with continued cross-party support, the RSPCA will continue to deliver the fantastic care that it already does for animals throughout the country.

10.32 am

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I join in the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones)—and she is indeed a very good friend—on securing this important debate. Her opening speech setting out the history and the issues was very thorough, and absolutely typical of her deep knowledge of these subjects, which she displayed, of course, when she served with me as a member of the shadow team over many years. I am delighted that my hon. Friend continues to be a staunch advocate for animal welfare in this place, and that her commitment to this cause was recognised last month, when, I am told, she won the Nature 2030 award for animal welfare. I also thank the shadow Minister for his kind words for my colleague; they are very well received.

I pay tribute to the RSPCA's outgoing chief executive, Chris Sherwood, and wish him well in his new role, which I am told is at the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

I am delighted to take part and reply in today's debate celebrating the RSPCA's 200th anniversary and some of the achievements since that first meeting in the London coffee shop in 1824. It has been a very good debate. I was warned in advance that probably a number of people's pets would be mentioned, and we have had Bella from Waveney Valley and Ted from Westmorland and Lonsdale. I will not add my own.

I welcome new Members to this happy band that joins these regular Westminster Hall debates. I suspect we shall all get to know each other even better over the next few years. Of course, no debate like this would be complete without a contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I will come to some of his comments in a minute. I am particularly pleased to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd East (Becky Gittins), who made important points about the microchipping consultation. I can tell her that they are under very serious consideration. The points she made about the database were well made, but these are inevitably complex issues.

I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) here; he made a series of important points. There are clearly issues around greyhound racing and welfare. Those involved in that sport are making considerable efforts to address those issues, but we are monitoring them carefully and if action is needed, it will be proportionate and sensible.

[Daniel Zeichner]

The hon. Gentleman also raised important points about poultry production. Of course we want to improve animal welfare in any way we can, but I gently say to him that the trade issues are complicated, and there is no point in our moving unless we can move in tandem with others. Exporting cruelty does not solve the problem. This is a complicated set of issues, but we clearly want to make as many improvements as we can.

I was pleased to hear the important points that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) raised about animal testing. I will come to them in a moment.

As we always say, we are a nation of animal lovers. The RSPCA plays a crucial role and should be given significant credit for helping shape the attitudes towards animal welfare that underpin our society. The comments by the hon. Member for Strangford about the USPCA informed my thinking; I was not entirely aware of its work. The inspectors and animal rescue officers of the USPCA and the RSPCA work—in often extremely challenging circumstances—to investigate and rescue animals from harm, and they deserve our thanks and praise, as do the staff and volunteers who work tirelessly to rehabilitate and rehome so many animals and give them a better life. The RSPCA has proven to be a formidable champion of animal welfare over the past 200 years, and successive Governments have greatly benefited from its expertise and advice.

Hon. Members have raised a number of campaigns and issues, and I will try to set out our position on some of the main ones. In our manifesto, we outlined that we are committed to ending puppy smuggling. Since the pet travel rules were harmonised with the European Union in 2012, there has been a significant increase in the number of non-commercial pet movements into the UK. Sadly, it tripled since 2011 to more than 320,000 dogs and cats in 2023. The number of dogs, cats and ferrets imported under the commercial rules has also significantly increased over the past few years. I listened closely to the comments of the hon. Member for Strangford about cat movements. By the nature of the crime, we cannot know the true extent of pet smuggling operations, but we know that commercial imports of dogs and cats are being disguised as non-commercial movements, as they are subject to less stringent checks.

Sadly, there is also an emerging market for the importation of heavily pregnant dogs and dogs with cropped ears—a painful practice that has been rightly banned in the UK for more than 15 years. We intend to clamp down on unscrupulous traders who prioritise profit over welfare. This problem is linked to dog breeding issues. We are working closely with the UK Brachycephalic Working Group to reduce the number of dogs affected by that condition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn mentioned the overriding recommendation of the 2015 Law Commission report into wildlife legislation—namely, that wildlife laws in this country need to be consolidated. I cannot today commit to bringing about that consolidation, but it is clear that we need more consistency and clarity. Our general election manifesto included an explicit commitment to bring an end to the use of snare traps, which I am sure hon. Members will welcome, but I am conscious that questions are posed about the humaneness of other wildlife traps. The law should be there to improve the protection of our wild animals, not only from an ethical standpoint but because the protection of wildlife is a crucial part of our approach to meeting our nature recovery ambitions.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his speech; it is wonderful to see him in his place. I spent five years before my election to this House working in the office of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), and in the shadow DEFRA team with the Minister, so it is very good to be here listening to him. On that point, I urge him to be bold and ambitious. The shadow Minister's speech was like a rehash of a previous life, but his rose-tinted version did not quite match my recollection. We seek to have the strongest approach to animal welfare, so let us be bold and do what the Conservatives did not.

Daniel Zeichner: I shall always listen to my hon. Friend's exhortations to be bold. Watch this space in the coming few months.

Finally on wildlife, significant sanctions are available to judges for those convicted of most wildlife crimes, but there are questions as to why there are different penalties for similarly abhorrent acts against different species. Bringing more consistency seems worthy of closer consideration. The Government will look at how best to deliver nature restoration and enforce animal welfare standards for wildlife.

Moving on to points raised especially by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough about phasing out the use of animals in experiments, the use of animals in science is a highly sensitive issue. We agree with the RSPCA that it is essential to replace the use of animals with humane alternatives. That is why we made in our manifesto a commitment to partner scientists, industry and civil society as we work towards the phasing out of animal testing. We are engaging with key stakeholders with an interest in animal research as to how we will take that commitment forward. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn asked for a timetable in her opening statement; I assure her that it will be done in due course.

The UK is world leading in the development of alternative methods to using animals. This Government are keen to ensure that such methods are used wherever possible. However, technology is not quite yet at the stage where animal testing can wholly be replaced. We want to replace the use of animals in scientific procedures where we can, but for now the carefully regulated use of animals in scientific research remains necessary if we are to protect humans and the wider environment.

The use of animals in such testing is limited to specific purposes. Furthermore, the use of animals in scientific procedures is permitted only if no alternative is available, where the number of animals used is the minimum needed to achieve the scientific benefit, and where the potential harm to animals is limited to the absolute minimum needed to achieve the scientific benefit. Those are collectively known as the three Rs of replacement, reduction and refinement.

I also recognise the significant public interest in the welfare of farmed animals, and the immense contribution that the RSPCA has made to help raise farm animal

welfare standards through its lobbying and its farm assurance scheme, RSPCA Assured. I heard the comments by the hon. Member for Waveney Valley, but I am confident that the work that the RSPCA is doing will restore confidence in that very important scheme.

I appreciate the strong public demand for clearer animal welfare information on the food people buy, to help them make purchasing decisions that align with their values. The public consultation on fairer food labelling was undertaken earlier this year by the previous Government. That consultation sought views on proposals to extend existing mandatory methods of production labelling. We are carefully considering all the responses to the consultation before deciding on next steps. We will publish a response to the consultation in due course.

On cages and confinement, I am very much aware of the strong public feeling about keeping farm animals in cages and of the recent campaigns, including by the RSPCA, urging the Government to publish consultations on phasing out the use of enriched colony cages for laying hens and of farrowing crates for pigs. I appreciate the RSPCA's role in leading the way on encouraging high standards when it comes to this issue, with RSPCA Assured not permitting the use of colony cages for laying hens or farrowing crates for pigs.

I am encouraged that the market itself is driving the move to alternative systems for laying hens—primarily free range and barn—away from the use of cages. The transition to non-cage egg production has been supported by the major supermarkets, which have pledged to stop selling shell eggs from hens kept in colony cages by 2025. That shift by retailers has accelerated the move away from colony cage systems. Free-range eggs account for more than 60% of total egg throughput in the UK.

We will not, however, leave the issue to market forces alone. The transition to cage-free systems is being supported by grants in England for laying-hen and pullet farmers with flocks of 1,000 birds or more to refurbish or replace existing housing, including those looking to make the transition from colony cages to higher-welfare non-cage systems.

As with cages for laying hens, the issue of ending the use of pig farrowing crates does not only affect the UK industry, but is something that our European trading partners are also considering.

Jim Shannon: I know that the Minister and I, and hopefully everyone else in this Chamber, appreciate the efforts and contributions of farmers who, by and large, want their animals to be well looked after and try to achieve that. The National Farmers Union here and the Ulster Farmers Union back home are working alongside farmers to improve things. Sometimes in debates we can get a wee bit lost in these things. It is important to remember that many people are trying their best to make things better.

Daniel Zeichner: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. It is important to make the point that of course all our farmers want to raise their animals to the highest possible standards, but they need the right regulatory frameworks to make that possible, which is what we are working on. As with any change to our farming systems, as I said earlier, we need to consider the implications for trade.

Adrian Ramsay: The Minister says that he wants to be ambitious on animal protection and has asked us to watch this space, which we will do, given the cross-party interest in this roomin animal protection issues. He mentioned market forces and trends in animal welfare. May I highlight, therefore, that we are seeing a proliferation of huge industrial chicken sheds in Norfolk and Suffolk, and I am sure around the country? Tens of thousands of birds, and in some cases pigs, are kept in really unpleasant, cramped indoor conditions that are not consistent with welfare standards of the type that the Minister talks about. What action will the Government take to stop that trend? This is about animal protection, river pollution and environmental standards.

Daniel Zeichner: I disagree with the hon. Member's assumption that animal welfare standards are lower in larger-scale production facilities; that is a false premise. I urge him to look at some of the smaller premises that are sometimes undercapitalised and, I am afraid, do not always achieve the welfare standards that we are looking for. I do not think it is as simple as he makes out.

The trade issues are really important. We already lead in Europe—I am going back to the pig sector here—in having a significant outdoor pig sector. Some 40% of the national sow breeding herd farrow freely on outdoor units, with no option for confinement. DEFRA's statutory welfare code of practice for pigs states that the aim is for farrowing crates to no longer be necessary and for any new system to protect the welfare of the sow as well as her piglets.

In the meantime, under the new "Get funding to improve animal health and welfare" service, a fully funded vet visit known as the animal health and welfare review is available to pig farmers to improve pig health and welfare.

It is fair to say that the United Kingdom is rightly proud of the high animal welfare standards that underpin our high quality British produce, and we will work to ensure that we address low confidence and provide stability for the farming sector.

In conclusion, the Government look forward to delivering the most ambitious programme for animal welfare in a generation. I very much hope we can build on the excellent relationship that we have forged with the RSPCA over many years to progress the various important animal welfare issues that have been raised today.

10.48 am

Ruth Jones: I want to thank every hon. Member who has taken part in this debate today: my hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd East (Becky Gittins) and for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss); the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay)—it is good to welcome him to his place—and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I also thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), and the Minister. Everybody has made intelligent, reasonable and well-informed contributions. Many valid and important points have been made.

Animal welfare would not be where it is today without the immense contribution of the RSPCA over the last two centuries. Today we know that the RSPCA's animal

[Ruth Jones]

rescue line receives around a million calls a year—one every six seconds. Staff work across England and Wales to investigate allegations of animal cruelty and neglect.

I was recently lucky enough to be able to visit the RSPCA centre in Newport East in my neighbouring constituency and I accompanied an RSPCA inspector on her rounds for the day. I urge all Members to go out with an RSPCA inspector; it really opens our eyes to what they have to deal with. I saw at first hand the vital work that they do. The RSPCA staff, supporters and volunteers continue to work tirelessly for a better world for every kind of animal.

In line with the shadow Minister, I want to finish by paying tribute to the RSPCA chief executive, Chris Sherwood, who is leaving the RSPCA, which I know will miss him—he has led it since 2018. I thank him and all the other staff for their hard work. Today we celebrate the RSPCA, a well-loved organisation whose work ensures that animal welfare is at the forefront of our agenda, so thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for the RSPCA.

10.50 am

Sitting suspended.

Proposed Salt Marshes: Pawlett Hams

11 am

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I will call Sir Ashley Fox to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates. At least one other Member has indicated that they wish to speak, and there may be interventions.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the environmental impact of the proposed salt marshes at Pawlett Hams and other sites.

It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I welcome the Minister to her place.

I am grateful to have this opportunity to move the motion, which concerns an issue of great importance to my constituents in Bridgwater. I asked for this debate to discuss EDF's plans to establish a salt marsh at Pawlett Hams in Somerset. The proposal was highly unpopular with the local community. In fact, it was difficult to find anyone who thought it was a good idea, and when I met representatives from EDF, even they seemed a little half-hearted about it.

Why, one might ask, does EDF, which is building the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station a few miles down the coast, want to flood 800 acres of beautiful Somerset countryside and turn it into a salt marsh? The answer is complex. When EDF was given planning permission to build Hinkley Point C, it was required to take measures to mitigate damage to marine life caused by the water intake pipes, which are situated in the Bristol channel and, as one might imagine, there is a risk of harm to fish, which might get sucked into them.

EDF originally set out three proposals to minimise the risk of harm to marine life. The first involved designing special low-velocity, side-entry water intake pipes, with a capped head design. These reduce the number of fish that are sucked into the pipe as they swim past the end. The second was a fish recovery and return system, which means that a good proportion of the fish that swim into the intake pipe are returned to the sea, with minimal injury. That is not a perfect system, but it is certainly one that will save the more resilient species.

The third was that EDF was required to install an acoustic fish deterrent, or AFD. This involves the installation of a number of underwater sound projectors that play a constant loud noise that is designed to stop fish approaching the area of the intake pipes. EDF now says that it is unable to install the AFD, because of engineering difficulties and health and safety risks to the divers who would need to maintain the system. To deviate from the AFD proposals, EDF has to submit a material change application. As part of the application, it is working with the Environment Agency to agree several compensatory habitat measures to deliver benefit to the estuary's qualifying habitat.

EDF says that it is putting forward a mosaic of mitigation measures. Some of them seem sensible and beneficial to the natural ecosystem in and around the Severn estuary: for example, the creation of several hectares of seagrass in the estuary and a commitment to delivering 15 hectares of kelp forest. It is also considering upgrades to several weirs to benefit migratory fish.

The most significant proposal, however, and the one that brings us to Westminster Hall today, is the creation of 800 acres of salt marsh.

At the beginning of this year, EDF consulted on the salt marsh being established in Pawlett Hams, in my constituency. Pawlett Hams is a precious ecosystem. EDF's plans to flood the area with saltwater would endanger not just the land itself, but the myriad species that call it home. It would transform the biodiverse habitat into barren, species-poor salt marsh and tidal mud. What is most extraordinary about EDF's plans is that the Hams is an area of great ecological importance. It forms part of the Bridgwater bay site of special scientific interest, which was first declared in 1989 and recognises the area as one of particular interest to science, due to the rare species of flora and fauna that it contains. There is a lush, biodiverse habitat for many animals in the Hams, including lapwings, redshanks, otters, water voles, water beetles, great crested newts and yellow wagtails. Those species would be driven out if the area was turned into a salt marsh. The Hams provide valuable grazing for local farmers that would also be lost.

EDF's plan was a disaster, and even if it went ahead it was not clear how it would mitigate the problem of the fish that would be lost. I made my views abundantly clear to EDF over the months, so I was delighted when, a day after making a request for this debate, it announced that it is pausing its proposal. EDF says that it is now considering four other potential sites for salt marshes in the Severn estuary, at Kingston Seymour, Littleton, Arlingham and Rodley.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his detail and his excellent summary of exactly what is being proposed in Arlingham. The proposal was put to the people of Arlingham, they had a large meeting on Monday evening and, almost universally, there was a feeling that this was not a good idea for people there or for their landscape. Many of the reasons that the hon. Gentleman has put across are the same in Arlingham. It seems rather strange that the Arlingham site and salt marsh will somehow compensate for or mitigate the predicted loss of about 182 million fish; I do not think there is any way we can say that those two match each other. Although I support the principle of habitat creation and acknowledge the benefits of the salt marsh, does the Minister share my concern that EDF's application to modify Hinkley Point C's consent order seems like an unacceptably high price for an environmentally unique habitat to pay?

Sir Ashley Fox: I will leave the Minister to answer those points, if I may.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I pay tribute, as I am sure the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) would, to the amazing community at Pawlett Hams, who campaigned ferociously, but in quite a gentle way, and single-mindedly to get its aims and dislike across. I hope that that is reflected in the comments made by the hon. Member for Stroud about the community; indeed, we have a meeting in the communities that I represent on Monday next week. It is the case that the communities feel that EDF and the Environment Agency may have been a little heavy-handed in their first approaches. They seemed to be rather fierce and not accepting of the fact that people have a view about their own community and its sustainability.

Sir Ashley Fox: The hon. Lady anticipates the next part of my speech.

As a new MP, it is tempting to believe that this change of heart by EDF is entirely due to my persuasive powers, but that is not the case. All credit must go to the Pawlett Hams Action Group, a genuine grassroots campaign that sprang up to defend the Hams. The group demonstrated the significance of the Hams by conducting wildlife surveys and collecting personal and historical testimonies. It also raised awareness of the issue through petitions, social media, community events such as a photography competition and collaboration with local schools. I pay tribute to the group's co-ordinator, Judith Ballard, and to the other leading members, Moira Allen, Rachel and Molly Fitton, and Joy Russell. There are many others who worked hard to save the Hams so that it might be enjoyed for generations to come. I thank them all—perhaps they can help the hon. Members for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) and for Stroud (Dr Opher) in resisting unwanted salt marshes.

Although my constituents and I welcome EDF's decision not to proceed with the plan, several outstanding questions need to be answered. My first question relates to the inclusion and, now, the planned removal of the AFD in the development consent order. That was included at the request of the Environment Agency. I want to know why it was included if, as we are now told, it is unsuitable for conditions in the Bristol channel. Related to that question, what was the process between the Environment Agency and EDF on agreeing that it should be removed?

To my local community, the process looks opaque. Some of my constituents believe that the AFD should remain as a condition of EDF being allowed to operate Hinkley Point C. I do not claim to have the technical knowledge to know whether it is a practical option or not—and the Secretary of State has yet to make formal decision—but it seems to me that EDF and the Environment Agency are putting together a package of mitigation measures in the hope that the deal will be signed off.

I want to know why, once the decision to explore the establishment of a salt marsh was made, Pawlett Hams was designated as the preferred site. As I said earlier, the Hams is recognised as a wetland of international importance. Turning it into a salt marsh is not a mitigation. It would be an intentional decision to cause environmental harm. It is a completely illogical and extraordinary choice by the Environment Agency. The view of many of my constituents is that the Environment Agency chose Pawlett Hams so that it could flood the land and save money on maintaining flood defences. I want to ask the Minister for an assurance that the Government will continue to maintain all the flood defences on the River Parrett.

Finally, I want to ask the Government to consider whether there might be a better way of delivering environmental improvements than through the Environment Agency. It was the Environment Agency that wanted to include an AFD in the initial development consent order. Now it apparently agrees that it should be removed,

[Sir Ashley Fox]

and is the prime mover behind this unwanted salt marsh. Having retreated from Pawlett Hams, it now wishes to inflict this on other parts of the countryside.

If an acoustic fish deterrent is truly impractical—I remain to be convinced—I would like to see the money saved, which would be tens of millions of pounds, put at the disposal of the local community to fund genuine environmental improvements. I want to see those decisions taken by democratically accountable bodies, such as Somerset Council and the local town and parish councils. In my view, they are more likely to spend the money wisely than the agency that thought that turning Pawlett Hams into a salt marsh was a good idea.

11.12 am

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Thank you, Mr Twigg, for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I recognise that I have very little time, because I wish to ensure that the Minister has an opportunity to respond to my questions and those of the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox).

I have already mentioned that this was a heavy-handed approach, which is how my constituents feel. The fact that there is little detail has caused enormous distress in my community of Kingston Seymour. I thank the hon. Member for Bridgwater for talking about the campaigners, many of whom I know. I also recognise the efforts of Claire Sully, who was one of the hon. Gentleman's opponents in the general election. In an effort at balance, I recognise that in 2011, when a proposal affecting Kingston Seymour came from the Environment Agency in a previous iteration, Liam Fox helped us to see it off.

I want to mention a number of things briefly. Some expert evidence was offered in 2011 by Dr Robert Kirby, a coastal geomorphologist and scientist. He advised that any salt marsh would eventually wash away or be eroded. As I already mentioned to the Minister, this piece of coast is on the Severn bore. The rise and fall of the tide will have an impact on every one of the communities. It is the second highest tidal rise in the world, and therefore that seems highly likely.

I have been informed by local historians that the existing seawall is of Roman origin in places, and I cannot understand exactly what the Environment Agency intends. If it intends to breach the seawall, that will increase the level of flooding. If it intends to build up the seawall, it will not create any more salt marsh, so I am really very unsure about this. I will pick up on exactly the point made by hon. Member for Bridgwater about why we were all told that the acoustic fish deterrent would be the absolute answer to all problems many years ago. Now it appears to be utter fiction, and I do not understand how it is that we can suddenly be looking at creating salt marsh and dismissing the number of fish that are going to be killed when that was a critical factor when Hinkley Point C was being discussed. Everyone threw up their hands in horror at the possible mass destruction of fish, but the acoustic fish deterrent was supposed to get rid of that problem.

In the area that we are talking about, Kingston Seymour, the residents have concerns. I have to say that 100% of the population is not against this, but people need the detail. There was a meeting and a number of constituents raised the following points with me. They are really concerned about solar farms, the sewage works in this area and the adverse impacts of saltwater on the three freshwater fishing lakes in Kingston Seymour. They are also very concerned about the increased risk of flooding, and they have already experienced increased insurance costs for their properties and businesses in 2011 as a result of the Environment Agency's proposals then. There is a brilliant coastal footpath, which is an opportunity for people to move back and forth along the coast. Shortly after being elected on this occasion, I went to the opening of the pier to pier coastal path, which is a multi-user path that connects Weston-super-Mare pier with Clevedon pier. It was massively well used even before it was opened a week after the election. It was incredibly popular in that first week and huge numbers of people were using it.

The other thing that the Minister might want to know is that Kingston Seymour contains sites of special scientific interest. It seems slightly perverse that, where we have conservation sites and we have all been working hard to protect that area, and there are a number of protected species there, we are now proposing to mitigate the mitigation that everyone has provided. It is absolutely bonkers. We will end up mitigating the mitigation of the mitigation of the mitigation if we carry on like this. I really do not see that it is particularly helpful.

I am aware that there are different and expanded tourist offerings in this area since the last EA scheme was got shot of in about 2012 or 2013. There has been significant investment in businesses, including barn conversions that have created tourism accommodation, office and commercial activities, new caravan and camping grounds and new golf course facilities, and several of those businesses have created all sorts of recreational amenity. I am really concerned and I wonder whether the Minister might enable local people in Kingston Seymour to understand exactly what it is that the Environment Agency proposes and the impact it will have on them. That needs to be done really quickly before investigations take place as to the suitability of the land.

11.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) on securing this debate and on his excellent representation of his constituents' views here today. I begin by saying that this is the subject of a live planning case and I am sure that hon. Members will understand the limits on what I can say. However, I can assure hon. Members that I have listened carefully to the points raised, asked my officials some of the questions that they have asked, and have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the issue. I hope that what I say will be useful to them and their constituents.

I will begin by setting out the facts of the case. The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 protects special areas of conservation and special protected areas. The regulations require an assessment of whether a plan or project could have an adverse impact on the integrity of a protected site. Any harm must be mitigated unless there are imperative reasons of overriding public interest and no alternative. In those cases, compensatory measures must be secured.

In this case, an acoustic fish deterrent was part of the approved mitigation for the impact of Hinckley Point C on the Severn estuary. Hinckley Point C has applied to remove the acoustic fish deterrent. That means that compensation may be needed for the loss of fish within the Severn estuary site. The species of concern are Atlantic cod, sea bass, whiting and herring.

In a pre-application consultation earlier this year, Hinckley proposed Pawlett Hams as a suitable compensatory salt marsh habitat. As the hon. Member for Bridgwater has said, Pawlett Hams was designated as part of the Bridgwater bay SSSI in 1989. It is particularly important for its network of freshwater ditches and their associate invertebrate communities—insects. Pawlett Hams is also part of the Severn estuary Ramsar—which is a wetland site—and special protection area, a European designation for bird sites. It has a triple protection.

In its response to the pre-application consultation, the Environment Agency was unable to agree with the suitability of the Pawlett Hams sites until further evidence and assessment has been completed. Hinckley approached the Environment Agency; to gently correct the hon. Member for Bridgwater, the Environment Agency did not suggest it. It is my understanding that the applicant makes a request to the regulator.

I understand that following the consultation, Hinkley Point C is investigating new locations for salt marsh creation as an alternative to Pawlett Hams. It is holding early conversations with stakeholders ahead of public consultation, as we have heard from colleagues today. Any additional sites being put forward are sites identified and selected by Hinkley Point C, not the Environment Agency. The Environment Agency agrees that the marine measures proposed are an appropriate option within a wider compensation package. It has not agreed on the scale of the measures to off-set the predicted adverse effects. To the question raised by the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt), flood modelling and flood risk assessments would be required for identified sites.

Tessa Munt: As I understand it, the Environment Agency is helping the integrity of the seawall by building it up at Kingston Seymour, so it seems incredibly perverse that it might agree that that should change. Currently, it is making it better by creating more flood protection for the villagers in Kingston Seymour.

Mary Creagh: Let me come on to flood protection, and I will say something about salt marshes later. If the hon. Member is not satisfied with my response, then I am happy to write to the Environment Agency on her behalf.

The application for a material change is currently in the pre-application stage. That involves consultation and engagement with various bodies, including statutory consultees such as the Environment Agency and Natural England, which looks after our SSSIs. Those bodies will be able to provide valuable information on environmental impacts. That will include the sufficiency of the compensation package and its ability to compensate for the impact on protected fish species—let us not forget that this is about protecting the fish.

To comply with the pre-application consultation requirements under the Planning Act 2008, Hinkley Point C must carry out an appropriate consultation about any proposed changes. The decision relating to the project will ultimately be for the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband) to make. I am confident that he will do so correctly, in line with the requirements of the Planning Act. However, in doing so, he will need to consider all relevant issues. They include whether the proposed compensation is required and if it is, whether it is proportionate to the detrimental impact on fish populations of not fitting the acoustic fish deterrent. The planning guidance is clear: Ministers and officials should approach all such decisions with an open mind, based on the evidence presented to them, objectively and without having or giving the appearance of having any predetermined views on the merits or otherwise of the case. I am sure that we are all, in this room, seasoned politicians in planning applications.

I cannot discuss the particular merits of this case, but I want to raise some broader points prompted by some of the issues, because I too have asked questions. I have heard what the hon. Members for Bridgwater and for Wells and Mendip Hills have asked and that has made clear that we must deliver our infrastructure goals in a way that is positive for our natural world and for our wider landscapes. If we are to meet our ambitious targets on nature restoration while accelerating to net zero, we will have to think carefully about how we use our land. That is why the forthcoming land use framework for England will consider cross-governmental issues, such as energy and food security, and how we can expand nature-rich habitats, such as wetlands, peat bogs and forests.

Spatial planning will play an important role in the delivery of the Government's growth and clean energy missions, and the land use framework will work hand in hand with the strategic spatial energy plan. The Government will also explore the opportunities for spatial planning to support the delivery of other types of infrastructure. I recognise that in some cases the planning regime acts as a major brake on economic growth, which is why the Government will make the changes we need to forge ahead with new grid connections, roads, railways, reservoirs and other nationally significant infrastructure.

The proposed Planning and Infrastructure Bill will accelerate house building and infrastructure delivery and streamline the delivery process for critical infrastructure, including accelerating upgrades to the national grid and boosting renewable energy. That will benefit local communities, unlock delivery of our 2030 clean power mission and net zero obligations and ensure our domestic energy security. We will simplify the consenting process for major infrastructure projects and enable new and improved national policy statements to come forward. We will also establish a review process to provide the opportunity for them to be updated every five years, which will give increased certainty to developers and communities.

We are just as committed to protecting and restoring nature. In England, we are committed to halting the decline in species abundance by 2030 and reversing it by 2042. We are also committed to reducing the risk of species extinction and we will restore and create more than half a million hectares of wildlife-rich habitat by 2042. Delivering those targets sits at the heart of our mission to ensure nature's recovery. We will look to

[Mary Creagh]

reduce pressures on species and protected sites, such as pollution and climate change, and we will take action to recover specific species.

I will say a quick word about solar farms, because I know there has been a lot of talk about them, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills. My understanding from conversations with my biodiversity net gain team is that when we put in a solar farm on grazing land, the actual biodiversity net gain is up to 140%. I understand there are concerns about solar farms, but actually, it is an interesting way to diversify farm income while providing a boost to nature.

Salt marshes have had a bad rap in this debate. They are incredible valuable habitats. Wonderfully mysterious places on the border between land and sea, they are a liminal landscape in constant change, shifting with the tides. They are often overlooked and undervalued and, as we have heard, they can be talked down. I want to speak up for the salt marshes. They play a vital role in supporting species. For many fish, including sea bass and herring, those wetlands serve as essential nurseries—

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

11.30 am

Sitting suspended

Maternity Services: Gloucestershire

[Sir Christopher Chope *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered maternity services in Gloucestershire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. The hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) sends his apologies; he was due to be here but he is counting the votes somewhere else at the moment in an important internal election. He wanted me to start by saying that he gives his full support to the comments that I and others will make in support of maternity services in Gloucestershire, so I hope *Hansard* reflects that.

It is not controversial to say that NHS services across the country are struggling. One of the services that impacts all of us at least once in our lives is maternity care. This service is at the heart of women's healthcare; it must be treated with the utmost seriousness. Pregnancy and childbirth is a special moment for families. It is a memory I cherish—obviously I was not pregnant myself. It is something to be cherished by all. But for pregnant women it can also be an extremely stressful experience. If there are failures in the system, the consequences can be dire.

Some of those consequences were laid bare in the recent "Panorama" documentary on maternity services in Gloucestershire. In that documentary we heard too many harrowing stories. Brave whistleblowers from within the system and brave mothers told their stories—one brave father told a story too. Those stories were told in the most heartbreaking terms, and will stick with me for as long as I live. Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS foundation trust apologised for those failings. It has invested in increased staffing, worked to reduce staff turnover and has made changes to leadership in maternity care. But so much more needs to be done.

The service at Gloucestershire Royal hospital was rated inadequate in 2022 and again in 2023. The findings of a further inspection earlier this year are still awaited, but a section 31 safety enforcement notice was served in May. Cheltenham's midwife-led Aveta birth unit serves a large chunk of our county. It was closed for births in autumn 2022, some time before six of our county's seven Members of Parliament were elected. The closure was due to a shortage of midwives. The reorganisation by the hospital's trust was carried out to ensure that one-to-one care across Gloucestershire's wider maternity services could be achieved. It is an entirely understandable response; nobody would want to put mothers and babies at risk.

We were told, however, that the measures were temporary. Two years down the line they are still in place, and that is not an acceptable situation for people in our county. The NHS hospital trust suggests that the Cheltenham Aveta centre will not re-open for births before April 2025. Even then, nothing seems certain. The trust states that it is committed to reopening the centre when it is safe to do so. However, the byzantine way in which the NHS sometimes works means that it is difficult to

work out who will be the ultimate decision maker. Sometimes decisions on resources are made by the integrated care board rather than hospital trust staff, and that collaborative process makes it difficult to work out who must be held to account for statements that have been made in the past.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Everyone in this room will be very aware that the difficulties in Gloucestershire are unfortunately replicated in every part of the United Kingdom—certainly in my part of it. We have some of the best staff in the world in our maternity wards, and we rightly recognise the good work that they do, but they are being hampered in doing their job and caring by understaffing, budgetary restraints and an inability to get support from senior staff. I believe this needs a root-and-branch change across all the United Kingdom. Would the hon. Gentleman agree with that?

Max Wilkinson: I would. The hon. Member makes a strong case, and I will come on to some of the evidence from the Royal College of Midwives later. It has done some important studies into the stress that midwives are put under in the system.

I will move on to Stroud—the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) is in his place. In Stroud, six post-natal beds were closed around the same time as the closure to new births at the Cheltenham Aveta centre. The reason given by the trust was that the temporary closure would consolidate staffing across the county and provide a safer level of care for births across the whole of Gloucestershire. I am certain the hon. Member will have more to say on this if he is called to speak later, and I am pleased to see him here.

In our county, the 6,000 families who rely on our maternity services each year view this as a significant downgrade in service, and it is a cause of worry for a large number of families. It is clear that these services can only reopen when staffing levels improve. At the moment, the trust says it is around 13% below the staffing level required to return to the previous level of service, with Cheltenham open and the beds reopened in Stroud. However, the nature of midwifery means that quite a lot of the midwives will be off on maternity leave themselves at any one time. Indeed, I will come on to talk about the stress that midwives are under and some of its causes, which have led to a larger proportion of midwives being off for a significant period of time each year than staff in the rest of the NHS.

Research into what is driving the recruitment and retention crisis exposes the scale of the challenge we face in Gloucestershire and across the rest of the country. We are told that recruiting to a trust under a section 31 safety notice is even more challenging than it is elsewhere. Midwives who are already under significant pressure are subjected to additional strains in the form of monitoring and bureaucracy, and that can have an impact on staff morale. Of course, monitoring and bureaucracy are important when we are trying to get trusts out of safety notices; however, we cannot look past the fact that that makes it more difficult to overcome those recruitment challenges.

If that were the only barrier, it would be somewhat simpler. The Royal College of Midwives conducted a randomised survey of weekly hours worked by midwives and maternity support workers. The findings were absolutely shocking. It found that the staff surveyed reported a collective total of nearly 120,000 unpaid hours that week. That is a stark illustration of the demands placed on frontline NHS staff, who go above and beyond in a system that appears to be falling apart at the seams.

It is no wonder that the Darzi review reports that there is a high rate of sickness absence among midwives at 21.5 days a year per midwife. The most common reasons cited for absence were anxiety, stress or depression, or other psychiatric illnesses. Midwives go into the profession because of a commitment to the health of women and babies and to giving care at a critical moment, and to be part of a joyful moment in so many families' lives. The fact that they are collectively suffering such high levels of stress tells us just how badly wrong the system has gone.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on mental health, I believe we should acknowledge and pay tribute to NHS staff in general and specifically midwives because we know that one factor that causes stress is overwork. We are also aware that the NHS very much runs on good will—people working extra hours and unpaid hours. That has been the norm for many years, but it is not sustainable. We need to acknowledge the support they need from a mental health point of view.

Max Wilkinson: My hon. Friend makes a strong point. Employee assistance schemes have a strong role to play here. I understand that in the NHS there is quite good support in general. However, it is a massive struggle when people are working so many extra hours to ensure that they get the support they need. In the case of midwifery, it is a stressful job—a life-and-death matter in many circumstances.

There is a clear and obvious link between the extreme overwork identified in the RCN survey and the findings of the Care Quality Commission. Obviously, if staff are working so many extra hours, they will suffer. Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has identified staff turnover levels and low morale due to the workload as significant factors. The Darzi report also calls for a shift away from care in centralised hospital settings towards communities, and states that that is a likely route towards the recovery of our health services. That being the case, and with a Minister in the room, I say that there is a clear argument for restoring Cheltenham families' access to a fully functioning birth unit in our town as soon as it is safe to do so.

I have three questions for the Minister, if she would be so kind as to answer them. First, what is the Government's position on seeking to reinstate maternity services in places such as Cheltenham and Stroud, which have been recently downgraded? Secondly, what will the Government do to address the ongoing recruitment and retention crisis in midwifery? Thirdly, in cases such as Gloucestershire's, where a section 31 notice is exacerbating recruitment and retention issues, what can the Government do to help local trusts improve their staffing position? I understand that there are examples of trusts around the country being supported to pay high wages and salaries to ensure that midwives can be properly recruited and to overcome shortages.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): My local hospital, the Royal Berkshire hospital, is where my two children were born and many of our friends' children were born. It has recently received an upgraded rating of good from the Care Quality Commission, and it is one of only nine organisations, out of 131, that got an upgrade to good over the last year, so I commend the Royal Berkshire leadership and staff for their diligence and dedication, and congratulate them on that result. Does my hon. Friend agree—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to make a speech, he can do so later. Let us hear the response to the intervention.

Max Wilkinson: I am sure that I would agree with whatever my hon. Friend was about to say. He was making the point, I think, that it is easy to be down on our NHS and its staff. That is not the purpose of this debate at all; its purpose is to ensure that we give the support that is needed to our midwives, other NHS staff and, indeed, NHS managers, who are often maligned but, like other NHS staff, work long hours and are in it for the betterment of health services.

On a personal note, I offer my wholehearted thanks to the staff at Gloucestershire hospitals, who were there for my wife and me when our daughter was born in Gloucestershire Royal hospital in 2022. It was an important day for my family and for the country when we went into the operating theatre for the C-section: this country had no Prime Minister, and when we came out we had my daughter, Elodie, and we had Liz Truss. That is a memory that will live long for me. I particularly thank Fiona Liddle, the midwife who gave us the most care during my wife's pregnancy, as well as all the doctors, nurses and healthcare workers who helped to make the experience so joyful for us.

2.44 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) on securing the debate and bringing attention to the challenges that our maternity services face in Gloucestershire. I must declare that as well as being an important subject for my constituents, this is a personal subject for me, and I am privileged to contribute my family's experience to the debate today.

My little boy, who turns one later this month, was born in the county and spent his first night at Gloucestershire Royal hospital. While it is clear that there are challenges facing our maternity services and that improvements are required, I want to start by sharing the positives of our experience.

First, the support and care provided by the community midwifery team was second to none. Our midwife Lynsey was with us throughout our journey, and was even on call the day my wife went into labour, so she was there to deliver our little boy. Lynsey looked after us throughout my wife's pregnancy, answering our questions and signposting us to courses that would enable us to become advocates for the birth we wanted. From the outset, our experience was positive, although I know that is not the case for all families, and it is essential that their voices are heard in this debate.

Being able to choose where you have your baby is important. Having conducted our own research, we decided that we wanted to give birth in a midwife-led unit. There are of course differing views on that, but that was our choice as we had read that midwife-led care can lead to fewer interventions. At the time in Gloucestershire, Stroud was the only reliable option, as Gloucester's midwife-led suite was frequently closed due to a lack of available midwives. As part of our maternity care, we were invited to Stroud maternity unit to visit the birthing suite so that it was familiar on the big day. I understand that is very important, as stress produces hormones that can actually stop or slow down labour.

Once my wife was in labour, however, our plans were nearly changed at the last minute due to a lack of midwives at Stroud maternity unit—stress we could have rather done without. That highlighted to me the great reliance currently placed on midwives working overtime to cover shifts across Gloucestershire. However, with Lynsey on hand and with minimal intervention, the birth itself was relatively quick and our baby boy was born. It was truly the best moment of my life.

Unfortunately, my wife needed an operation after the birth, so we were transferred to Gloucestershire Royal hospital: wife and baby in an ambulance, me following behind on what was, following the best moment of my life, the scariest car journey of my life. The care we received that night was exceptional. Not only were my wife and baby looked after, the unbelievably compassionate team looked after me too. Something as simple as a cup of tea and a reassuring chat when I had been up for 48 hours and left on my own with a newborn baby was transformative.

Unfortunately, things were not so positive the following morning. All was well with mum and baby, and we were told we would be going home in the afternoon. I went home to grab a quick shower, get some shopping in and make sure the house was ready for our new arrival. I was gone for at most two hours. When I got back, my wife told me she had been visited by over 10 different people in those two hours: pharmacy assistants, nurses and midwives, each adding new information about her discharge. She had just had a baby and undergone surgery under general anaesthetic. There were instructions for her and our baby. None of them were written down. For her, it was overwhelming, and something as simple as written discharge notes would have made a huge difference.

After we got home, our baby unfortunately developed some issues with his breathing. That can be quite normal, I understand, as babies are used to breathing fluid and getting oxygen via the umbilical cord. But as first-time parents who had been awake for 60 hours, we were worried, and there was no one to turn to. We phoned Stroud maternity unit, where we had given birth, but their post-natal unit is closed due to a lack of midwives, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham rightly pointed out. They advised us to call 111, and they told us we had to call Gloucestershire Royal's delivery unit. They told us we had to call Stroud maternity unit because that is where we had given birth. We went back to Stroud, then back to 111, and no out-of-hours GP service was available. The only solution was to go to A&E.

Taking a newborn baby to A&E on a Saturday night is an interesting experience. The staff in A&E were wonderfully friendly, but their procedures limited what they could do. Our baby could not be seen by the neonatal unit as we had been discharged from the hospital. He would have to go to the paediatric unit, which the staff warned us was rife with covid. All we wanted was someone medically qualified to listen to his chest and let us know he was alright. There must be so many parents in a similar position, learning the art of being a parent for the first time and needing that little bit of assurance that their baby gasping for air is going to be okay. We need to find a better way for those parents to access that care.

Overall, I have to say a huge thank you to the team who looked after us from the early days of pregnancy right up until our son was born. How lucky were we to have our community midwife there at the birth—the person we had grown to know and trust? But in a way, that points to another problem: Lynsey is just one of many midwives across the county being pulled from the community to fill gaps in midwifery services.

Across Gloucestershire, vacancies and turnover rates in midwifery services remain high. The increased workload is causing low morale, and the workforce is struggling with the level and pace of change required for the service. Community midwives such as Lynsey regularly find themselves on call when too few midwives are available at midwife-led units in hospitals. Right now, there are vacancies for 32 midwives in Gloucestershire, which is 13% of the workforce. When we take into account sickness and maternity leave, that figure rises to 63 full-time equivalent vacancies. It is no wonder that midwives such as Lynsey are being asked to fill the gaps.

As the hon. Member for Cheltenham pointed out, the Royal College of Midwives estimates that across the UK, midwives give more than 100,000 hours of unpaid time to the NHS every week to ensure the safe running of services. While no one could doubt the dedication and compassion of those incredible midwives, that cannot be right. We cannot continue to rely on the commitment of midwives to their vocation to fill those gaps. If midwives are working more than 100,000 hours of unpaid overtime a week, it is inevitable that services will be affected, and that the safety of mothers and their babies will be put at risk. Midwives are being driven from the profession because the work and the pressure of work is just too much. It is no wonder my wife left hospital with no written discharge notes—where was the time left to write them?

While our experience of Gloucestershire Royal was largely positive, others have not been so fortunate. Many will have seen the harrowing instalment of "Panorama" that aired on the BBC in January this year, which focused on maternity services in Gloucestershire. The programme included the tragic deaths of the mother and two babies at the hospital between 2019 and 2021. Feedback from staff suggests that chronic staffing issues and a poor culture where midwives felt unable to speak out about unsafe conditions played a large role in what were avoidable deaths.

We also need to ensure that in a diverse city such as Gloucester, all residents—including those for whom English is a second language—can access the care they need. The recent CQC inspections of services in Gloucestershire have been very concerning, and Gloucestershire Royal hospital was issued with a section 31 enforcement notice by the CQC earlier this year. I raised this with the chief executive of the trust in my meeting with him in my first few weeks as the new MP for Gloucester. I understand that the trust has already made progress on its improvement plan, and I will keep a close eye on that on behalf of all Gloucester residents.

Earlier this year, the CQC published the national review of maternity services in England. It reviewed 141 units across the NHS and highlighted widespread issues with staffing, buildings, equipment and safety management processes. There are many deeply troubling takeaways from this report, but what stuck with me was the CQC's stark warning that across our maternity services, preventable harm is at risk of becoming normalised. The last Conservative Government pushed our maternity services—our midwives—to the point where preventable harm could become a routine consequence of understaffing in units and on wards up and down the country. We cannot accept this for the future of maternity services in Gloucestershire or the UK.

I urge the Government to ensure that maternity services are given due attention when considering the Secretary of State's 10-year plan for our NHS. Staff shortages are not the only issue we need to address, but it is clear that they are fundamental to the challenges our maternity services face in Gloucestershire and across the country. The Government have committed to training thousands of new midwives. We must honour that commitment to ensure that giving birth in the UK is safe, that parents have choice, and that midwives feel supported and valued for the incredible work they do.

2.53 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. In 2021, my daughter was delivered by caesarean section following a complicated pregnancy. Thanks to the diligence of the delivery team, which included English, Indian, Italian, South African and Spanish experts, we were spared the trauma that too many parents endure, and took our daughter home 24 hours later. I cannot thank those professionals enough for their care and application of expertise. The midwifery profession and those who join it should be celebrated in this House, as they should across the country.

I would like to provide some national context to the issue of midwifery in Gloucestershire, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) did. Against significant budgetary constraints in the last decade, the NHS workforce has increased by 34%, while full-time midwife posts have risen by only 7%. In that same decade, caesarean section deliveries such as ours have increased by 10% to 23%, meaning that mothers and babies stay longer in hospital, and require additional care by midwives.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, a Royal College of Midwives survey in March 2024 recorded that nationally, midwives and maternity support workers carried out 120,000 hours of unpaid work in a single week. As my ex-colleagues across the Royal Air Force will confirm, when more is continually expected of a diminishing workforce, both the workload and the mental load will increase on those who remain until ultimately they leave

[Cameron Thomas]

or they break. Mistakes become more commonplace. Let us acknowledge the unique emotional load carried by our midwives, while they also carry the workload of 2,500 others due to our national shortage.

The inspection of Gloucestershire maternity services in April 2022 makes for concerning yet predictable reading. Like the hon. Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre), however, I am pleased to have received assurances from the chief executive of Gloucestershire hospitals NHS foundation trust that improvements have been and continue to be made. I look forward to a full debrief on the report that will follow the external investigation into Gloucestershire maternity care; the report must be transparent, and retrospective action must take place accordingly. That backdrop creates additional pressure for Gloucestershire maternity care as we look to attract newly qualified midwives to our beautiful county. My call to graduating midwives, as to those already in post, is, "Help us get this right and be a part of the success story."

The outcome of our efforts must be the permanent reopening of birthing units at Cheltenham and Stroud. Local efforts will take us only so far. Page 99 of Labour's 2024 manifesto pledged to train "thousands more midwives"—a drive that will, I am sure, enjoy cross-party support. I invite the Minister to press the Chancellor to include a funded plan to train thousands more midwives in the autumn Budget.

2.57 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for calling this debate. Maternity care in the Stroud area has been a big issue for the past couple of years in particular. I have been a GP for 30 years, and I have helped with antenatal and post-natal care and, indeed, intrapartum care for six months, which was the hardest work I have ever done in my life. I also delivered my second daughter in a Worcester hospital.

I know and have worked with fabulous midwives, who are the absolute key to maternity services, as we have been discussing. Doctors are occasionally called in for other reasons, but midwives run maternity services; they have to be central, and they have to make their decisions around women. That is one of the reasons I promote Stroud maternity unit: as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) said, midwife-based units have lower levels of intervention and better outcomes for babies.

As many hon. Members have said, the key problem here is the lack of midwives. We should not shy away from that, but I also want to talk about a number of other issues. Something that seems to have been missing from the discussion is women's choice over where they give birth—we seem to have reduced that choice to just Gloucestershire Royal hospital. Although Stroud maternity unit is open for intrapartum care, it does not have post-natal beds, so women are generally choosing it less often. That is a pity, because it is a fantastic place to give birth and has a low intervention rate. Equity and equality also seem to have been lost from the discussion recently, and we need to get them back into the decision-making process.

Maternity care is actually a longer process than just where someone gives birth. I will outline where those interventions take place. Pre-conception and antenatal care tends to be done in GP surgeries by community midwives with the help of GPs. Intrapartum care can be done at home—a small proportion of people do give birth at home—or in midwife-led units, such as Stroud maternity, or in either midwife-led or consultant-led units, such as in Gloucester Royal and Cheltenham. They are the possibilities. When it comes to post-natal beds, the only choice at the moment is Gloucestershire Royal; there is no other option in Gloucestershire. Either mothers go there for their post-natal care or they have to go home and have a community midwife.

The last part, I always think, of the whole maternity service is the eight-week check of the baby by their GP. I have done thousands of those checks in my life, and it is one of the best things I ever do. The GP can check babies for problems and talk to mums about not sleeping and all the other issues.

That is the whole, rounded nature of maternity care. I now want to talk about Stroud maternity, because that is what I know about most and what we are missing most. First, it is a very much loved and valued service in Stroud and we are missing the six closed post-natal beds. As I have said, it is a stand-alone, midwife-led unit. That is unusual in this country, and it is a shame it is unusual, because it is a really good place to have intrapartum care, so it is something that I am really trying to promote. We have 1,000 live births in Stroud a year, and at the moment only about 300 take place at Stroud maternity unit, but as I have said, there are lower levels of intervention and there is increased maternal satisfaction. For that reason, we must get these beds open again; they have been closed since 2022.

I want to make a few points about post-natal care, because often people say, "Oh, it's a luxury; we can't really afford it." It is not a luxury. There is very good evidence that for certain families, certain mothers, good post-natal care saves a huge amount of money later on. It is about making sure that the baby and the mother bond properly and that breastfeeding starts properly. It is about making sure that they have a couple of days away from, perhaps, a number of other children and properly bond and that mothers learn how to look after babies. A lot of my colleagues say, "Well, post-natal care, we don't really need that," but we do need it. If we lose it, it will cost the country more, but it is also part of the whole maternity service. That is the first thing I would say.

Secondly, the people at the CQC have stipulated various things. The CQC is about safety, which none of us can argue about. However, some of its decisions, I feel, do not make sense and all they do is give safety to the organisation and not to the mother. For example, postnatal beds are being closed because it insists on having two midwives on the unit at all times; that makes it safe. However, closing the post-natal beds means that all these mothers have to go home. Are they safer at home or are they safer at hospital, with maternity care assistants and other nursing staff? I would say that the safety of the mother is better served with those post-natal beds open, even if there is just an on-call midwife as a second midwife. I want to slightly question the logic of the CQC—we must go back to it—so one of the things

that I will do after this debate is write to the inspectors and arrange a meeting with them, because we must consider the safety of the mother and the child first. This is not about covering the organisation and making that safe; it is about making the mother safe, so I would iterate that as well.

There is something else that we have been doing. The League of Friends at Stroud hospital in general and at the maternity hospital is fabulous and has been providing extra services for post-natal and antenatal mums for some time. We now have an interim plan whereby we are going to open a sort of day hospital in the maternity unit so that at least mothers can come and have a bath while someone else looks after their baby, for example, and they can receive advice from health visitors and midwives. That is an interim plan. I do not want to say that it is a good replacement. We must get those post-natal beds open, so I am also due to meet the maternity and neonatal voices partnership, which is a crucial agent that we must talk to.

In summary, we need to train and, crucially, retain more midwives, because we have trained quite a lot of midwives who have almost immediately left the profession, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham was saying, because of stress. We need to secure a better working arrangement for them, and I look forward to my hon. Friend the Minister outlining plans to train thousands more midwives. We need to review CQC safety and make sure that the stand-alone nature of midwife units is fully understood by the CQC. We also have to make midwife working much more flexible. There could be on-call systems for these stand-alone units, so a second midwife does not need to be present if they are available to be called in. I have talked to midwives about that, and they seem happy to run that type of service. We also need a commitment from the ICB and the Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS foundation trust to reopen all six post-natal beds at Stroud maternity hospital.

3.5 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for securing this debate.

Although my constituency is in south Gloucestershire—which I have spent many years as a unitary councillor explaining is a unitary authority, not a district of Gloucestershire—some of my constituents access health services north of the border in Gloucestershire. The serious concerns about maternity services in Gloucestershire are causing people to travel the other way across the border, into Bristol, where many other of my constituents use services, so they have a significant impact on my constituency.

I welcome this debate because I know from my own experience the impact that overstretched maternity services can have on outcomes for the mother and baby. I had the misfortune of giving birth in a hospital that had too many simultaneous emergencies. Even now, more than 20 years later, I vividly remember the feeling of abandonment, the horror when my newborn baby was rushed to the neonatal intensive care unit, and the panic as I felt myself losing consciousness and a team of doctors rushed into the room to deal with me. It was many hours before I was reunited with my son, six months before he was discharged from consultant care, and more than two years before I was discharged. My experience of early motherhood was blighted by trauma, pain and seemingly endless follow-up appointments for both of us with a huge range of specialists. Five or more years later, doctors still considered my son's birth relevant to his health. Sadly, for some families the outcomes are far, far worse. I cannot begin to imagine the pain of losing a child or partner in childbirth, but for some that is the tragic reality. How hard it must be to bear if there is the possibility that better care may have changed that reality.

Let us not forget the impact on the wider family. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) spoke about the support he received from staff when his son was born. The family, too, can be traumatised by what they see family members going through, so I understand how important it is to have good maternity services, and I am deeply concerned about the impact that the current shortage of midwives is having on outcomes for mothers, babies and their wider families. Stroud maternity unit is affected by the shortage, so people are choosing to travel to Southmead, which many of my constituents already use, and that extra pressure will make it harder for staff there to deliver the service that people need.

Being continuously supported by a midwife during labour can prevent a situation from escalating dangerously. Proper support after the birth, however it went, can set families up for the early months by helping mothers to recuperate, establish feeding, talk through concerns and get to know their baby in a supportive environment.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) made a very good point about the importance of choice. There can be a sense that it is a luxury—people make these choices because they have an idealised view of how birth should go—but, as my own experience demonstrated, the manner of the birth can have significant, long-term consequences for the mother and baby, so choice is not a luxury. It is important to understand that in childbirth feeling comfortable allows hormones to flow, and that promotes the best chances of a successful, uncomplicated birth, which is obviously the ideal. Some people take comfort in knowing that they have the very best, high-tech facilities on hand in case there is an emergency. For others, it is about knowing that they are in a familiar environment—their home or a birthing unit that they feel comfortable in. Choice is important, not because it is a nice thing for mothers to have but because it has potentially long-term consequences on the physical and mental health of the mother and baby.

I am concerned that two years after the joint report on safe staffing from the all-party parliamentary groups on baby loss and maternity, staff levels are still frequently inadequate. We want to see a cross-Government target and strategy, led by the Department of Health and Social Care, for eliminating maternal health disparities, providing guaranteed mental health support and establishing a new workforce plan, backed up with adequate funding and an expansion of the maternity and neonatal workforce.

3.10 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for introducing this debate. The

[Bobby Dean]

experiences that he and others have shared about maternity services in Gloucestershire are similar to those in my constituency.

In Carshalton and Wallington, the Epsom and St Helier trust has an overall good rating from CQC. However, its maternity services have recently been downgraded to requires improvement, and, more worryingly, the safety element of those services was downgraded from good to inadequate following the inspection. A critical reason for the downgrade was the state of the building, which makes it hard for staff to perform their jobs efficiently and for patients to have the comfort of quality services. Some examples highlighted in the report were that the bereavement room was not soundproofed, the ensuite facilities had a shower curtain instead of a door, and, at the time of inspection, the two operating theatres opened directly on to the delivery suite corridor and were not secured, allowing anybody using the service to gain access to potential deliveries and surgeries.

A hospital that is crumbling, where three quarters of the building is not up to standard and where infection control is tricky because of the cramped conditions, risks tragic consequences for maternity care. It is an exhausting atmosphere for staff to work in and has led to low morale. What we need is urgent investment in the hospital's infrastructure. A new building was promised by the previous Conservative Government, but so far it has turned out to be unfunded and we are waiting to see what happens with the forthcoming review. I am due to meet the Health Secretary in the next couple of weeks, and I will make it clear that it is essential to deliver a new building for both A&E and maternity services. Preferably that site will be at St Helier, which serves a densely populated area with greater deprivation levels and higher health inequalities, which are particularly pertinent to maternity care.

The building is not the only issue; the phoneline is also an issue. I have noted other hon. Members' remarks, and as one Member mentioned, having the ability to pick up the phone and speak to somebody to get simple advice after a baby is born is critical, and that is not functioning properly in our hospital either. Another point I wish to make, on staff retention and recruitment levels, has been well made already. Our staff, too, are hard-working, dedicated and doing their best, but they are under immense pressure, which is leaving them feeling burnt out and fatigued. The bottom line is that there are simply not enough staff members to go around.

The CQC report for the St Helier trust highlighted a shortage of midwifery staff with the necessary qualifications in lots of critical areas, and it further noted that not all staff had completed all the mandatory training. We have spoken to the chief executive officer of the trust about that, and he explained that it is not because staff are unaware of the problem, but because they are simply so stretched that getting them through those courses while trying to maintain a minimum level of care for people coming through the hospital has proved impossible. Childbirth, of course, waits for no one, and in that high pressure, life and death situation, it is a matter of working with the available staff or having no staff at all. If we can get the recruitment and training of midwives right, we can go a long way towards solving the conundrum.

The consequences of understaffed and underfunded maternity care are dire. In recent years, there has been a stark increase in maternal mortality, rising from around eight deaths per 100,000 to over 13 per 100,000. Women from lower socioeconomic and ethnic minority backgrounds are disproportionately affected, being twice and three times more likely to experience maternal mortality, respectively. Those last statistics are particularly harrowing in constituencies such as mine. It is an urban constituency, and we have a higher than average number of women from both ethnic minority backgrounds and more deprived areas.

Improving maternity care must be a key priority for this new Government as they seek to address the overall crisis in our healthcare system. Giving birth has been one of the most dangerous medical procedures for women throughout history and nobody wants to give birth in a crumbling and potentially unsafe hospital where there are not enough qualified staff to help them.

If the Government are serious about improving women's equality and closing the gender healthcare gap, the UK's serious decline in maternity care needs to be addressed. That is why the Liberal Democrats have called for the UK Government to ensure that the commitments made in the NHS workforce plan are backed by adequate funding and include the expansion of the wider maternity and neonatal workforce. In the meantime, I will continue to fight for the upgrade in maternity services that my area so desperately needs.

3.15 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): One of the biggest problems that has come up time and again in every maternity inquiry is that women are not being listened to, and too many times their concerns about their care are dismissed. That really needs to change, so we need to start prioritising the voices and experiences of women if we are serious about fixing this crisis.

I said earlier that I am the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on mental health, and I need to mention the shocking statistic that suicide is now the leading cause of death for women between six weeks and 12 months after they have given birth. World Mental Health Day 2024 is tomorrow and it is heartbreaking to think how many new mothers must be really suffering without the support they need.

We need to recognise the financial impact of this crisis. The NHS faces a £21 billion maternity negligence care bill—money that should be going into providing maternity care. When the negligence payout is three times the actual funding for the care, the system absolutely needs resources to be poured into it to ensure that we get that bill down and instead use the money to deliver safe and effective care.

In Winchester, people are particularly concerned about proposals to downgrade our consultant-led maternity services to a service that does not have consultants and surgeons on site. Unlike the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher), who is a doctor, I am a vet, so I do not have his experience. However, I have done countless emergency caesareans, so I know that when something starts going wrong in childbirth, especially halfway through a birth,

timing is everything. The thought of starting to give birth in Winchester but then having complications and having to be transferred up to Basingstoke is understandably concerning and terrifying for many constituents. We are therefore fighting to keep consultant-led maternity services in Winchester, because the problem in Gloucestershire arose partly because of the downgrading of services and the move to other hospitals.

The safety of maternity services is a concern nationwide, including in the Hampshire hospitals NHS foundation trust area. In 2023, the Care Quality Commission downgraded the trust's maternity services from good to requires improvement after it found serious safety concerns. The trust's amazing staff have been working really hard to improve things, and I am pleased to report that the trust exited the maternity safety support programme in July this year. However, there is still a long road ahead to restore public trust in these vital services.

I want to acknowledge the brilliant work of a Winchester resident who is here today. Jo Cruse launched the Delivering Better campaign, and I urge everyone here today, who will obviously have a particular interest in maternity services, to engage with and learn more from it. Jo has shared her story with me, and with her permission I will read it out:

> "My daughter's birth in October 2021 was the most terrifying experience of my life. I entered motherhood injured by a series of poor clinical decisions, and deeply traumatised by a three-day labour during which my calls for help and pain relief were repeatedly ignored or dismissed.
>
> The experience eroded my trust in a healthcare system I have always revered, pushed my marriage to the brink, stripped me of my dignity, led me to develop suspected PTSD and many months of painful recovery. It has had a significant impact on how I feel about whether I will have more children. I cannot overstate how far the shockwaves of that experience have extended in my life.
>
> I live with the knowledge that what happened to me was not only avoidable, but is happening every day in maternity wards across the country. This is not an issue localised to a few ailing trusts. This is a public health crisis being allowed to unfold in plain sight."

3.20 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) on securing this important debate. Maternity services affect every single one of us at least once in our lives, so it is important that we protect them to ensure that, for all of us, that moment—obviously, many of us experience it more than once—is a safe one.

I will not mention all the hon. Members who have spoken, but I am pleased to see so many of my Liberal Democrat colleagues, who have all made excellent speeches and powerful points. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for sharing her experience, and the hon. Members for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) and for Stroud (Dr Opher) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) for sharing theirs. Obviously, the hon. Member for Stroud has his own medical expertise, which is very important. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) described his constituent's shocking experience, which I think we were all upset to hear about.

This is not the first debate we have had on maternity services—not even the first in this Parliament—and the reason for that is the shocking under-investment in those services. On 19 September, during recess, the Care Quality Commission issued a report, and its contents are hugely disappointing if not surprising. As has been mentioned, it spoke of the risk of normalising avoidable harm, which is an unacceptable situation to be in.

Hon. Members might be aware that my interest in maternity care came about because I am from Shropshire—I represent North Shropshire—and my constituents Kayleigh and Colin Griffiths lost their daughter Pippa at Shrewsbury and Telford hospital NHS trust. They fought tooth and nail alongside Rhiannon Davies and her husband Richard Stanton to bring about the Ockenden review into the scandal that unfolded at the trust.

Since then we have had a report on East Kent, and there is a review going on in Nottingham. None of that is news to us, which is shocking. I sat on the all-party parliamentary group on birth trauma, which was brilliantly led by the former Member for Stafford, Theo Clarke, and on the baby loss APPG, and I am currently trying to reconstitute the maternity APPG. All those groups have found the same failings over and over again.

The CQC report tells us what we already know: 40% of maternity services are rated as requiring improvement and 18% are rated inadequate. That means that less than half are rated as acceptable, which is not excusable, particularly given that we have had so many high-profile scandals and so many commitments—I believe they were made in good faith—from the Dispatch Box that these things will not happen again, but they are happening every single day.

We know from all those reports that unsafe staffing is at the root of most of the problems and that it is pushing hard-working midwives, in particular, to the brink. They work their socks off to share in what should be the most joyful moment of each individual's life. When I had my baby nearly 16 years ago in an emergency situation, the midwife, who had been with me all afternoon, stayed on at the end of her shift to make sure that I and my baby were okay. We received excellent care and were both fine in the end, thank goodness. However, we have all relied so much on the good will of those individuals that they are experiencing burnout at an alarming rate.

I was canvassing in my constituency during the general election when a midwife came running across the road in her dressing gown and slippers to tell me that she was emigrating because she had had enough and that two other midwives she knew in the county were taking the same step because they had experienced burnout on such a shocking level. Any workforce plan needs to deal urgently with that problem.

Staffing is one problem, but unsuitable buildings are another. In the shocking inquiry into the Lucy Letby case at the Countess of Chester hospital, which is slightly unrelated, I read that sewage was coming up into the hospital's sinks. How can we control infection when there is literally raw sewage in the building? It is unacceptable. We need to ensure that this Budget invests not just in the GPs, healthcare workers and midwives we so urgently need, but in the fabric of our hospitals.

We have repeatedly heard that there is a failure to learn when things go wrong and that hospitals focus too much on protecting their reputation rather than on

[Helen Morgan]

learning from terrible mistakes that might have happened—and that will inevitably happen on occasion, even with the best staff in the world, because sometimes things go wrong. Hospitals must learn from those mistakes.

Finally, there is a failure among hospitals to have an open culture, so staff who have concerns are unable to raise them. The duty of candour law, to which the Government have committed, is so important, and I urge the Minister to ensure that the people to whom workers in hospitals can speak up are independent of the hospital manager and the clinical director. If workers are reporting to the person responsible for giving them their jobs, that is not a safe process. We must have independent whistleblowing procedures for people raising clinical concerns. I am sure my constituents share my anger that we have to return to this topic again and again, when we should be looking at how far we have come since the Ockenden review over two years ago.

I want to touch on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) about outcomes. Black and Asian women and their babies have a far worse probability of surviving birth than white women. If that was happening in a single trust, we would have another big, important review, but because it is spread out across the country, it is being lost, so we must return to it. It is not acceptable in this country in the 21st century that ethnic or socioeconomic background is a determinant of whether having a baby is safe. We are not on track to meet our 2025 targets for reducing stillbirth and neonatal death, and those targets have not been renewed. I urge the Minister to renew them and to ensure that there is a plan in place to meet them.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester made the critical point that spending more on medical negligence than maternity services is totally unacceptable. This country cannot afford for that to continue. We must make maternity services safe, because it is better for the mothers, better for the babies and better for the taxpayer. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

3.28 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) on securing this important debate. Childbirth is a really special event. It has been described today as the best moment of someone's life, and that description is often used. It is a special moment in the lives of not just the parents and of course the child, but the wider family and friendship group—the birth of a baby is enjoyed by everybody.

I have been privileged to attend many births over my career as a doctor, although aside from the births of my own three children, they have generally been skewed towards where things have not been going to plan—it is not, I hasten to add, that that is a result of my presence, but more that my presence is a result of things not going to plan. The work of the NHS—its midwives, its obstetricians and the wider team that look after women and their babies—is by and large exceptional. However, we hear stories of where things go wrong and we need to minimise those as much as possible.

Essentially, the talk of whether Cheltenham needs a midwifery centre comes back to the pull and tug that I have seen throughout my career between the centralisation and the localisation of services in general. When services are centralised, it can be argued that there is an increase in expertise and an increased volume of cases, which makes people more familiar with emergencies because they happen more frequently. More specialist services can also be offered for those with high-complexity and low-volume problems. There can also be more support from staff, because there are more staff present in the unit. However, centralised services can feel more remote, they can be too far away for people living in rural areas and they can feel too impersonal, particularly for a procedure such as giving birth. In a local unit, people may feel more comfortable and know the staff, and there may be a close-knit team. However, as our veterinary colleague, the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), so amply described, if things go wrong, people can be a long way from the help they need. So there is that balance and that push and tug.

As has been mentioned, choice is important to women who are making informed consent choices on where to give birth, based on the information they receive. The hon. Member for Cheltenham has made a good case for why the balance may not be as it ought to be in Gloucestershire; the Government should look carefully at that.

I was sorry to hear of the experience of the hon. Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) with his new-born baby. As a paediatrician, I am familiar with the need to weigh all the factors in the balance: the fact that a baby has gone home and may have picked up a viral illness that has brought them back in again; the risk to the baby from going on a children's ward where the impact of disease is more predominantly based in infection and infectious conditions than in older age groups and adult wards; and the risk of putting a baby on a neonatal unit and introducing the virus to that unit, which could make the babies already there so very unwell. We need to think carefully about a solution to that, so that people do not go round and round in circles, as the hon. Member for Gloucester described, being passed from pillar to post. I am sure that was a frightening experience for him and I am sorry that happened.

I now turn to other issues raised today. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) talked about the importance of community midwives. Even though my eldest is now 17 and my youngest nine, I still remember my post-natal midwife Marie and the care she gave. Sometimes, maternity care focuses a little too much on what is going on in a hospital when what happens in the community is also very important.

The hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) suggested that we could have a midwifery in-patient unit with mothers and babies and only one member of staff. I am afraid I do not agree with her on that. The hon. Member for Winchester raised the concept of two simultaneous emergencies. If there is only one member of staff, how do they go on a break, or what if they are in the bathroom when they are needed? If we have a unit, unless it is attached to a major centre with more staff, we need that second person.

As of December 2023, there were 2,361 full-time equivalent midwives working in the NHS's trusts and other core organisations in England. That is an increase

of 3,707—18.9%—since 2010. On the one hand, the birth rate is falling and the number of midwives is rising, but I recognise that the births that are taking place are more complex in some ways than they used to be. At the spring Budget, there was a further investment of £35 million to improve maternity safety over the next three years, including £9 million for brain injury.

I asked the Minister, at the previous debate on maternity safety on 4 September, whether she would commit to that money being spent and I have not received an answer. I asked her several questions during that debate, including whether she could confirm that the Government would proceed with the fortification of bread products with folic acid to protect babies from spina bifida. I asked her about the non-essential communications budget, which the Chancellor had said on 29 July would essentially be cut, and whether that was affecting public health budgets. Those budgets are very important, particularly around optimising public health messaging regarding chronic illness and conditions such as diabetes and obesity before conception. I have not received an answer to either of those questions.

I also raised the NHS saving babies' lives care bundle, which was due to be updated on maternity early warning scores and tracking tools, to ask the Minister whether that was on track. Again, she has not written to me as promised with the answer to that question. I asked her whether she would be supporting the healthcare safety investigations branch and about the £35 million budget I have just described. I have not received answers to any of those questions more than a month later; none of my staff can find any correspondence from the Minister. Can she answer those questions today, or at least commit to doing so by the end of the week? We have waited quite a long time.

My final question last time was about the group overseeing maternity services nationwide, because following the East Kent report—I was the Minister when that was published—Dr Kirkup's recommendations were accepted. Maria Caulfield, then Minister for Women's Health, set up and chaired a working group to review the work being carried out by a whole range of programmes to improve maternity and neonatal care and implement those recommendations. I asked her who would go on to chair the group and whether she could guarantee that the work would continue, but I still have not received an answer. It would be helpful for the Minister to answer the questions raised in the last debate as well as in today's.

3.35 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

With your leave, I will start with a few words to mark Baby Loss Awareness Week. Many mums and dads across the country have suffered the heartbreak of losing a baby. Everyone deals with grief in a different way, but it has been moving to hear from parents how baby loss certificates have allowed them to process what they have gone through and have helped give them closure.

That is why this week we launched an extension to the baby loss certificate service, which is a voluntary scheme to enable parents who have experienced a pregnancy loss to record and receive a certificate to provide recognition of their loss, should they wish. Until now the service was only open to parents who had experienced a loss since 1 September 2018, but today we are removing that restriction, making the certificates available for every parent who has lost a child. We will update the House with a formal written statement shortly. The Government are committed to delivering compassionate care for women and support for parents who have suffered a baby loss. It is the right thing to do.

I think this has been a genuinely good debate. We have heard from experts—I commend the Opposition spokesperson the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for the work they do—and others have shared experiences. I knew that the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) would bring forward good points too, so I contacted the trust myself so that I could give the hon. Gentleman and hon. Members present my frank assessment of what is happening on the ground.

To reiterate, as of August 2024 the midwifery vacancy rate in the Gloucestershire hospitals NHS foundation trust stood at 13%—the equivalent of 32 full-time midwives. That level is high for the south-west, though roughly in line with the national average. In April 2022, the Care Quality Commission gave the trust a warning notice for the maternity service, and rated it "inadequate" a year later. In May this year, the CQC issued the section 31 notice—a severe warning that requires at minimum an immediate action and improvement plan, which, as colleagues will know, in some other settings could result in a closure. It issued that after seeing postpartum haemorrhage rates, poor foetal monitoring and high levels of agency staffing.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham and others from the area are right to be concerned. We can all agree that it is unacceptable when new mothers do not receive the highest possible standard of care. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we should be honest about the problems in our NHS and serious about fixing them. Maternity services are very far from where we want them to be. Childbirth should not be something that women fear or look back on with trauma. Safety is obviously paramount. As the hon. Member for Cheltenham said, it should be a special moment.

I thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for sharing her experiences. I was in hospital for two weeks after having my first child, and it is a traumatic time, so the length of time she mentioned must have been very difficult. My second came out so quickly that I was in and out of hospital before we knew it. My third child, as has been mentioned, was almost delivered at home by my husband after we had chosen a home birth. He is not medically qualified, so I can tell you that the sound of the doorbell ringing for the midwives' arrival was the best sound I have heard in my life.

To the second question asked by the hon. Member for Cheltenham, I will outline the steps the trust is taking to improve the situation. They include a new director of midwifery, an education and training midwife and a perinatal quality and governance lead. To improve retention, the new leadership has introduced a retire and return scheme and is holding monthly events for senior leadership to listen to staff and address their

[Karin Smyth]

concerns. The trust has recruited 33 new midwifery starters since 2023, including from overseas. Ten midwives are due to start this month, with a further 10 expected in January. But there is still a gap. That is why the Aveta birthing unit and the postnatal beds at Stroud maternity will remain temporarily closed until they reach safe levels of staffing. The trust clearly felt that it could not continue those services without putting new mothers at risk, which is an impossible situation to be in.

I am pleased that the birthing unit at Stroud remains open, but the other closures have had an impact on women, their families and the local community, as has been eloquently expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester and mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate. The impact goes further afield to my own city of Bristol. In addition to those measures, the trust is developing new apprenticeship schemes; building partnerships with universities, including Worcester and Oxford Brookes; and launching a midwifery attraction campaign in the autumn.

Although the trust has had positive feedback from last year's new starters, I am pleased that it is carrying out regular assessments, as per the recommendations in the Ockenden review, to ensure that midwives have the right skills to serve the people of Gloucestershire. The turnover rate is now settling, and I know the hon. Member for Cheltenham and other colleagues will do everything they can to help convince midwives that his county is a great place to live and work. The passion for those units is very evident here today, which I am sure will be welcome to those trusts.

I know from my career in the NHS that such changes take a long time. It is too soon to make an assessment until all the new midwives have started. However, we are not waiting for the CQC to do the rounds to ensure that the picture is improving. The local maternity and neonatal systems team and the regional NHS England team are meeting with the trust on a fortnightly basis to review progress. The trust's monthly board reports will report on progress; I know hon. Members will be watching carefully.

It is important to give the new team space to prove themselves. I am hopeful that we will see improvements in time. At a national level, whenever trusts and maternity units do not perform on our watch, we will steer them back to safer ground. That is why we are supporting Gloucestershire maternity services through the national maternity safety support programme. That means that the trust is supported by a maternity improvement adviser for midwifery and obstetrics, who helps the trust to embed the maternity improvement plan.

I know that the hon. Member for Cheltenham and others will continue to hold the trust to account, until it is delivering for women in their constituencies. I am grateful to him for obtaining this debate and giving me the chance to put the Government's position on the record. With regard to his third question, like many trusts in this position, the trust does have the budget for establishment; it is the recruitment and retention of midwives that is the issue. Some trusts do different things with incentives; I do not know whether this trust is particularly doing that. That might be something he would wish to pick up with the trust at another time.

On more general maternity improvements, in September the CQC published a report that demonstrated how much the previous Government let down new mothers in this country. Lord Darzi's report has shown that, despite some improvements, there is still a disgraceful inequality of outcomes for black and minority ethnic women, as we have heard again today. We will look at every recommendation in the CQC report, and if officials object to any of them, I expect to hear a very good reason why.

There is ongoing work to improve maternity and neonatal services across England. The NHS put in place a three-year delivery plan to make maternity and neonatal care safer, fairer and more tailored to every new mother's needs.

I shall now discuss the Government's wider ambition. Choice—which was mentioned today by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud and the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate—is for us absolutely a key part of maternity care. As the hon. Member for Winchester said, our NHS must listen to and work with women and families on how their care is planned and received, based on what matters to them.

To get maternity care back on its feet, we need to train thousands more midwives as part of the NHS workforce plan, while encouraging experienced midwives to stay in the NHS. Many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Cheltenham, spoke of recruiting midwives, with regard to morale and workload. That was also mentioned by the hon. Members for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) and for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean). The NHS will deliver the people plan, giving a stronger focus to a modern, compassionate, inclusive culture, which absolutely has to be part of our forward look in the 10-year plan.

We will ensure that trusts failing on maternity care are robustly supported into rapid improvement. We are setting an explicit target to close the black and Asian maternity mortality gap. NHS England is on the right track, boosting the workforce through training, apprenticeships, postgraduate conversion, return to midwifery programmes and international recruitment. I have been clear that the Government will build on those programmes, not replace them.

Finally, I want to end by restating our unwavering commitment to maternity services across the nation, including in Gloucestershire. We are actively working to improve staffing levels and are planning for the future needs of Gloucestershire's maternity services. I say to the constituents of the hon. Member for Cheltenham that I hear his concerns and completely understand them, and I will work with him to set this right.

The Opposition spokesperson is an assiduous writer, and I have answered a number of her letters, but if I have not responded to particular points from the previous debate before recess, I apologise, and will ensure that that happens after this debate. She has raised important questions.

In the constituency of the hon. Member for Cheltenham and in mine, women have had to bear the brunt of inaction for the past 14 years, but this Government will deliver for women, not just in the south-west but in the country as a whole.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call Max Wilkinson to respond to this very well-informed debate.

3.45 pm

Max Wilkinson: Thank you, Sir Christopher. I thank the Minister for her long and detailed reply. I appreciate the time that she has taken. I also appreciate her background in the NHS; we have spoken elsewhere about how she worked in the NHS for a long time, and I know that she will bring a lot of expertise to her brief. I also appreciate the specific references to the constituency, and the work that she has done to ensure that she could give a detailed response about Gloucestershire's services, rather than a more general response on the national picture. That has brought a lot to the debate.

We have heard some powerful contributions, not least the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young), who told her personal story. We also had a contribution from a member of the public via my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), as well as one from the hon. Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre), who had a harrowing few days, by the sounds of it, with a really good outcome. He referred to his son in his maiden speech the other day as well. That was joyful, so I thank him.

The Gloucestershire example is not unusual, as the Minister and others have pointed out. However, we suffer in Gloucestershire from an outsized problem; our NHS trust is suffering from a deficit of midwives in a way that other NHS trusts are not, and we need to address that. The Minister referred to the good work already being done by the trust, and it is important that in our contributions we recognise that work is being done, under new leadership, to try to turn things around. In my regular meetings with the trust's chief executive, that has come through. An open and transparent communications culture is something that we will welcome as new Members of Parliament.

At its heart, this discussion must come back to the safety of women and babies, and to choice for mothers. Locally, we are suffering the symptoms of a widespread national issue, but it is not acceptable for people in Cheltenham and Gloucestershire to be denied that choice indefinitely. That is what we are dealing with. I urge the trust's chief executive and others—who I know are listening to this debate, and who know that we are contributing in good faith—to keep members of the public and everyone else, particularly local MPs and councils, informed about what is happening next.

We know that there will not be a decision before April 2025, but it is important that there are milestones, so that people get updates and there is regular open, transparent reporting. That helps to maintain confidence in the system as the good work of supporting the rights of mothers, babies and families goes on, and ensures that our midwives are better looked after in the system. If we can keep this debate happening in public, we are more likely to reach a situation in which Gloucestershire families get the service from the local NHS that we all deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered maternity services in Gloucestershire.

3.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Skills England

4 pm

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Skills England.

It is an honour to serve under you as Chair, Sir Christopher. I am so glad to have the opportunity to raise the urgent need to reset our adult skills system in England, to press my case for my constituency and region, and to seek further information about the Government's plans. The argument I will make today is this: Skills England cannot be just another quango. We need a confident and directive organisation that takes what our economy needs, directs provision, drives learner uptake, and delivers more workers with higher skills ready for better jobs on higher wages. I will also press the case for my constituency, for the Black Country and for the wider west midlands. Judging by the number of people here, there is some interest in this topic, and perhaps we should seek further opportunities to talk about these issues. I am sorry that in my inexperience, I asked only for a 30-minute debate.

We are here today because the Conservatives oversaw a decade of decline in skills, and it has made our country poorer. Employers are unable to fill job vacancies, more than a third of vacancies are down to skills shortages, learners cannot get the training they need and industry is left without the skills to tackle the challenges of the future. That is why Labour have pledged to overhaul our skills system and set up a new body for skills: Skills England. Skills England is a central part of our plan for growth, good jobs and prosperity. It will have three key jobs: to assess skills needs, to oversee the suite of qualifications and courses on offer, and to co-ordinate all the players in the sector, of which there are many. The point is to bring order to the skills system, joining it up and making it more responsive to what employers need.

I want to say a bit more about the nature of Skills England and how it goes about its job. I have five key points. First, Skills England must spot and respond to genuine skills needs through the best available data and intel. We sometimes forget how hard it is, caught up in the day-to-day, for employers to predict the shape of the market for their goods and services in the future, how the supply chains will change and what that means for their workforce, products and quality. I hope that Skills England, alongside our industrial strategy, can help with that.

One of the aspects of Skills England I am most pleased about is that it will be tripartite, with unions on the board as of right. Our movement has always taught working people to read, write, do maths and, more recently, use computers, to help them get on in life. As we face another industrial transition out of energy-intensive and carbon-reliant industries, we need to plan and manage with workers and use their insights too. Workers' voices need to be around the table on skills, and with this Government, I know that they will be.

Secondly, Skills England must be co-ordinated across Government and, most importantly, with the Migration Advisory Committee and the industrial strategy. I looked at the shortage occupation list this morning and it is frankly an indictment of our skills system that so many

[Antonia Bance]

vital jobs in manufacturing and construction are listed: bricklaying, welding—something those in my own area are expert in—roofers, carpenters, joiners and retrofitters. No more. Skills England must start to direct support to fill these skills gaps so that we can grow our own. Above all, Skills England must work hand in glove with our new industrial strategy and deliver the skills training that will make the strategy real.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Let me put on record that I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships. In preparation for your speech, I totted it up and it seemed that Skills England will be the fifth such national quango set up by Westminster since the Manpower Services Commission in 1973. The average tenure of a Skills Minister since 1997 has been 15 months—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. It is helpful if you address your remarks through the Chair, rather than turning away. Apart from anything else, it makes it difficult for *Hansard* to record what you are saying.

Andrew Pakes: I apologise, Sir Christopher; this is my first such intervention in one of these debates. Since 1997, the average tenure for a Skills Minister has been 15 months—longer than Liz Truss's, but shorter than a premier league manager's. The average life of a skills quango such as Skills England has been only eight years, less time than most people spend in primary school. Does my hon. Friend agree that the only way that Skills England will be a success is if it is linked to industrial strategy, is tripartite and brings together employers and unions? That would mean that we would have a durable system and not a repeat of the failures of the past, which saw short-term interventions that have not delivered for working-class people.

Antonia Bance: As my hon. Friend might expect, I agree with him on all those points. I hope very much that our current Skills Minister's tenure is significantly longer than the average, and that Skills England proves long-lasting and effective in responding to the industrial strategy.

We expect the Green Paper on industrial strategy perhaps as early as next week, but certainly by the Budget. This may be a tangent, but it is important. I want an industrial strategy that makes choices and sets out which sectors are our priorities—yes, clusters where we are already world-beating, or could be, but also places that are our priorities for industrial development and catch-up. Good growth must level the playing field, and national growth cannot be at the expense of left-behind places like the one I represent.

However, Skills England must respond not just to industrial strategy and migration, but to all of Government, as it touches skills such as our agenda for getting people back to work. We want people helped into real jobs that offer a route out and a route up, and not just any job. That means no more jobcentres running their own skills and education programmes separate to the priorities of Skills England.

Third, we need a Skills England that is directive, not hands-off; one that sees its role as supporting training that meets the industrial strategy, not courses that do not. I will give an example: one shortage occupation is lab technicians for our world-leading life sciences sector. If the gap is lab technicians, then it is Skills England's job to make sure that the courses for lab techs run, are funded, are supported and are filled. If that means that young women in an area cannot do low-level hair and beauty courses that set them on a path to a life on the minimum wage, but are instead channelled into a higher-wage, higher-skilled job that offers a career path, such as being a lab tech, so be it. That is Skills England doing its job.

It may be easier and cheaper to run a business management course in a classroom at a college, but given the shortage occupation list and the industrial strategy, we need bricklayers and welders. Yes, it will cost more to make the facilities available and we may have to pay the lecturers a bit more too, but that is what is needed.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that to achieve any of the outlined Skills England missions, we need a levelling of the playing field over time for further education, in particular for wages in the sector, and that we should work to rectify that, particularly in teaching sectors that are challenging to recruit for, such as critical minerals, as we see in Cornwall?

Antonia Bance: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I was heartened to see that in her letter to the School Teachers Review Body my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education referenced the need to ensure that the implications for further education teachers are taken into account. I hope that, over time, we may be able to hear a little more about the plans in that area.

My most recent point raises a number of questions because Skills England does not hold the resources, although maybe it should—or at least some. I will leave that with Ministers.

Fourth, we need a Skills England that is relentlessly co-ordinating and engaging. As a country, we are still working out how to move away from the hugely over-centralised government machine, not least in places like my own west midlands where we are still in the infancy of having a set of institutions, people, power and money that help us determine our own future. I hope that Skills England will be a trailblazer not only for skills, but for a model of real partnership between regional and national where combined authorities can actually input into national policy.

I have three specific asks for the west midlands. Would the Minister consider moving responsibility for commissioning local skills improvement plans to combined authorities? Combined authorities such as ours could have more of a role in shaping the growth and skills levy. Finally, combined authorities are not just one of a range of stakeholders for Skills England; they should be represented at board level and in working groups as part of its structure. If this work is led only from Whitehall, missed opportunities will mean that local places are left behind. Those places may well be best placed to support the join-up required for coherent labour market policy, strategy and delivery when different Departments are intervening in the same place.

I will say one further thing—my fifth point—about how Skills England must work: it has to see its role as levering more money into training, pushing employers

to do more and making it easy for them to do so. Employer investment in training has fallen over the past decade. Investment per employee is down 19% since 2011. I hope that a clear skills strategy will start to change that, sitting alongside, for the first time in a number of years, a stable Government giving business the confidence to invest. Skills England has to see its role as not just anticipating but driving demand among learners. It should raise hopes and aspirations and make it possible for young people to get the skills they need, as well as for people in their 30s, 40s and 50s to retrain and get on in life.

I will mention the role of unions again, because one of the least comprehensible acts of the previous Government was the sheer vandalism of ending the union learning fund in 2020. In 2020, 200,000 workers were supported into learning or training through the union learning fund. It was open not just to union members or in union workplaces, but to everyone, and it worked. Union learning reached people that other initiatives just did not. Most importantly, it reached basic skills learners. In union learning, over two thirds of learners with no previous qualifications got their first qualification. The fund added over £1.4 billion to the economy through the boost to jobs, wages and productivity. It cost £12 million, and that £12 million levered in £54 million from employers, unions and training providers in its last year. I very much hope that our new Government—so clear about the role of unions in social partnership—will make use of the reach of unions to workers and into workplaces that may otherwise not be reached by learning.

I will finish by setting all this in the context of my constituency of Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley in the west midlands. We are industrial towns shaped by factories, foundries, mines and canals. In my area, 42% of young people leave school without English and maths at grade 4 GCSE, and 2.5 times the national average have no qualifications. Round our way, 40% of job postings are looking for people with level 4 skills and above, but just 16% of the applicants have a level 4 qualification. That is why our wages lag behind the national average, employment rates are low and poverty rates are high.

I have—indulge me—three skills priorities for Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley. The first is manufacturing skills, and I wear the "Made in Britain" badge. In Sandwell, 1,000 firms and 21,000 jobs are in manufacturing, and we could make so much more than we already do with a determined effort to get local people into the right manufacturing skills courses to position us for advanced manufacturing supply chains across our region.

The second skills priority is construction. Our aspiration as a Government—something that is so close to my heart—is to build 1.5 million homes in the next five years. For that, the construction industry training board tell me that the current workforce needs to grow by 30%, with 150,000 more people working in construction. Everywhere in the country will need construction workers, but if we seek to bring up areas that have been left behind, we could turn that massive skills need into an opportunity, train those workers and bring those jobs to places such as ours.

Thirdly, we hear much about higher-level skills, but I am also always here to champion basic skills. Having solid literacy and numeracy skills gives workers a massive wage return and makes a big contribution to our economy. We could add over £2 trillion by the end of the century if we ensure that all young people get good basic skills by the end of the decade. I will always stand for high skills, good jobs and decent wages in Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley. I hope hon. Members have heard from me today what approach Skills England should take to deliver for the country and for areas such as mine—it must deliver for areas such as mine.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) on securing a debate on this important subject. I am delighted to be the first Minister in this Parliament to respond to a debate on skills, which I am sure everyone across the House will agree are crucial to both individuals and our economy.

The honour of being Minister for Skills actually falls to my noble friend, Baroness Smith, who has recently laid a skills Bill before the other House. I know that she has already been out and about in her short time in the role, meeting people at the sharp end of skills delivery: providers, colleges, teachers and also students, young people taking T-levels and apprentices. It is for those people—people of all ages and backgrounds—that we need to ensure that the skills system is working.

As this is a debate about skills, I must mention the fantastic results that the UK achieved in the World Skills event in Lyon last month. Students and apprentices from across the UK competed with the best from around the globe and won two silver and two bronze medals, as well as 12 medallions for achieving the internationally recognised standard of excellence. The team finished 10th in the medal table out of 60 countries, which demonstrates the real commitment to excellence of our young learners. I pay tribute to them.

We need to ensure that learners like that—indeed, all learners—have access to the right opportunities. We know that the skills landscape is ever changing, and that new technologies, businesses and approaches all bring new skills needs. However, we have not always kept up with that need. The current system is incoherent, and too many people are unable to benefit from it.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I have the excellent MidKent College in my constituency, and they tell me that there has been constant change in the skills landscape over the last 10 years, with qualifications being removed and then reintroduced. They have put it to me that more certainty would make for much better long-term planning, not only for students but for colleges.

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for mentioning the college in her constituency of Maidstone and Malling. She raises a concerning factor that should have been dealt with, so I am pleased to say that in July the Secretary of State announced a review, led by Becky Francis, of post-16 qualifications. Skills policy has too often been made in isolation, which has made the system confusing, as she has mentioned in relation to MidKent College.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Just for the information of MPs from the mainland here, Northern Ireland supplies construction workers to the mainland,

[Jim Shannon]

who come over to London by plane every week on Monday morning or Sunday night. If we can produce workers in Northern Ireland who do work in London, perhaps some contribution should be made to our construction sector and our colleges back home so that we can keep producing workers of great skill.

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very interesting point. I have not grasped the whole of that issue, so I would be happy to have a further conversation with him about it.

The lack of a clear plan has led to confusion and widespread skills shortages, which hinder economic growth. The lack of basic skills among adults and reduced employer investment limit our ability to meet domestic skills needs. Too many people have been unable to access the benefits of quality post-16 education and are more likely to face unemployment, lower wages and poorer health. That is why meeting the skills needs of the next decade is central to delivering the Government's five missions: economic growth, opportunity for all, a stronger NHS, safer streets and clean energy. We aim to create a clear, flexible, high-quality skills system that supports people of all ages, breaks down barriers to opportunity and drives economic growth.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): On economic growth, nearly 50% of UK businesses have experienced a cyber-security breach in the past 12 months, and cyber-attacks cost the UK economy £27 billion annually. The country faces a shortage of 93,000 cyber-security professionals, so does the Minister agree that cyber-security skills development should be prioritised in Skills England's agenda?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Lady for that important and pertinent point. Skills England's very purpose—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, I will come on to speak about that. It will ensure that there is training when employers identify skills gaps and those jobs are needed.

Skills England will ensure that we have the highly trained workforce we need to meet the national, regional and local skills needs of the next decade, and it will be aligned with the upcoming industrial strategy. That is a critical part of the Government's mission to raise growth sustainably across the country, support people to get better jobs and improve their living standards. Skills England will provide an authoritative assessment of national and regional skills needs in the economy now and in the future. It will combine the best available statistical data with insights generated by employers and other key stakeholders. It will ensure that there is a comprehensive suite of apprenticeships, training and technical qualifications for individuals and employers to access, which will align with skills gaps and what employers need. As part of that, it will identify what training should be available via the new growth and skills levy, which will replace the rigid apprenticeship levy, as many have been calling for, to ensure that levy-funded training delivers value for money, meets the needs of businesses and helps to kick-start economic growth.

Andrew Pakes: Will the Minister join me in congratulating my constituent Grace Gourlay, who two weeks ago won the *Peterborough Telegraph* advanced apprentice of the year award for her work at the end of her second year of a four-year course at Caterpillar in engine and test design? Does she agree that one of the big challenges for Skills England in reforming the growth and skills levy is to ensure that we reverse the decline in the number of young people entering apprenticeships in skilled areas? We must begin to reverse the 70% drop in young people taking up an apprenticeship course.

Janet Daby: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and join him in celebrating all of Grace Gourlay's achievements.

Skills England will work together with combined authorities and other places with devolved deals, as well as with other regional organisations such as employer representation bodies, to ensure that regional and national skills needs are met at all levels, from essential skills to those delivered via higher education, in line with the forthcoming industrial strategy.

To support our aim to ensure more local say in skills provision, local skills improvement plans, or LSIPs, provide an agreed set of actionable priorities that employers, providers and other stakeholders in the local area can get behind, to drive change and help to make technical education and training more responsive to local labour market and employer needs.

Since autumn 2022, the designated employer representative bodies leading the LSIPs have engaged thousands of local businesses on their skills needs, helping to forge new and dynamic relationships between businesses, skills providers and other stakeholders in the skills system. The plans are a valuable source of information and will provide important intelligence for the newly established Skills England.

A £165 million local skills improvement fund has been made available across all areas of the country to support providers to respond collaboratively to the skills needs identified in the plans. I am aware that a local collaboration of colleges in my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury's local area, which is led by Solihull College and University Centre, has been awarded £10.3 million of funding to support the west midlands LSIP's priority actions. For example, Dudley College of Technology is leading a project that has received £2.1 million to support an expansion of the regional electrification and engineering technical training offer, capital investment is being used to upgrade existing facilities and offer new provision.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Janet Daby: I am afraid that I will not, as I really need to make progress.

The west midlands LSIP has been recognising local challenges, as well as opportunities, including the advancement of the country's fastest growing tech sector, facilitating emerging strengths in clean tech and green energy, and stimulating growth in priority growth clusters identified by the West Midlands Combined Authority, and creating a pipeline of new entrants into the logistics and distribution industry by increasing the availability of apprenticeships.

Offshore wind is a new technology that is being deployed around the UK, including in the Celtic sea. It is estimated that up to 5,000 new jobs could be created

in the area from the new supply chain. Skills that will be critical to this industrial progress include welding, marine vessel operation and cable laying.

It is good to know that Truro and Penwith College wants to explore this sector. I know that green skills are a priority for the college, with its focus on electric and hybrid vehicles, renewables and retrofit for construction. The college also leads the local skills improvement fund project for Cornwall, which focuses on upskilling in these fields. We encourage colleges, including those in Cornwall, to utilise their full adult skills fund allocations. Colleges can grow their allocation by overdelivering on their formula-funded provision by up to 110%.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury for securing this debate, on a matter that we both agree is important. It has given me the opportunity to talk about our plans for Skills England and for skills more widely. I am sure that in the coming months and years there will be more discussion and debate about skills, because they are critical to the prosperity of our businesses and employers, the prosperity of individuals, and indeed the prosperity of the nation. As I have set out today, we are already starting to make reforms to the skills system with the introduction of key measures, such as establishing Skills England to ensure that we have the highly trained workforce needed to meet the national, regional and local skills needs of the next decade and beyond.

Question put and agreed to.

Sepsis Awareness

4.30 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sepsis awareness.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. Sepsis is one of the least well known medical conditions and the No. 1 cause of preventable death in the world. Eleven million people die each year in the world from sepsis, and that represents one in five of all deaths in the world. Sepsis can be very difficult to detect and hard to distinguish from other illnesses. Sepsis claims more lives than lung cancer, bowel cancer, breast cancer and prostate cancer put together. That is truly astonishing. Across the UK alone, 48,500 people a year die from sepsis. The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges suggests that the figure is much higher—about 68,000 a year. That is incredible.

Given that there are approximately 200,000 cases of sepsis each year in the UK, it costs the NHS between £1.5 billion and £2 billion every single year and the wider economy at least £11 billion a year—some people think the figure is closer to £15 billion. The direct cost of sepsis to the NHS is 1% of its budget.

One reason why I requested this debate today is that I have many constituents who have been unfortunate enough to suffer from sepsis. I have a very brave young lady in the hall today. That is Abbi; she is sitting at the back. I am incredibly proud of the strength and determination she has shown to overcome this illness—she is a survivor. I will tell Abbi's story. On 28 November 2022, she had been to her doctor's for some antibiotics for her tonsils, because she was a long-time sufferer of tonsillitis and thought it was tonsillitis again. She had suffered with that all her life, so that was understandable. At 6 pm on that day, she was blue-lighted to King's Mill Hospital in Ashfield, to the accident and emergency department, because she was fighting for breath and literally dying in front of her husband, Steve, who was sat there. She was given numerous injections of adrenaline while travelling to the hospital, because it was thought that she was having an anaphylactic fit and it was a reaction to the antibiotics that she had had that morning. When she arrived at A&E, she was put on 10 litres of oxygen by the staff, but it was evident that that was not enough; it was not doing the job. But they did not, unfortunately, administer any antibiotics or put her on IVs at that time; no blood tests were taken. Her husband, Steve, was constantly asking the staff, "Is there something else we can do for Abbi?" Only now, looking back a few years later, is it clear that sepsis was never thought of at the time.

Abbi very quickly deteriorated, so she was transferred to the intensive care unit at King's Mill Hospital, where she was placed in an induced coma. She was fighting for her life, and all her organs began to shut down at a very rapid rate. Only when the ICU did some tests, when the results started to come through, did staff realise how ill she was and that she had actually got pneumonia, strep B and sepsis.

However, that was just the start of Abbi's journey. When the ICU team realised that the situation was far more complicated than they could deal with at King's Mill, they contacted Glenfield general hospital in Leicester. She was transferred there to be placed on an ECMO

[Lee Anderson]

machine, which takes the place of the heart and lungs—I suppose it is a life support machine. She was lucky to have fitted the criteria to go on that machine. She stayed on it for the next three weeks, in a coma and fighting to stay alive. Without it, she would not be here today. There are only five of those machines in the UK, and it costs the NHS £20,000 per day, per patient. While she was on the ECMO machine, it was visible to Abbi's family that she would lose both hands and both legs beneath the knee, because sepsis had taken over her body and given her gangrene.

On 17 December, Abbi was transferred back to the ICU at King's Mill hospital because she no longer had to be on the ECMO machine at Leicester, but she still needed round-the-clock intensive care treatment. On 9 February, she was transferred to the burns and plastics ward at Nottingham city hospital, where she would wait for her amputations. Imagine that—having to wait in hospital knowing that they were going to take her arms and legs away, after everything she had been through. On 4 May, she was discharged after spending six months in hospital, coming out as a quadruple amputee. She told me just before the debate began—she sometimes forgets—she also lost the sight in her left eye. Incredibly sad. Incredible, brave lady. That is Abbi's story, and I thank her for sharing it with me.

Other constituents have contacted me about sepsis, including Karen from Ashfield. Her elderly mother contracted sepsis and had an awful time at the hospital. Her diagnosis was slow. It was not picked up properly, and, just a few months later, she sadly collapsed and passed away. Neil from Ashfield was much luckier. It was picked very quickly. They got the antibiotics into his body and he made a full recovery. With Pam from Ashfield, it was lucky for her husband that she was a former nurse. She recognised the symptoms and insisted that the hospital put the IV antibiotics into his body very quickly. There is a window of about 12 hours to get the antibiotics in. The point of today's debate is to get the awareness out there, not just in the wider community but in hospitals, because it is very unfortunate that sepsis is being missed. Maybe if they had picked it up quicker in Abbi's case, we would not be sat here—I do not know. Shirley from Ashfield had a better experience. The hospital picked it up very quickly and she made a full recovery, so there are people making full recoveries.

We all know about the sad story of our colleague, Craig Mackinlay—Lord Mackinlay now. I have had conversations with him over the past few weeks about this debate, although he could not be here today. He had a torrid time. His wife was told he was going to die, but he fought back. I think she put pictures of his family on the ceiling of his room at the hospital. He is a fighter, is Craig. It nearly took his life and it has taken him several months to get over it. We did not know where he was; we thought he was just on holiday somewhere at first. We did not see him for months and then we heard what condition he was in. He came back to Parliament a few months back. I will be honest: there was not a dry eye in the House when he walked in as the bionic man. It was so emotional. He is living proof that we can fight back from this disease and have a reasonable quality of life, given the right support and a good hospital.

As I have said, 48,500 people a year die from sepsis. Other organisations put that figure much higher. That is almost 1,000 people a week dying from sepsis in this country, but if somebody was stopped in the street and asked what it was, they would probably struggle to say. The symptoms are a very high or low temperature, uncontrolled shivering, confusion, passing less urine than normal, and blotchy or cold arms and legs. I know that because a few years back, my wife had those symptoms. My wife has cystic fibrosis and she is post double lung transplant, so she has all sorts of medical problems as well, and we thought that it was maybe a rejection of the lungs or pneumonia. We managed to get her to the hospital, and it was sepsis. They told us at the hospital that if we had left it any longer, she would have died—simple as that—because of other complications and she has no immune system. Last year, when she had it again, we knew straightaway what it was. She had the same symptoms, so we got her there pretty sharpish.

I also learned today from Abbi that, on her road to recovery she got her prosthetic limbs but she is also—I do not know if the Minister is aware of this—on a list at Leeds hospital to have a hand transplant. She has a prosthetic for her right arm, but she is on the list for a hand transplant—it is absolutely amazing that we are doing that now. It offers people a lot of hope—Abbi does not stop smiling. We have a campaign in this country for strokes and we all know the symptoms now. We have all seen the stroke campaign on TV about the facial symptoms or someone not being able to talk or keep their arms up. We know all that now. I would like to see a campaign for sepsis so that families and, more importantly, our hospitals are fully aware. What does it cost to give somebody some antibiotics as a precaution if they are shaking, are cold, are blotchy and have a fever? For goodness' sake, what does it cost to put an IV on them and get some antibiotics pumped into them while they do the other checks?

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Does he agree that sharing the stories of all those we know who are affected by sepsis, as he has done so sensitively today about his Abbi, helps to highlight the importance of early recognition of this dreadful disease and the importance of early diagnosis?

Lee Anderson: The hon. Member is absolutely right, if I am honest, and that is what this debate is about. It is about sharing stories. As I said earlier, we could probably ask 100 people on the street what sepsis is and the vast majority would struggle to tell us what it is and what the symptoms are. What we need, and it is quite right, is a campaign for awareness, whether that is through schools or on social media or the TV. I would really like to see a campaign on sepsis so that everybody knows the symptoms. I am going to wrap up now—I have spoken for 13 minutes. I know there are lots of colleagues present who want to speak as well and I am conscious that we have only an hour.

4.43 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing this debate on such an

important issue, which is very close to my heart personally. I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I start by just speaking about myself a little.

In January 2017 after the Christmas break, I came back to Parliament, like many colleagues did, with a bit of a cold. Of course, we carry on working—after all, it is just a cold. Weeks went by and it was getting a bit worse, so I took a course of antibiotics. I suspect, like the hon. Gentleman, a seven-day course of antibiotics very rarely clears up an infection for a gentleman of my physique. Within a short period, the infection was starting to come back and I had a sore throat. Nevertheless, it was only a sore throat, so I went out to Strasbourg for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe meeting that week, and while there, my condition deteriorated.

I was feeling really grotty on the Tuesday morning so I just stayed in my hotel room. On Wednesday, things were so bad that I asked someone to do me a favour and go to a chemist. By Thursday, they had got so terrible that I booked an appointment with a GP in Strasbourg, which, as a typical man, was very much a last resort. The GP did the normal checks—blood pressure and the like—and gave me a throat spray. I was feeling pretty awful, so I flew back that evening and struggled through constituency events on Friday. By Saturday morning, I was getting up and putting on my suit on top of my pyjamas and telling my wife that I had to come down to Westminster to vote. She recognised that that was not entirely typical behaviour and phoned for an ambulance.

Within a few hours I was in an induced coma. I remained in a coma for the next 11 days after a septic shock diagnosis. The consultants told my family I had about a 10% chance of surviving and that if I were to pull through it would almost certainly be with life-changing effects—amputations, brain damage or other severe effects. Fortunately, of course, I was extremely and unbelievably lucky, largely because of the amazing care that I received from the staff at Russells Hall hospital in Dudley. Above all, I was lucky that on that Saturday morning as I presented at A&E, the nurse walking past happened to recognise that the symptoms, which looked much like any number of other conditions, particularly meningitis with a rash, could be sepsis.

Sepsis is a life-threatening condition. It is a response to infection that can lead to tissue damage, organ failure and death if not treated promptly. Despite its severity, the number of deaths and the many, many other people left with their lives fundamentally changed by sepsis, very few people are able to spot the signs, which of course delays diagnosis and treatment. Even the GP in France, who I am sure was an extremely well qualified and professional physician, did not spot that my symptoms could be sepsis.

That lack of awareness contributes to the staggering statistics that the hon. Member for Ashfield went through. There are around 48,000 deaths a year in the United Kingdom due to sepsis, which means that by the end of this 60-minute debate, the chances are that five more people will have lost their lives to sepsis. A further 25 people will have had their lives changed by sepsis. Globally, it affects around 49 million people, with probably around 11 million losing their lives each year. There is a growing body of opinion that believes that the majority of covid deaths were probably covid deaths where the infection triggered a septic response.

I keep saying "probably" because, frightening as the figures are, they are best guesses. We do not know. Although the reporting in the United Kingdom is better than in almost any other country, it is still not consistent. It is possible that a death will be recorded just as a multiple organ or respiratory failure despite it being a case of sepsis or of septic shock. It is important that we step up to the challenge of reducing those deaths, which, as has been said, represent more than the number of lives lost to breast, bowel and prostate cancers combined every single year. We need a sepsis register so that we know how many cases there are and how those cases progress.

One of the most alarming aspects of sepsis is that it often goes unrecognised until it is too late. I was lucky that it was spotted as I presented at A&E—even two or three hours later might have made the difference between a 10% chance of survival and a quite minuscule chance. Our friend and former colleague Lord Mackinlay was similarly fortunate; although his condition deteriorated at an astonishingly rapid rate, it was caught just in time for him to survive.

Early identification and diagnosis are important because, in most cases, timely broad-based intravenous antibiotics will be enough to stop the infection from triggering a septic response. Promoting Sepsis Awareness Month is therefore not just about sharing statistics or stories; it is about saving lives. By educating the public and healthcare professionals about the signs and symptoms of sepsis, we can ensure that more people receive the urgent care they need.

The UK Sepsis Trust, which does so much amazing work and is led by the incredible Dr Ron Daniels, has a three-point plan that we all need to get behind. We need to be able to measure and publish performance data on sepsis care pathways, so that we can see how they are responded to and can measure successes and where things have not been done correctly. We need fast and reliable diagnostics, to allow those on the frontline to make the correct decisions quickly, without lengthy waits for test results to be returned from central laboratories. We also need to increase awareness of sepsis, as the hon. Member for Ashfield is doing so well with his debate today, to ensure that medical professionals and the public are able to ask the question: could it be sepsis?

I am speaking with a slightly croaky throat, but I am fairly sure that this time it is not the strep B infection that triggered that septic shock in January 2017. I can be confident because, unlike nearly eight years ago, I am all too aware of the signs and symptoms of sepsis: slurred speech or confusion, extreme shivering or muscle pain, passing no urine for a day or more, severe breathlessness, skin that is mottled or discoloured, and a feeling normally described as "like you are going to die." Having had it, I would say, "It feels like you want to die."

If the public and healthcare professionals across the system are aware, can look out for those six signs, and ask that question—could it be sepsis?—then many more lives could be saved. Sepsis could then be spotted earlier in people like Abbi, whom the hon. Gentleman spoke so movingly about, and Lord Mackinlay, and we can ensure that life-changing conditions can be dealt with far sooner.

4.53 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for moving the motion and for speaking about not just the political side but the personal side of this debate, through the story of Abbi. I congratulate her on her bravery and on being here to hear the debate.

In reflecting on what the hon. Member said, what I will say to the Minister is that although we talk so much about health being devolved to the other nations, at times we have to take a step back and see what our national health service can do at that national level. The hon. Member's ask for a sepsis awareness campaign is surely something that our public health agencies, health trusts, Ministers and Departments across this United Kingdom can take on and look at on a four-nations basis. Sepsis affects everybody and every region equally, so that is something that we can do. I thank the hon. Member for raising the issue here today.

I was Health Minister in Northern Ireland for three and a half years and, looking back, sepsis was not an issue that was high on our agenda—or even my agenda—at that time. There is a realisation from the stories that we have heard today, including those of Abbi, the hon. Member for Ashfield and the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), that brings home the seriousness of it. I looked back to see what had been done in Northern Ireland on raising awareness of sepsis. In 2019, Unison ran an awareness campaign in Northern Ireland for its members and, in 2020, the South Eastern health and social care trust—one of our five geographical health trusts— ran a campaign, but I could find nothing done centrally or pushed out by our public health agency. There is so much more we can do.

I found one positive thing: a piece of work was published last month by Sepsis Research FEAT and the James Lind Alliance, in which they identify the top 10 research priorities that could shape the future of sepsis treatment and care, with the goal of saving tens of thousands of lives each year, as well as addressing the financial implications that the hon. Member for Ashfield talked about. Those top 10 priorities address critical questions, including how to improve the accuracy and speed of diagnosis, which has been mentioned today; exploring alternatives to antibiotics; and investigating the long-term effects of sepsis, which is now referred to as post-sepsis syndrome because of the after-effects of having that illness. As a life-threatening condition that can affect anyone, sepsis often progresses rapidly, leading to death or life-altering consequences for survivors, with post-traumatic stress disorder even being identified in previous sufferers.

I mention that research because it was co-led by a professor from Queen's University Belfast. It suggests that work on sepsis can be brought forward, so I encourage the Minister to look at that research, which was published last month and also involved professors from Cambridge and Edinburgh. The Minister can take that work forward after this debate, but he should also engage with his ministerial counterparts across the United Kingdom and follow the hon. Member's appeal for UK-wide awareness of sepsis and what can be done to prevent it. In closing, I congratulate Abbi once again for being here to put a personal face on a very challenging condition. Hopefully, today's debate will have a positive outcome.

4.57 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Christopher. I want to recount the experience of my constituency colleague and friend, Richard Lochhead, Member of the Scottish Parliament for Moray. Late last year, Richard became ill with flu-like symptoms at an event in Edinburgh. Days later, back in Elgin in the constituency, he collapsed at home and was blue-lighted to Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin, and then on to the Aberdeen Royal infirmary. He had, of course, developed sepsis from what seemed like common flu-like symptoms.

Richard has said publicly:

> "There's no doubt that I'm lucky to be here."

The sepsis had attacked his heart and he required emergency open heart surgery. He was an otherwise healthy individual who enjoys cycling and, hopefully, he will be able to get back to that—I certainly think he will, given how he looked when I saw him most recently. He spent six weeks in hospital and said there were times when he "couldn't do anything". He also described having to learn to walk again. He lost his voice and that took several weeks to return. For any politician, obviously, losing their voice is a difficult thing to deal with.

Richard has thankfully made a faster than expected recovery, having been at death's door, although that recovery has still been many months. He is now back representing his constituents in his inimitable style, and carrying out his ministerial duties in the Scottish Government most effectively. I am sure colleagues will join me in wishing him well for his continuing recovery, albeit that he is most of the way there now. A combination of expert care, his own determination and, arguably, some luck, got him to that point, but many others—as we have heard from colleagues today—are not so lucky.

It was reported in the excellent *Press and Journal* newspaper that in the last year alone almost one person a day in Grampian, Highland and Islands has died from sepsis. More than 2,200 patients needed ward treatment, with around six admissions a day in an area represented by just 11 MPs. With more than 600 MPs in this place, that gives an indication of how big and shocking the impact of sepsis is.

This is bluntly a life and death issue, and I commend the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for bringing forward this debate and, vitally, for keeping the issue in the spotlight. The symptoms that have been described by others are critical for people to understand. No one should gamble on whether it may or not be sepsis. If they have the slightest inkling that sepsis might be the cause of an illness, they should get to a doctor and a hospital and get checked out.

5 pm

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for this debate. It is hard to think of a more appropriate topic. I also thank Abbi—who has shared with us the warmest smile that I have seen in a long time—and her husband for being here; it is a privilege to meet them.

I want to take a moment to share a personal story, to show why drawing attention to this subject is one of the most appropriate things we can do as Members of Parliament. I have four young children at home. After the birth of the most recent one, my wife began to suffer some of the symptoms we have discussed today, but—very much like the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood)—tough Brits do not easily give in to the hospital. As fate would have it, though, we had a meeting that morning with a carer who was checking on women who had recently had children. She popped round to check on the welfare of baby and mother, and although my wife and I were adamant that everything would be fine, this skilled professional spotted the symptoms immediately and demanded that we were rushed to hospital. We were there within half an hour and, within another 20 minutes, there were around a dozen doctors, nurses and support staff rushing around like maniacs. Although I cannot remember the specific number of signs, they were tenfold, fifteenfold, twentyfold what they should be in a healthy person. The staff may have saved my wife's life in very real terms.

That is why I wanted to take this moment to recognise why this issue is extremely appropriate. The consequences of catching sepsis are minor, but the consequences of not catching it are extraordinarily severe. The difference is cheap: it is education; it is information that we can all carry with us for free, but which can potentially benefit someone's life.

I want to take one last moment to again thank Abbi for sharing her story and my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield for allowing us to hold this debate, and to thank the extraordinary staff at Basildon University Hospital.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): There are two more speakers and six minutes to go, so that is three minutes each.

5.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for raising this issue. He and I spoke this week, and his perseverance and hard work have given us a chance to make a contribution. I also commend Abbi for coming here today and for giving her personal story, which the hon. Member for Ashfield referred to. I salute her courage and bravery through all these hard times, as well as her wonderful smile, which the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock) mentioned.

As the DUP's health spokesperson, I add my voice to those of other hon. Members to raise awareness of sepsis. With superior hygiene and antibiotics available on tap, we have a tendency to think that sepsis is a disease of the past, when it clearly is not. The sad fact is that, during this one-hour debate, five people in the UK will lose their lives. This debate is to hammer home the need for people to be aware of the signs of sepsis.

My dad had sepsis in hospital a long time ago. It was a minor case, with the advantage that he healed quickly. He was right there in the hospital where the nurses were and the reaction was immediate to ensure that he survived.

Most parents are aware of the glass test for meningitis, which has been hammered home on multiple occasions. However, when I did a quick survey of my office staff—three of the five are parents and one had training from St John Ambulance—it shocked me that the only person who knew what sepsis was was the St John Ambulance volunteer; the others talked about extremities turning black, which is almost end-stage sepsis. We need to be aware of the symptoms before that, and that quick survey has pushed me into thinking that there needs to be more awareness among parents and communities as a whole. I know that the Minister will try to respond—he always does and he is assiduous in what he does.

The charity Sepsis NI said that we currently have no recovery protocols in place in Northern Ireland for sepsis, although that is not just a problem in Northern Ireland. When patients leave hospital, the fact that they may have been treated and survived does not mean that they are in any way better; in fact, most are still seriously ill and need both physical and psychological help. We still need to work on a GP and hospital after-care plan, and I hope the Minister will share some of his ideas with the Assembly back home. The situation must change, and we need a UK-wide strategy to deal with this issue across the UK.

Lastly, this statistic is a good one to put on record: the best guess for Northern Ireland is that 7,020 people will be affected by sepsis this year and 1,240 will die. If those facts do not scare us, they need to. People need to be aware of the symptoms: the fast breathing, dizziness, pale and mottled skin, high temperature and cold body. We all need to be able to call those to mind as quickly as we do with other major killers, such as meningitis.

This debate is a good step in raising awareness. I very much support my colleagues in asking for more to be done centrally, using a co-ordinated approach to raise awareness UK-wide of the killer that is sepsis. I again thank the hon. Member for Ashfield.

5.6 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing the debate.

These are extraordinary tales that we hear from loved ones and family. A very good friend of mine nearly died of sepsis seven years ago, but—I have to be honest—I had never heard of it until that moment when he nearly passed away. This could be one of the most extraordinary opportunities for our healthcare system to make a rapid difference.

Sepsis is so quick but so preventable. In the pressured environment of our hospitals and our GPs' surgeries, it is so easy for healthcare professionals to miss it. If it becomes embedded in all of us through a major publicity campaign, which could be organised relatively quickly, to ask ourselves that simple question, "Could it be sepsis?", in the same way that we often ask, "Could it be meningitis?", and if we could help medical professionals by asking them that question too, we will have the ability to prevent death or major life-changing injuries and to save money for the NHS. It is a massive win-win, and I hope the Minister can rapidly respond both positively and appropriately.

5.8 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on bringing this important debate forward today. I also want to take a moment to recognise Abbi, who is in the Public Gallery, for her bravery in all she has done and for coming here today and the work she is doing just by being here and raising the profile of sepsis.

While initiatives such as sepsis six have helped to improve outcomes for people who have sepsis in recent years, urgent challenges remain, in terms of both the awareness and the treatment protocols we have, and the resources we put into treating the condition. In preparing for the debate, I was able to grab five minutes with a constituent and a dear friend. She has looked after her mother, who was hospitalised and very ill for a long time, after being bitten by the family dog and developing sepsis. Eventually, over a number of years, she has been able to come home.

As well as caring for her mother, my friend is a consultant geriatrician locally to me in Mid Sussex and has a great deal of experience of what it is like treating sepsis in hospital. She wanted to emphasise that awareness of sepsis has grown among healthcare professionals and is much better understood than it once was. The UK Sepsis Trust, through its action and activism, has seen a real increase in public awareness of sepsis. In 2012, only 27% of people understood the severity of the condition, but that figure had soared by 2019 to 76%. Awareness is going in the right direction, although more certainly needs to be done.

While raising awareness is a part of this, public awareness alone is not enough. We must improve things such as diagnostic testing for sepsis through investment in hospital equipment and increased laboratory capacity. We cannot expect healthcare professionals to act swiftly if they are not given the tools they need to do their job to the best of their skilled ability.

I was grateful to the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock) for raising the issue of maternal sepsis. In September, the Care Quality Commission reported that 48% of trusts were rated "Inadequate" or "Requires improvement" for maternity services. Sadly, that includes my own trust, the University hospitals Sussex NHS foundation trust. Sepsis is just one risk factor in having poor maternity provision. All maternity units must meet high standards of care. That includes having adequate facilities and equipment and access to best practice care around the clock, especially for those experiencing miscarriage.

Moving on to emergencies, we know that demand for ambulances is intense, not just because of the winter pressures that come around every year but because of longer-term pressures. In my seat of Mid Sussex, the South East Coast Ambulance Service is predicting a 15% increase in demand for ambulances over the next five years. Response times for urgent conditions such as sepsis need to be improved. Across England last year, the NHS failed to meet response targets in every region for category 2 emergencies, which includes sepsis. We need to increase the number of staffed hospital beds and improve social care to cut delays in ambulance handovers, and it is imperative that the Government publish localised reports on ambulance response times. We must create an emergency fund to reverse the closure of community ambulance stations.

In conclusion, while we have made significant progress in raising awareness of sepsis, the fight is far from over. We must continue to push for better diagnostics, increased funding and improved care standards, ensuring that everyone, regardless of their background, has access to the best possible treatment.

5.12 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing a debate on this very important topic. I should also declare an interest as an NHS consultant paediatrician. I have cared for and continue in my work to care for people with this condition.

I would like to thank Abbi for coming today. It was an honour to meet earlier today and to hear her story from her MP, which highlighted both the difficulties she faced in getting good immediate care for sepsis and the consequences of that. I commend her for the bravery she has shown in coming today and for raising this issue for the benefit of other people. This debate will increase awareness, which is a very positive thing.

I remember sitting in the Chamber earlier this year when the former hon. Member for South Thanet re-entered Parliament to a standing ovation—an exceptionally rare occurrence in the House of Commons. It is truly humbling to reflect on the journey that he has been through in such a short space of time. Little over a year ago, he had no outward signs of sepsis at all. He has now become one of the most well-known advocates for people with it. His case brought renewed attention to this disease, which kills nearly 50,000 people in the UK every year. As the hon. Member for Ashfield said, that is around the same number of people who die from bowel, breast and prostate cancer combined.

The case of our former colleague speaks to not only a remarkable recovery but the suddenness with which sepsis can utterly change someone's life. As many people have said today, early identification is vital. Under the previous Government, awareness of sepsis improved significantly, as did the clinical recognition of symptoms, screening rates and the administration of antibiotic treatment, but there is much more to do.

I want to commend the UK Sepsis Trust and other public campaigners who played a significant role in improving awareness among the general public. A recent YouGov survey showed that the UK has high levels of public awareness compared with other countries. Will the Minister say what steps the Government will take to work with NHS England and patient groups such as the UK Sepsis Trust to raise public awareness, so that people can more easily identify the signs of sepsis? I have also asked this of another Minister, but have not yet received an answer. The Chancellor said that she was cutting the communications budget—can the Minister confirm that those cuts will not affect the important public health messaging for campaigns like this? It is important that we do not cut budgets that will save people's lives and, indeed, save the NHS money. It is also important to raise awareness not just across the general public, but among health professionals, including medical staff in both hospitals and communities.

The national early warning score has been introduced and is being rolled out, along with the sepsis six, which was developed with the UK Sepsis Trust. The six—oxygen, cultures, antibiotics, fluids, lactate management and urinary output monitoring—must all be carried out within the first hour. Has the Minister established how well those measures are being rolled out across the UK, and what is he doing to ensure that is being done effectively? The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence updated its guidance earlier this year. Will the Minister update the House on how effectively that guidance has been implemented across the UK? Martha's rule was introduced before the election; the rule relates to the ability for people to get a second opinion from another health professional if they remain concerned about their loved one or themselves. Will the Minister update the House on the work the NHS is doing to roll that out, too?

Research is the cornerstone of transforming sepsis care, and the last Government invested more than £1 billion through the National Institute for Health and Care Research. It is important that we research the causes of and treatment for sepsis, but we must also research new antibiotics, because we are starting to see antibiotic resistance to infections. If we do not invest in antibiotic research, new antibiotics will not be developed—we are essentially asking people to develop a drug to be kept on the shelf for when we need it, and there is no money in that, so it will not get commercial take-up. It is therefore important that the Government invest in that.

The UK Sepsis Trust is calling on the Government to publish data on the sepsis care pathway so that we can see where it is performing well and where it is performing less well. I urge the Government to do that. It would be helpful if the Minister could confirm today that they will do so.

As we close the debate, let us remember what we are fighting for. Sepsis takes the lives of 50,000 people every year. It strikes suddenly and often without warning, as Lord Mackinlay's case reminds us so powerfully. Early identification and rapid treatment are the keys to saving lives; we have made strides, and awareness is growing, but we must do more. We must continue to improve recognition, strengthen control and push forward with life-saving initiatives. I urge the Government today not just to maintain their commitment but to strengthen it by partnering with NHS England, publishing more data, researching the causes of sepsis and ensuring we can fight this disease together.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I thank the Front Benchers for sticking to their five minutes, which means the Minister now has 10 minutes; there will hopefully also be a couple of minutes for the proposer to reply.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): It is good to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I start by welcoming new Members to this House. I know it has been three months since the general election, but this is my first opportunity as a Health Minister to welcome those who have a clear interest in public health and prevention matters. I assure Members of the House that I will work with all Members to try to get those better outcomes. Working across party is how I always operated in opposition, and I seek to do the same in government. I also want to welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), to her post. We very briefly went head to head in the past when I shadowed her—I hope that she gets to shadow me for longer.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing this important debate. He is a chap who always wears his heart on his sleeve. Whether we agree with him or not, he is always forthright and passionate about the causes that he cares for. This is a cause for which there is commonality across the House, and I want to thank him sincerely for putting forward such an eloquent case to me, as the new Public Health and Prevention Minister, and for setting out the story of his constituent, Abbi. I am going to make her blush, and we have all said it, but she has a wonderful smile—she really has. I hope she will still be smiling at the end of the debate because I want to ensure that the Government do more on raising awareness of sepsis.

I have always taken the view that Members vastly enrich our debates with their own experiences and those of their constituents, and we heard it again in contributions over the course of the debate. I want to start by saying as the Minister that my deepest condolences go to the families and friends of everyone lost to sepsis, including those watching the debate elsewhere. Sepsis is a devastating condition. Last month was Sepsis Awareness Month. I want to pay tribute to the outstanding sepsis charities, including UK Sepsis Trust and Sepsis Research FEAT. They do so much to raise awareness, support families and fund research.

The shadow Minister mentioned Martha's rule, and I want to touch on that. Throughout the history of the NHS, families have been at the heart of driving change and, indeed, holding our health service to account. Members may have read, as I did, Merope Mills' article in the *Guardian* describing her daughter's last few days in hospital. It was a difficult read—there is no getting away from that—and I cannot even begin to imagine how difficult that article was to write. At just 13 years old, Martha was a bright, bubbly young girl and, in her mum's words, a "feminist in the making." She should not have died. Her parents should have been listened to, they should have been kept in the loop, and they should have been treated with the respect they deserved. Talking to families should never be some tick-box exercise. On the contrary, nobody knows their child better than a mum and dad, as we know. Families have a critical part to play in their own care, and we need to ensure that their concerns are heard and acted on.

Thanks to Martha's parents and other campaigners, NHS England will roll out Martha's rule across 143 hospital sites by March next year. That initiative will enable patients and their families to seek a second opinion or a rapid review from someone outside their care team if they are concerned that their condition is deteriorating.

On sepsis training, NHS England has developed specific sepsis training resources to improve sepsis recognition for clinical and non-clinical staff in the NHS. Guidelines for recognition, diagnosis and early management of suspected sepsis were updated earlier this year. It is critical that those updates are constantly implemented by frontline clinical staff to drive real improvements on

[Andrew Gwynne]

the ground. It is also important that we recognise the life-altering complications of sepsis, such as multiple limb amputations, as again was so eloquently set out by the hon. Member for Ashfield. Again, I want to thank Abbi for being here today—there is nothing more powerful than her presence in the Gallery.

Physical rehabilitation is an important part of the recovery process. It can be a long, difficult and frustrating process, so it is important that the NHS continues to place patients at the heart of rehabilitation services and focuses on meeting individual goals and improving their quality of life.

On public awareness, as has already been said by numerous Members, we all remember that incredible moment when Lord Mackinlay, who had a life-threatening battle with sepsis, walked into the House of Commons Chamber just before the general election was called. His moving testimony shone a spotlight on the physical and emotional pain of sepsis survivors and their families. I welcome his advocacy in that area. In the NHS, our focus must be on improving the early recognition and clinical treatment of sepsis. We should thank everyone who has campaigned on that.

Sepsis is a clinically complex condition. The signs and symptoms vary hugely, particularly in the early stages. Moreover, sepsis is not a single disease; it does not have a single diagnostic test. The NHS has got better at recognising and treating sepsis by the introduction of the national early warning score, a screening and decision support tool now used by 100% of ambulance trusts, and 99% of acute trusts, in England. Last year, NHS England ran a financial incentive scheme to encourage the use of the national early warning score to improve responses to unwell and deteriorating patients, and several trusts have rolled out the national paediatric early warning score to ensure the recognition of deterioration in children. We need to maintain that momentum, continuing to improve care and reduce preventable deaths from sepsis—because they are preventable, and we should do all we can to prevent them.

I want to see patients and families empowered to seek timely medical help. The job of the healthcare system is to ensure that frontline staff can recognise sick patients and respond quickly to provide lifesaving treatment. To support that, in the last five years, the National Institute for Health and Care Research has invested over £19.7 million of funding in 20 research projects on sepsis diagnosis, management and treatment, and it welcomes applications for research on sepsis.

I want to touch briefly on antimicrobial resistance. Our treatment of sepsis relies on effective antibiotics. That is why the Government are focused on tackling antimicrobial resistance by implementing the UK's five-year national action plan.

On improving awareness, I spend almost every day thinking about prevention—it is in the title of my job—and preventing infection is the best way to avoid sepsis. I agree with the hon. Member for Ashfield, and indeed other Members, that we should be doing all we can to better educate and inform. It is heartwarming that in the latest statistics we have, awareness of sepsis is not only increasing, it is at relatively high levels. But we should never rest on our laurels. We have to keep reminding people of sepsis. That is why I will work with the hon. Member for Ashfield and others to ensure that we get the support we need.

I will work on a four-nation basis with colleagues across the devolved Administrations. One of my first jobs was to talk to Mike Nesbitt, the Health Minister in Northern Ireland, and the Welsh and Scottish Health Ministers, about health issues to which we have a common approach. Sepsis has to be one of those.

Finally, I assure the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, that the comms budgets will not be cut for public health measures.

5.28 pm

Lee Anderson: I thank every hon. Member here for making some wonderful contributions and sharing some stories. I think the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) summed it all up perfectly: "Could it be sepsis?" That is the question all health professionals and families should be asking themselves if they see the symptoms.

It has been a wonderful debate. Once again, I thank Abbi and Steve for coming here, because it is real-life stories such as Abbi's that inspire us as MPs to tell them in this place. If we cannot do anything about sepsis awareness, such as having a campaign, I would be very disappointed. However, I have been very encouraged by what the Minister has said today, and by fellow Members from all parties. All I can say to sum up, Sir Christopher, is, "Could it be sepsis?"

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered sepsis awareness.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Wednesday 9 October 2024

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Independent Film Tax Credit

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Today the Government have laid regulations to bring in the independent film tax credit (IFTC). This will provide an uplift to our existing audiovisual expenditure credit (AVEC) specifically targeted to support the growth and success of low-budget British films. These regulations set out the eligibility criteria for film production companies, which will be able to apply for an eligibility certificate from the British Film Institute from 30 October this year. Companies will be able to apply to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to claim the IFTC from 1 April 2025.

These regulations create the mechanism for low-budget film productions and international film co-productions to apply for tax relief in the form of an enhanced AVEC. This targeted uplift will be at a higher rate of 53% compared to the normal rate of 34% for other films.

The regulations include a budget condition to ensure that this tax relief specifically targets independent productions with a budget of up to £15 million.

To avoid productions with budgets slightly over £15 million receiving a much lower amount of relief, films with core budgets of up to £23.5 million are eligible. The IFTC has a cap of £6.36 million on the total cash credit receivable, which is based on qualifying core expenditure (i.e. "core budget") of £15 million. This creates a taper in the proportionate value of the credit for films with core budgets above £15 million.

The enhanced AVEC rate will be available for £15 million of a production's budget. There is also a "modified creative connection" condition which means that the film must have a director or scriptwriter who is a British citizen or ordinarily resident in the UK, or be an official UK co-production. Finally the regulations also detail the particulars and evidence that applicants will need to provide in order to access this enhanced relief.

The regulations have been laid alongside appointed day regulations which mean that from 30 October 2024, eligible companies will be able to apply for certification for this enhanced uplift. Film production companies can claim this enhanced relief in relation to films whose principal photography began on or after 1 April 2024. HMRC will begin accepting applications on 1 April 2025.

Both the Corporation Tax (Certification as Low-Budget Film) Regulations 2024

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2024/1009/pdfs/uksi_20241009_en.pdf

and the Finance (No. 2) Act 2024 (Applications for Certification as Low-Budget Film: Appointed Day) Regulations 2024

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2024/1010/pdfs/uksi_20241010_en.pdf

have been published on legislation.gov.uk.

[HCWS115]

Petition

Wednesday 9 October 2024

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water bills in Lancaster and Wyre

The petition of residents of Lancaster and Wyre,

Declares that residents in Lancaster and Wyre have been significantly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis; notes that Ofwat has proposed that bills should increase by an average of £19 per year between 2025 and 2030; and further declares that households are paying for the mistakes of the privatised UK water industry whilst company bosses are handed bonus payments.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to look into all appropriate measures to mitigate the impact of increases to water bills on households.

And the petitioners remain (etc.)—*[Presented by Cat Smith, Official Report,* 22 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 494.*]*

[P003003]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

The Government would like to thank the petitioners for raising the issue of water bill increases in Lancaster and Wyre.

We understand the petitioners' concerns over proposed customer bill rises and recognise that no one wants to see water bills go up—particularly during a cost of living crisis. The fact is that consumers have faced a situation of weakened regulation and failures to draw in the necessary investment. This has left our sewage system to crumble and we now have record levels of illegal sewage dumping in our rivers, lakes and seas. This is completely unacceptable. While the decision to increase bills is one for the independent water regulator, Ofwat, and not the Government, this Government fully expect the regulator to scrutinise the price review plans put forward to them by water companies and ensure best value for money for customers.

In the meantime, this Government are determined to fundamentally transform the water industry for the benefit of all. We have already announced immediate actions to end the disgraceful behaviour of water companies and their bosses and we have set out a three-stage approach to cleaning up our waterways.

Week one water announcements

Within our first week of Government, we announced an initial package of reforms to protect customers' bills and the environment and to give consumers new powers to hold companies to account. Our announcements included:

> Ensure that funding for vital infrastructure investment is ringfenced and can only be spent on upgrades benefiting customers and the environment. Ofwat will also ensure that when money for investment is not spent, companies refund customers, with money never allowed to be diverted for bonuses, dividends or salary increases.
>
> This Government have been clear with Ofwat that new billpayer money must be ringfenced and used to improve and build vital infrastructure. Water companies will also place customers and the environment at the heart of their objectives. Companies have agreed to change their "articles of association"—the rules governing each company—to make the interests of customers and the environment a primary objective.
>
> Consumers will gain new powers to hold water company bosses to account through powerful new customer panels. For the first time in history, customers will have the power to summon board members and hold water executives to account.
>
> Protection and compensation for households and businesses will be strengthened when their basic water services are affected and we have launched a consultation—which can be accessed at https://consult.defra.gov.uk/water-affordability-and-consumers/consultation-on-updating-the-guaranteed-standards/consultation/intro/
> —on more than doubling the value of payments made to customers in the event of service failures and to trigger payment with a broader set of circumstances.

These measures seek to strengthen protections for water customers and put customers at the forefront of water company activities.

Special Measures Bill

In less than 70 days, we introduced our Water (Special Measures) Bill, that will boost accountability and begin the work of cleaning up Britain's rivers, lakes and seas. The Bill will bring much tougher regulation to the water sector and ensure water bosses are held to account. The Bill includes provisions which will make water bosses personally liable for wrongdoing; ban bonuses for CEOs and senior leaders unless high standards are met to protect the environment; boost the regulator's powers to recover enforcement costs; and automatically fine companies that pollute our waterways.

This Bill is an initial downpayment after years of failure.

Reforming the sector

We will also outline further legislation to fundamentally transform how the nation's water system operates, tackle pollution, deliver a resilient water supply, boost investment and speed up delivery of infrastructure upgrades.

The Government will be carrying out a review to fundamentally transform how our water system works and clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good. We will invite views from a range of experts covering areas such as the environment, public health, consumers, investors, engineering and economics, and there will be a public consultation to test the proposals are robust and radical enough to clean up the pollution from our waterways.

We also understand the financial pressures hard-working families and pensioners are currently facing, especially as many people have been impacted by cost of living challenges. We are therefore pushing the sector to ensure support is available for vulnerable customers who are struggling to pay their bills. All water companies offer affordability support for households who struggle to pay their bills in full including WaterSure and social tariffs, payment holidays, payment matching, benefit entitlement checks and financial advice referral arrangements.

We are moving at pace to transform our water sector and hold those in charge responsible.

Written Correction

Wednesday 9 October 2024

Other Correction

LIZ JARVIS

Chalk Streams: Sewage Discharge

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Chalk Streams: Sewage Discharge on 8 October 2024.

Liz Jarvis: 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?

[*Official Report,* 8 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 66WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis):

Liz Jarvis: 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 **near** 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?

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 9 October 2024

	Col. No.
PRIME MINISTER	294
Engagements	294
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	285
Cass Review	290
Discrimination against Disabled People	290
Impact of Energy Costs on Disabled People	285
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—*continued*	
Impact of Socio-economic Disadvantage on Future Earnings	288
Topical Questions	292
Violence against Women and Girls	285
Women in the Workplace	291

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 9 October 2024

	Col. No.
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	21WS
Independent Film Tax Credit	21WS

PETITION

Wednesday 9 October 2024

	Col. No.
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	5P
Water bills in Lancaster and Wyre	5P
OBSERVATIONS	5P

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Wednesday 9 October 2024

	Col. No.
OTHER CORRECTION	5WC
Liz Jarvis	5WC
OTHER CORRECTION—*continued*	
Chalk Streams: Sewage Discharge	5WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

not later than
Wednesday 16 October 2024

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

Volume 754
No. 25

Wednesday
9 October 2024

CONTENTS

Wednesday 9 October 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 285] [see index inside back page]
Minister for Women and Equalities
Prime Minister

Northern Ireland City Deals [Col. 305]
Answer to urgent questions—(Hilary Benn)

Film Industry [Col. 315]
Statement—(Lisa Nandy)

Renters' Rights Bill [Col. 332]
Motion for Second Reading—(Angela Rayner)
Amendment—(Kemi Badenoch)—on a Division, negatived
Motion agreed to

Higher Education: Staffordshire [Col. 421]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Government Support for the RSPCA [Col. 93WH]
Proposed Salt Marshes: Pawlett Hams [Col. 116WH]
Skills England [Col. 146WH]
Sepsis Awareness [Col. 154WH]
General debates

Written Statement [Col. 21WS]

Petition [Col. 5P]
Observation

Written Correction [Col. 5WC]
Other Correction