

**Thursday
12 December 2024**

**Volume 758
No. 63**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 12 December 2024

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Steel Industry: South Yorkshire

1. **Dr Marie Tidball** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the steel industry in South Yorkshire. [901764]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The steel industry has been in decline, and we intend to turn this around. That is why we are developing a steel strategy, investing up to £2.5 billion and working at pace. The steel sector in South Yorkshire and across the UK has been neglected for too long, and we intend to change that.

Dr Tidball: Stocksbridge Speciality Steels in my constituency is a world-leading plant, with specialist capability to produce cleaner and stronger high-grade steel for our aerospace industry. The plant supports hundreds of jobs and has an exceptional on-site skills training centre, with links to local universities. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the future strategic significance of Stocksbridge Speciality Steels and its fundamental importance to our national steel industry?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and for championing her constituency and its industries. She makes a very good point, and I recently met her to talk about this. This week, I met Community trade union representatives from the steel sector in her area as well. I am always happy to meet again to see what we can do.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): As the Minister knows, it is not just South Yorkshire that is facing difficult decisions about the steel industry. I thank her for our recent meeting about the future of Scunthorpe. Is she able to add anything on when we might expect an announcement? As she will appreciate, particularly at this time of year, there is growing anxiety among the workforce.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and for his interest in his constituents and their jobs in the steel industry. As he says, we have met to talk about this, and I have nothing new to add today,

other than that we continue with our conversations with British Steel. We are working as fast as we can. Obviously, it is ultimately up to British Steel to decide what it wants to do and take forward, but we stand ready to support and work with it.

UK Exports

2. **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help increase the number of businesses exporting goods and services. [901765]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): We recently launched Unlock Europe, a new export programme designed to help UK businesses build stronger relationships with European customers. Last month, in Manchester, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State launched a new pilot scheme, alongside the mayor and his team, that offers businesses in the north-west more support in selling their products and services overseas. We are determined to do more, and will bring forward further plans in due course.

Alex Baker: Exports from our aerospace, defence, security and space sectors contribute around £40 billion to our economy, but without additional support, many of the small businesses I speak to in Aldershot and Farnborough are limited in their ability to export. What can Ministers do to help them, and will the Government consider reinstating the trade show access programme, closed down by the Conservatives, to help more small and medium-sized enterprises trade around the world?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we have to do more to help small businesses in particular, and businesses in general, to export more overseas. That is one of the key, but often understated, ways in which we can deliver growth for this country. As part of our work on a new trade strategy and a small business strategy, we are looking at further proposals to help our businesses export more.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Italian press has been reporting that the global combat air programme consortium, involving the UK, Italy and Japan, might be extended to include Saudi Arabia. Can the Minister confirm this press report? How would that affect any future decision to suspend licences to export arms to Saudi Arabia, as the Government decided to in 2019?

Gareth Thomas: We are looking at working with other GCAP partners. I was in Italy last month to discuss the further potential of GCAP, and other work that we can do with the Italians in this space, but that will not affect the issue about which the hon. Gentleman is specifically concerned.

Business Confidence

3. **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): What steps he is taking to help improve business confidence. [901767]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): The Government were forced to make difficult choices in the Budget, but the fundamentals of doing

business in the UK remain strong. The Government's agenda of creating an industrial strategy, getting people back to work, reforming our planning system, rebuilding our relationship with the EU, pensions reform and more, is entirely focused on improving the long-term business environment across the UK.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: In the aftermath of the Budget, I spoke with many business leaders in my constituency of Solihull West and Shirley. Invariably, they told me that they are pausing recruitment and freezing their growth plans as a direct consequence of the decisions made around taxation and the Employment Rights Bill. What does the Secretary of State say to those businesses in my constituency that no longer have confidence in the Government and feel abandoned by their policies?

Jonathan Reynolds: I say that the Budget was seven weeks ago, so if the Conservative party, which did not tell us how it would pay for the promises it made when it was in government, now has a plan to pay for those promises, I would welcome receiving it in writing, or hearing it here at oral questions or in a statement. The raw reality is that the Conservative party made promises that it had no intention of keeping. We are not going to do that; we will fix the foundations and do what we say. The reason this Government will succeed on growth and business investment in a way that the previous Government did not has to do with the fundamentals: the return to political stability in the UK; an openness to the rest of the world, including the EU—a difficult subject for Conservative Members, I know—which is still our major trading partner; and the willingness of this Government to use their mandate to improve the business and investor environment. Those fundamentals mean that the future of the UK is very promising.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): Steel manufacturing is a vital west midlands industry, but business confidence is being dented by retrospective charging of steel safeguarding duties by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Companies that are affected in my constituency and elsewhere feel that such duties were unfairly and wrongly imposed on them during the chaotic Brexit transition period. They tried to work with the last Government, but got nowhere. Given the importance of the steel sector to British industry, will the Minister work with the Treasury to resolve the issue, and ensure that these vital businesses are protected from hefty bills that they should never have been sent in the first place?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important matter. Given the sums of money involved, I can understand why that is a substantial issue for businesses in her constituency. It relates to the duties that were charged at a time of significant political uncertainty. This is a Treasury issue relating to taxation, but I promise we will get her the meeting she needs, and work with her to ensure that she gets the answers she requests for her constituents.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): There is no clearer pointer on business confidence than the Bank of England's recent survey on employers' responses to the Budget. Some 59% expect lower profit margins;

54% expect to raise prices; 54% expect lower employment; and 38% expect to pay lower wages than they otherwise would have. Now *City AM* reports that Labour has carelessly lost all its business backers. Will the Secretary of State show any contrition, admit that business confidence is through the floor, and start standing up for business, rather than the Treasury?

Jonathan Reynolds: Well, what can I say? Was it the Conservative party that increased corporation tax from 19% to 25% in one Budget, and that crashed business investment and confidence because of the way it mishandled Brexit, failing to prepare for either outcome of a yes/no referendum? And which Opposition Front Benchers played a role in the mini-Budget? Frankly, it was all of them. With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I will not take advice from him. Since the Budget, I have heard repeatedly from Conservative colleagues that they want to lower taxes and increase spending, even though they cannot account for the promises that they made when in government. That is not credible unless they engage with reality, as this Government are doing. Whether it is the response to the Chancellor's speech at Mansion House or finally sorting out Marks & Spencer this week, this Government are getting on with the job and looking to the future.

Greg Smith: Sorry seems to be the hardest word. [*Interruption.*] I am talking about the Government's Budget. Further proof of how low business confidence is getting under this Government was given in evidence to the Employment Rights Bill Committee. Jane Gratton of the British Chamber of Commerce predicted

"a reduced hiring appetite were this legislation to come in, and that"

their members

"would be less likely to recruit new employees due to the risk and difficulty, particularly under the day one rights".—[*Official Report, Employment Rights Public Bill Committee*, 26 November 2024; c. 8, Q2.]

If business confidence is low, employment goes down. We already know that every Labour Government leave unemployment higher than when they took office, but is it not a bit extreme for this Labour Government to legislate for that outcome?

Jonathan Reynolds: If the hon. Gentleman googles that statistic, he will find that it is not actually true, but I appreciate that it is demanding being in opposition, and that there may not always be the capacity and resources required. As we heard on the excellent Second Reading of that legislation, the vast majority of employers in the UK already operate to a higher standard than the level to which the floor is being raised in the Employment Rights Bill. I do not in any way pull back from saying that some of the most vulnerable, insecure and low paid members of our society will benefit from the Bill; that is exactly what it is about. Those people may have given up on politics or think that the mainstream political system will not deliver for them. I reject the claim that certain industries require a supply of labour from jobs that do not give people the security and dignity that they need. This is a set of proportionate, reasonable reforms that will make a difference—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have a list of speakers here. I call Munira Wilson.

Paid Employment Leave: Kinship Carers

4. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): If he will make an assessment with the Secretary of State for Education of the potential merits of introducing a right to paid employment leave for kinship carers. [901769]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): We recognise the vital role that kinship carers play in caring for vulnerable children, and the challenges that many face in balancing that care with employment. We recently announced the largest ever investment in support for kinship carers: £40 million to trial a kinship allowance in up to 10 local authorities. We will also review the parental leave system to ensure that it best supports all working families, and work is already under way to plan for that delivery.

Munira Wilson: I am sure the Minister will agree that kinship carers are unsung heroes, who often step up at a moment's notice to look after a child whose parents cannot, but four in 10 are forced to give up work to do so, which means they often struggle to pay the bills or put food on the table. Will the Minister look to right that wrong through the Employment Rights Bill, and introduce a right to paid employment leave for kinship carers, given the savings to the public purse and the better outcomes for children that arise from kinship care?

Justin Madders: I met a kinship carer in my constituency recently who told me about the challenges the hon. Lady has articulated. The carer said that the most important thing to her was getting respite care—a point that we can all recognise. We are looking at how the trial pans out. I have spoken in detail to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) about the proposals coming forward, but we think it is best to see how the trial works, and to look at the wider review of the parental leave system.

Hospitality Businesses

5. **Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the hospitality sector. [901771]

7. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the hospitality sector. [901773]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Hospitality businesses are at the heart of our communities and are vital for economic growth. The Government are creating a fairer business rates system, reducing alcohol duty on qualifying draught products and reforming the apprenticeship levy to support businesses and boost opportunities. We are addressing strategic issues for the hospitality sector relating to high-street regeneration, skills, sustainability and productivity, and that work will be supported by the publication of the small business strategy Command Paper next year.

Rebecca Paul: In Reigate, Redhill, Banstead and our villages, we have many amazing pubs that contribute hugely to the economy, such as the Garibaldi community pub in Redhill. For those businesses to thrive, reform of the unfair business rates system by 2026 is critical. Will the Minister commit to the proposed 20p reduction to

the small business rate multiplier, which is the absolute minimum reduction needed for the long-term sustainability of the pub sector?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Lady will know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer committed in the recent Budget to a series of reforms to business rates, including permanently lower business rates for hospitality businesses from 2026-27. I welcome the hon. Lady's support for that measure.

Sir John Whittingdale: UK Hospitality has estimated that the Budget measures will increase the cost of employing one employee by £2,500. Shops, pubs and restaurants across my constituency have said that that will lead to higher prices or fewer jobs. Will the Minister at least consider delaying the implementation of the national insurance contribution increase to 2026-27, when the planned realignment of business rates is due to come in?

Gareth Thomas: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will have noticed that in the Budget, the Chancellor more than doubled the employment allowance to £10,500. That will mean that more than a million small businesses, many of them hospitality businesses, will see no increase in their national insurance liabilities next year.

Free Trade Deals: Farmers

6. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of free trade deals on farmers. [901772]

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): Our approach to trade deals considers the impact on and opportunities for the agricultural sector, along with other sectors of the economy, and, of course, our growth mission. The Government will publish impact assessments to aid the ratification process for new free trade agreements.

Dr Chambers: I worked with farmers for many years as a veterinary surgeon, and now I meet them regularly as an MP, so I am aware that farmers in Hampshire and the rest of the country were hugely disappointed when the previous Conservative Government signed trade deals that undermined our high animal welfare standards. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that after future trade deals, British farmers will not have to compete with products produced to lower animal welfare standards—for example, battery hens, or products that involve the indiscriminate use of antibiotics, which is also a public health issue? It is not only vets and farmers who are proud of our high animal welfare standards, but the British public, so will the Minister confirm that he does not want to compromise on those standards?

Mr Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing his considerable expertise in veterinary science to the Chamber today. We will not compromise on animal welfare standards as we take forward our programme of free trade agreements. Although we might well have approached the negotiations that the previous Government undertook in a different manner, reopening them would certainly create uncertainty, which we genuinely

believe would hurt UK business. We are not seeing Australian or New Zealand beef and lamb flood the UK market, and we will continue to monitor trade flows under both those free trade agreements. He makes a very fair and important point about the need to maintain welfare standards.

Small and Medium-sized Businesses

8. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to support small and medium-sized businesses. [901774]

12. **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support small businesses. [901779]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): Small businesses are the beating heart of our high streets and communities, and are essential to our economic success. That is why, on Small Business Saturday, I announced the business growth service, which will ensure that businesses across the UK get quicker and easier support and advice from Government. Further announcements include the disability finance code for entrepreneurship to improve access to capital and tackle inequality for disabled entrepreneurs. A new fair payment code was launched by the Office of the Small Business Commissioner to help address late payments. Next year, as my hon. Friend has said, the small business strategy will be published to create thriving high streets, easier access to finance, open overseas and domestic markets and enhanced business capability.

Alice Macdonald: Small and medium-sized businesses come in many forms, from microbusinesses to community interest companies and co-operatives. Often, co-operative and mutual business models are overlooked. Norwich has a proud history of co-operatives. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that co-operative and mutual business models will be properly included in this Government's much-needed push to support small and medium-sized businesses?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much welcome my hon. Friend's question. My area on the eastern side of Greater Manchester has, like hers, a huge history of co-operatives and mutuals. The diversity in business models that they bring is a huge strength; they bring different things to the market and different ways of doing business. The resilience in co-operative models is particularly attractive. I can assure her that they form part of the Government's wider strategy. Our ambition is to double mutuals' size in the economy. The Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), the small business Minister, is leading on that work, and I would love my hon. Friend and businesses from her area to be involved in it.

Darren Paffey: Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting the winners of my first Small Business Saturday awards in Southampton Itchen. They were Riann Care, The Bunker, Miss Ellie's Café and Julie's Dance Studio. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating them on their role in ensuring a thriving local economy? What assurances he can offer them that this Government have the back of small businesses?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I certainly join him in congratulating those local businesses on their work and, indeed, all Members of Parliament on the work that they do on their constituency days to champion and support local businesses. The Government's agenda includes long-term reform of business rates to create permanently low business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure. The launch of high-street rental auctions, getting rid of derelict property in town centres, is also hugely exciting. The business growth service is predominantly about recognising that although the Government do a lot, businesses can often find it hard to access exactly what they need. I have looked around the world—to the US and its Small Business Administration, and to Singapore and its Enterprise Singapore, for example—to discover the best models. That is what we will take forward in 2025, and I find it a hugely exciting agenda.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Last Saturday was indeed Small Business Saturday. It was an opportunity for us to celebrate and support the many small businesses in our constituencies. However, too many of them are really worried about the increase in national insurance contributions—the £25 billion jobs tax—and there is simply no easy answer for them. They cannot just put up their prices, so they are looking at staffing levels. Why are the Government so against aspiration, and how do they think they will improve productivity and deliver growth in the economy?

Jonathan Reynolds: Conservative Members know what they left behind, and I have not heard any of them offer an alternative. The specific answer to the right hon. Member's question is that employment allowance was doubled in the Budget and the threshold was taken off. That is why 1 million, mainly smaller, businesses are paying less or the same in national insurance contributions as they were before the Budget. She should tell the House how the Conservative party would pay for the infected blood scandal—the victims of which we are all committed to compensating—Post Office compensation, support for the steel industry, and the advanced manufacturing plan that we inherited, because none of that was in our departmental budget. We are fixing the foundations with long-term public investment and an agenda based on higher business investment and better, stronger economic growth in every part of the UK.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Government have raised national insurance charges on employers and introduced a family farm and a family business tax. The Employment Rights Bill will raise business costs by £5 billion, predominantly for small businesses. As a result of those changes, does the Secretary of State believe that SMEs will employ more or fewer people?

Jonathan Reynolds: I have absolutely no doubt that the Government's agenda is one for employment, business investment and growth. Some of the things that this country needs the most could only have been delivered by a change of Government. I simply do not believe that the Conservative party is capable of reforming the planning system or having a long-term industrial strategy, fixing our relationship with the European Union, and all the rest of it. Yes, there have been challenges, but the Conservatives know what they left behind. They knew

what they were doing. There is a reason the Conservative party had no spending plans for the next financial year. We have had to confront that reality, but we cannot have the kind of success that this country needs unless we are willing to fix the foundations and focus on the long term. The Chancellor did that in the Budget, and the agenda of the Department for Business and Trade is extremely attractive for the future.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Some of the most successful small and medium-sized businesses, which truly think long term, are owned by families, so why does the Secretary of State think that it will help his long-term growth mission for the Government to start taxing those businesses when they get passed on to the next generation?

Jonathan Reynolds: With respect, I hear a lot of calls from the Conservatives to cut taxes and increase spending, but still no account of how they would do that. I appreciate that sometimes the initial transfer into opposition can feel exhilarating, but there is a responsibility that comes with it. I would like to see an account from the Conservatives of how they would pay for it.

For all tax changes across the board, we can still say with real confidence that the UK has a competitive tax system—benchmark our corporation tax, and the allowances on it, our capital gains taxes and, in this case, our inheritance taxes. The mistake that the Conservatives make is that they forget that the adjustments to specific reliefs for businesses and agricultural property are on top of the existing inheritance tax thresholds. Frankly, a little less scaremongering from the Opposition and a bit of focus on what is really at stake would be welcome.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): Small businesses are at the heart of our local communities. Firms such as Carbon ThreeSixty in my constituency are cutting-edge manufacturers of carbon fibre products. However, its growth as a small business is seriously affected by its ability to attract and retain quality staff, predominantly because of the poor public transport and completely non-existent cycle routes. These issues cut right across Departments. I would therefore be grateful if the Secretary of State could confirm what discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues in other Departments about how rural transport infrastructure would greatly support small and medium-sized businesses.

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome the hon. Member's question. She is right that some of the issues that most affect businesses in our constituencies often sit in other Departments. The role of my Department is to focus on and champion those issues across all of Government, whether they sit neatly in the Department or not. She correctly highlights the incredible and important role that rural businesses play, and their social as well as economic benefits. Her points about transport were well made. One of the big changes in the Budget was the ability to focus on long-term investments, which was recognised by the Office for Budget Responsibility in its assessment that the productive potential of the UK will grow significantly over the next decade because of that increased

focus—investment, investment, investment. Transport is a great element of that, whether in my constituency or in hers. I assure her that the needs that she articulates are considered at the highest levels of Government.

Chancellor's Mansion House Speech: Funding Plans

9. Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the delivery of the funding plans outlined in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Mansion House speech. [901776]

18. Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the delivery of the funding plans outlined in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Mansion House speech. [901785]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): Growth is the Government's No. 1 mission and, in her Mansion House speech, the Chancellor announced a package of reforms to drive growth and investment across the UK. I have lost count of the number of times I have had conversations with businesses where they talked about how our appetite for risk is not in the right place, and we are looking to reform that. Here in DBT, we are driving change through our new industrial strategy working across Departments, which we will publish in the spring.

Callum Anderson: High-growth companies across Buckingham and Bletchley rely on foreign direct investment for their growth and innovation. Will the Minister set out the steps her Department and the Minister for Investment are taking to ensure that the Office for Investment can attract more foreign private investment to help the high-potential industries in which Britain excels?

Sarah Jones: We have an expanded Office for Investment, which brings together the Department for Business and Trade, No. 10 and the Treasury. Our Investment Minister is working at pace travelling around the world to bring in investment. I met her and the Office for Investment this week, and we are in constant dialogue about how we can bring more foreign direct investment into the country, building on the £63 billion announced at the investment summit, and how we can kick-start the economy after 14 years of failure.

Mr Charters: The Chancellor of the Exchequer mentioned growth over 40 times in her superb Mansion House speech. York, Leeds and beyond will benefit from that. How will my hon. Friend ensure that the industrial strategy delivers for financial services so that we can achieve the growth this country desperately needs?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the UK's world-leading financial services sector. Through the Treasury, we are developing a 10-year financial services strategy and, of course, financial services is one of the pillars of our industry strategy, which we will publish in the spring. We cannot take the UK's status as a global financial centre for granted. In a highly competitive world, we need to earn that status and work to keep it, and that is what we intend to do.

Co-operatives

10. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help increase the size of the co-operative sector. [901777]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): The Government are committed to doubling the size of the mutuals and co-op sector. The creation of Great British Energy will help drive a significant expansion in the number of energy co-operatives, while work to modernise co-op, credit union and mutual law to drive expansion was recently announced by Treasury colleagues. We will work particularly closely with the recently established mutual and co-operative business council on this agenda. We will bring forward further proposals in due course.

Patrick Hurley: Co-operative businesses can be the lifeblood of our towns and communities. In my constituency, I have been working with stakeholders and interested parties to bring about a community co-operative bookshop, following the closure of independent bookshops in Southport in recent years due to the cost of living. May I take this opportunity to encourage new expressions of interest in the bookshop, and to ask the Minister to confirm what more support the Government can provide for our co-operative sector, so that towns like mine can see a thriving high street built around our community?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to underline the positive community impacts that co-operatives, mutual businesses and social enterprises can have not only on our high streets, but in our communities more generally. We recently announced a significant increase in the capital available to the British Business Bank, and that has enabled us to give £150 million of additional support to community banks, or community development finance institutions, as they are officially known. That will help drive more lending to community businesses, potentially including the one he set out, but if there is anything I can do to support the initiative, I would be happy to meet him to discuss it.

Business: Northern Ireland

11. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support businesses in Northern Ireland. [901778]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): Businesses in Northern Ireland, like businesses across the UK, are crying out for stability, open trade and an environment in which we can break down barriers to growth and investment, and that is what the Government are working across the board to deliver. My Department has a team in Belfast to help stay close to businesses in Northern Ireland and to understand what they need. Of course, we also work closely with Invest Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy and other key partners. I have spoken with Northern Ireland businesses during my short time in office, and I am encouraged by their passion and resilience.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Northern Ireland businesses, large and small, received just 0.6% of what the Government spent with UK defence companies between 2018 and

2023, compared with 25% in the south-east of England. As my Committee heard when we visited Northern Ireland last week, Spirit AeroSystems, which works on high-value defence and other aerospace contracts, faces an uncertain future, as half of its 3,600-strong workforce in Belfast wait to find out whether their jobs are safe following Boeing's buy-out of the company and the subsequent takeover by Airbus of only 50% of the work at its site in the city. We all know what happens to supply chains, communities and individuals in these circumstances, so what discussions are Ministers having with Cabinet colleagues, with Airbus, and with other interested parties to safeguard those jobs at Spirit now and to increase Government spend with Northern Ireland defence companies in the future? *[Interruption.]* Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I know it's Christmas, but come on. *[Laughter.]*

Sarah Jones: We love a long question, and it was a good one. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, one that we are all of course concerned about. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met the global chief executive officer of Airbus last week, and I have met representatives of Airbus, Boeing and Spirit AeroSystems and talked about this issue. We care about those jobs and about the future of our defence industry in the UK—it is incredibly important to us for many reasons—so we are doing what we can to make sure there is a good outcome.

Mr Speaker: This will be a good example of a short question. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Challenged already!

In the short time that the Minister has been in her role, she has shown quite clearly that she has a deep interest in Northern Ireland. Defence, light engineering and cyber-security are all vital to jobs and the economy in Northern Ireland, but what assessment has been made of the sustainability and efficiency of Northern Ireland's agrifood sector, and will the Minister commit to promote the productivity of that industry across the United Kingdom and, indeed, across the world? That is as short as I can make it, Mr Speaker.

Hon. Members: More!

Sarah Jones: The agrifood sector is incredibly important—I meet representatives of the sector, and I will do all I can. As always, I am very keen to talk to the hon. Gentleman about what more we as a Government can do to support the sector.

High Streets: Government Support

13. **Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support high streets. [901780]

14. **Sir Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high street businesses. [901781]

16. **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to support high streets. [901783]

19. **Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support high streets. [901786]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Working across government with mayors, local authorities and—crucially—local communities, we are beginning to tackle antisocial behaviour and crime, reforming business rates, working with the banking industry to roll out 350 banking hubs, stamping out late payments, empowering communities to make the most of vacant properties, strengthening the post office network and reforming the apprenticeship levy.

Ms Billington: I welcome the new powers delegated to local authorities, enabling them to tackle the blight of empty shop fronts and rejuvenate our local high streets. This will be particularly welcome in East Thanet, where the Ramsgate empty shops action group has been a powerful advocate for addressing this issue. We have a 24% vacancy rate on Ramsgate high street, so what steps are the Government taking to support and encourage local businesses and community projects to take over those vacant properties?

Gareth Thomas: I commend my hon. Friend on her work with the Ramsgate empty shops action group. Her experience on her high street is sadly echoed up and down the country—under the Conservative party, vacancy rates on our high streets shot up. High street rental auctions, which are the new powers that my hon. Friend alludes to, will help local councils to bring vacant units back into use, working with local communities. That will hopefully help to drive co-operation between landlords and councils and make town centre tenancies more accessible and affordable. We are encouraging local authorities to take advantage of those powers. As I suspect my hon. Friend already knows, colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are looking to do further work in this space.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Oliver Dowden.

Sir Oliver Dowden: Question 14, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, just ask the question. You're grouped.

Sir Oliver Dowden: I did not realise you had grouped them, Mr Speaker. Forgive me—a schoolboy error.

What advice would the Minister give struggling businesses in my constituency who are trying to work out how to absorb Labour's national insurance hike? Would he advise them to increase their prices, to squeeze wages or to cut investment, and can he explain to those businesses how that fits with the Government's promises to increase growth?

Gareth Thomas: I think the best advice I could give to businesses in the right hon. Member's constituency is to never vote Conservative again. His and his party's idea of good economics in Government seems to be to create a huge fiscal hole and leave it to the next Administration to fix it. We are working at pace to try to tackle the difficult economic inheritance that he and his colleagues in Government helped to create. Measures such as the industrial strategy and the decisions we have taken in the Budget—albeit some are difficult—will help to bring

back economic stability to this country. In the long run, that will help businesses in his constituency and, indeed, in constituencies up and down the country.

Baggy Shanker: On Small Business Saturday recently, I had the pleasure of visiting Derby's small businesses of various types, which are the beating heart of our city. However, as our planned city centre regeneration project recognises, empty shops on our high street do not reflect the high-performing, high-technology economy that we are so proud to have in Derby. Building on the new community right to buy, what more can the Department do to ensure that community groups receive the correct business advice and support to use this new right and to breathe new life and vibrancy into our high streets?

Gareth Thomas: I commend my hon. Friend not only for his work recently on Small Business Saturday, but as the leader of Derby council in driving the town centre regeneration work that he mentioned. We are determined to establish a small business growth service to provide better support and information to small businesses so that entrepreneurs in this country can take advantage of new powers to set up small businesses on the high street, perhaps capitalising on the high-tech, high-growth sectors of the economy to which Derby has access, and in that way making sure that we see benefits from the industrial strategy not just for bigger businesses, but for smaller businesses.

Mark Ferguson: My hon. Friend will know from his visit to Gateshead this week some of the fantastic small businesses we have on our high street, but also some of the incredible challenges faced by so many high streets and town centres. With that in mind, will he tell us what the Government are doing on access to finance for small businesses?

Gareth Thomas: Despite the considerable cold, I very much enjoyed my recent visit to Gateshead town centre, and I was impressed by the dynamism of the businesses that he and I met at his instigation in the railway quarter. One of the things we are determined to do is to increase access to finance for small businesses up and down the country. That is why we have provided over £1 billion across this year and next year for the British Business Bank, particularly to drive access to finance for small businesses such as the ones to which he introduced me.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): One of the ingredients for a successful high street is having a post office in the mix. The Government have inherited a network of 11,500 post offices, and that number has been stable since 2010. Will the Minister commit to supporting high streets by maintaining the scale of the post office network in this Parliament?

Gareth Thomas: Yes, we are determined to maintain and, indeed, strengthen the post office network. I suspect that the hon. Member will recognise that we inherited a Post Office with huge problems, which we are working with the new leadership of the Post Office to begin to tackle. We are looking at what new commercial opportunities there may be for the Post Office, and banking appears to be the most significant one. We are also

working with the Post Office to identify some of its infrastructure problems, not least in developing a replacement for the Horizon scheme.

Parental Leave Take-up

15. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of levels of take up of parental leave. [901782]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The parental rights survey 2019 found that 89% of employee mothers took maternity leave and 70% of employee fathers took paternity leave, but take-up of shared parental leave is much lower. In fact, it is disappointingly low, which is why we are committed to a review of the parental leave system. Work is under way to deliver on that, and I will provide an update in due course.

Christine Jardine: I agree with the Minister: it is very disappointing. For many parents, current maternity pay is too low, and the leave system is not flexible enough. A recent report by the BBC said that almost half of new fathers were unaware of what was available to them. The system is skewed, and the take-up is lower among lower earning families. That is particularly important—this was pointed out to me by a constituent in Edinburgh West—for those with multiple births who need not only more time but more financial support during maternity leave. Does the Minister agree that maternity pay levels need to be increased, and that the flexibility of the scheme needs to be improved, as does public awareness?

Justin Madders: The hon. Member makes a number of points, which I am sure we will consider as part of the review we are undertaking. The Employment Rights Bill has a number of important measures to support working families, bringing 1.5 million parents into scope for parental leave and another 32,000 into scope for paternity leave. We are keen to build on that and we want to support families who are in work.

Creative Industries

17. **Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the contribution of creative industries to the economy. [901784]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): The creative industries are a huge force for good in our country. They were responsible for 2.4 million jobs last year, and more than £124 billion for our GDP in 2022. They are one of eight growth sectors in our industrial strategy. We are working closely with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and across Government, to identify what more we can do to draw out even more of the potential growth that Britain's creative businesses can offer.

Tristan Osborne: As we all settle down for Christmas, we will be watching "Mission: Impossible", "James Bond", "Ironclad", and perhaps even "Call the Midwife", which were all filmed in Medway—[*Interruption.*] And also "The Great Escape", which was not filmed in

Medway, unfortunately. How can we make "Mission: Impossible" possible across our country when it comes to new films?

Gareth Thomas: I cannot follow the impressive nature of that question, but I can tell my hon. Friend that in the Budget my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed a new independent film tax credit, which will help to enable the successes that he has alluded to in his constituency and the surrounding area to be spread, potentially, across the country. That will allow more businesses to set up and generate growth and wealth for our country.

Post Office Closures

20. **Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Post Office closures on high streets. [901788]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): No decisions have been taken on the future of any directly managed branches, including in Chester-le-Street in my hon. Friend's constituency. The Post Office continues to work with local communities, and others, to consider how best to meet the need for post office services in a local area. The Government set minimum access criteria to ensure that 99% of the UK population live within 3 miles of a post office, and those Government-set access criteria ensure that, regardless of changes, services remain within reach of all citizens.

Luke Akehurst: The post office in Chester-le-Street has been at the heart of the community in North Durham since 1936, and offers vital services to my constituents. Does the Minister agree that keeping those services accessible is vital to keeping footfall on our high streets and encouraging other businesses to locate themselves there?

Gareth Thomas: I recognise the significance of the post office in my hon. Friend's constituency, as indeed I recognise the significance of post offices in my constituency and across the UK. It is important to maintain access to post office services as they play a crucial role in the high street. That is why we are determined to work with the Post Office to strengthen the network, as I alluded to earlier.

Topical Questions

T1. [901790] **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): It has been a hugely significant six months for the Department for Business and Trade. After our record-breaking international investment summit and our industrial strategy Green Paper publication, my Department has been engaging with businesses big and small to drive growth. Just this week we have helped to land a £500 million train-building deal with Hitachi, securing hundreds of jobs in the north-east—another promise fulfilled from the election campaign. For smaller businesses we are reforming business rates to breathe new life into our high streets, while launching a new fair payment code, tackling late payments to SMEs, and

supporting new high street rental auctions to improve town centres. As we have heard, our brand new business growth service will streamline SME support on everything from finance to exports.

We are also tackling the challenges that we inherited, negotiating a better deal for Tata Steel employees in Port Talbot, while progressing a UK-wide steel strategy. Our Horizon convictions redress scheme shows that we are righting the wrongs of the past for victims of the Post Office scandal. I look forward to working with all hon. Members in the new year, delivering on our plan for change, going for growth, and realising a decade of national renewal. In addition, Mr Speaker, I would like to wish you, all hon. Members, and businesses across the UK a very merry Christmas.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, very kind.

Alex Baker: My constituents still mourn the loss of our M&S outlet in 2015, but we are delighted that Superbowl UK has just opened in Aldershot. These anchor retail and leisure tenants are so vital for our town centres, so what can the Government do to assist communities such as mine to ensure that we can encourage businesses to be the cornerstone and footfall drivers of our town centres?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much agree and welcome the question from my hon. Friend. I certainly recognise that high streets are going through a transition from being primarily retail centres to now having much more of a mix of retail, hospitality and leisure, and I am delighted to hear about Superbowl's investment in Aldershot. I am not nostalgic for a town centre or a high street that has passed; it is about how we do that transition into the future. There is great practice around the country, whether in Aldershot or in Walthamstow, where I was recently, and the Government's agenda is committed to delivering that.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Secretary of State that these are topical questions, and contributions should be short. I come to the shadow Secretary of State for a good example.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): One of the great British innovations is the gift of free trade, lifting billions out of poverty abroad and increasing prosperity at home. Thanks to the Conservatives, this week the UK proudly joined the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, a bloc that includes some of the world's fastest-growing economies, as well as major trading partners and investors, such as Japan and Canada. With the Government having precious little else to show on growth so far, will the Secretary of State update the House on when he expects to conclude free trade deals with the Gulf, with India and with the US?

Jonathan Reynolds: At least we have some things we can agree on there, which is a nice start to the Christmas period. I agree that the UK has always been and must be a champion of free trade in a world where trade issues will be politically significant in 2025. We can work together on that future. We believe that we have progressed the Gulf Co-operation Council trade deal significantly. The shadow Secretary of State will know that there were some problems between the previous

Government and some countries in the GCC, particularly the UAE, where the relationship had unfortunately got into a difficult place. We have repaired that and the talks are going well. It is always a mistake to put a deadline on those, because it can limit our negotiating potential. When it comes to the US, we will see what happens with the President-elect, but I am looking forward to negotiation and discussion about that.

Mr Speaker: Come on, Secretary of State.

Andrew Griffith: The Secretary of State can count on our support to bring those deals forward. It pains me to say it, but as we have heard today, business confidence is at an all-time low, bar the pandemic. Hiring is collapsing and companies are fleeing. Labour has talked growth, but it has delivered decline. The one game changer now would be a US trade deal. Will the Secretary of State urge the Prime Minister to stop obsessing about going backwards into the EU and agree with me at this Christmas time that the best gift for British business would be for the Prime Minister to get on a plane to Washington and talk trade with President Trump?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am afraid that the shadow Secretary of State's analysis is too simplistic. The US is a major trade partner and always will be, but he will know that so is the European Union and another area is our trade with China. The future for the UK is being positioned to get the maximum benefit from all those key markets. The kind of agreement that he puts forward would have major ramifications for British agriculture in particular, and he knows the issues associated with that. We cannot consider one of those trade negotiations without considering the impact on all those key trading relationships. I ask him to consider the issue in a more holistic and complete way.

T2. [901791] **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Further to the successful international investment summit that my right hon. Friend mentioned earlier, which secured £63 billion-worth of investment for the UK, the First Minister of Wales, Eluned Morgan, has recently announced that Wales will hold its own major investment summit next year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this demonstrates the power of two Labour Governments working together in partnership to deliver economic growth for the communities we represent?

Jonathan Reynolds: I might be biased, but I thought that the international investment summit that we held was the best day of this year. That was not just because of the investment and the real tangible jobs that came from it, but because of the clear, simple message that we could put out there: stability, openness and improving the investment environment. I am delighted to hear the news from Wales. Not only will we support that, but I appreciate the strong working relationship we have on such issues as Port Talbot and getting a better deal for that community and the workforce. We have worked hand in glove with the Welsh Labour Government, and it strengthens the things we are able to do together.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): Tomorrow—on Friday the 13th—the EU's general product safety regulation comes into effect. Businesses are telling me that the

additional costs will mean that they can no longer sell to the EU and to Northern Ireland. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that small businesses are supported as the regulation comes into effect?

Justin Madders: As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, the regulation comes into force tomorrow. Actually, it covers things that most businesses are doing already, but we have provided guidance for businesses, including online marketplaces, on how the regulation will apply in Northern Ireland. We will continue to engage with businesses and online marketplaces to ensure that we are supporting them in dealing with this new regulation.

T5. [901795] **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I declare an interest as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on critical minerals. Although Cornwall sits on some of the richest deposits of critical minerals in the world, including tin and lithium in my constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, there are significant geological reserves right across the United Kingdom, including in the north of England, Northern Ireland and the lands of our Celtic cousins in Wales and Scotland. Will the Minister confirm that domestic critical mineral production and processing will form a key part of the Government's industrial strategy?

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome my hon. Friend's question, and I welcomed the time we spent together at South Crofty tin mine, which was also one of my favourite visits of the year. This is a hugely exciting area, and the opportunities for his area are particularly exciting. What we need is an open, transparent trading system where these products will have the certainty of access to markets, which will unlock the ability to use those deposits to our and our allies' mutual interests.

T3. [901792] **Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Farmers in my constituency maintain the highest animal welfare standards. They want reassurance that those will not be undercut by any future UK-US trade deal as they were by some of the deals done by the previous Government. Will the Minister assure me that the mandate and the detail of a trade deal will come to the House before the Government sign it, as many Members on the Government Front Bench agreed when they were in opposition? If not, why not?

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): There is an established process in taking forward the Government's discussions in relation to the mandate. On animal welfare standards, the Secretary of State has already alluded to how there was clearly considerable divergence during the previous attempts to conclude a free trade agreement with the United States. I assure the House that we as a new Government continue to take issues of animal welfare extremely seriously.

T6. [901796] **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): In Norwich, we have many amazing businesses such as the Norwich Glass Company, Café 193 and Great Eastern Model Railways that I visited recently. One of the challenges that they, the Norfolk chamber of commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses have raised is attracting skilled staff. Will the Secretary of State set out how the Government's skills plan will support such businesses to attract the staff they need?

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise what my hon. Friend is saying in her question, which is that skills will be one of the biggest, if not the biggest issue for businesses going forward. Of course, that sits in the Department for Education and we work closely with colleagues on that. We have the creation of Skills England and the reforms to the apprenticeship levy to create the growth and skills levy. Indeed, I think that my CEO call next week—I do those regularly—will be with the Secretary of State for education, where we will discuss this problem. Businesses from her constituency would be welcome to join that.

T4. [901794] **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that creating high-value jobs in science and technology is important. In local business, our local plan gives us the opportunity to build a science and technology park delivering over 5,000 high-value jobs, but we cannot proceed until the Department for Transport releases funds for local highway improvements. Will the Secretary of State press the Secretary of State for Transport to take action so that work can progress and we can deliver jobs and growth in Mid Sussex?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Member's question is perhaps more for the Secretary of State for Transport, but she skilfully put that to me. I assure her that I will work with the Secretary of State for Transport to do that. How we assemble investment sites is a huge issue, and how we can work better across Government with local partners is also a key issue for us.

T7. [901797] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Last week, research published by Sage showed that 84% of small businesses in the north-east plan to increase their investment in technology next year. As the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee launches its inquiry into innovation, growth and the regions, how will the Business Secretary ensure that the industrial strategy boosts adoption of technology—particularly British-developed technology—to boost growth across all our regions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): My hon. Friend will be aware that the Chancellor of the Exchequer recently announced £20.4 billion in investment for research and development for the next year, which will help to drive even more of the type of technological investment that she rightly champions. We are also working with small businesses to encourage them to adopt more digital technologies through the digital adoption taskforce.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Businesses in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton are at the sharp end of the Bank of England's business confidence survey. Unlike the Chancellor and the Secretary of State, they know that her Budget and the Employment Rights Bill are a recipe for higher prices, higher inflation, higher interest rates and higher unemployment. Is that the growth that the Secretary of State had in mind?

Jonathan Reynolds: We have had seven or eight of the same question from the Opposition Benches, and not a single answer to how they would pay for the promises that they make. We are getting on with fixing the

foundations, looking to the future and improving the business environment across the board. That is why businesses in the hon. Lady's area and mine should look to 2025 with real confidence.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British buses. The Secretary of State will be aware of the consultation on 160 jobs at Alexander Dennis in my constituency. In September, it cited an increasingly unlevel playing field over a number of years for domestic bus manufacturers. That shows the requirement for a clear industrial strategy. What assurances can the Minister give me, as part of implementing the industrial strategy, that the Labour Government are working to level the playing field for domestic manufacturers?

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise the issue and I welcome my hon. Friend's raising it at the annual dinner of the Society for Motor Manufacturers and Traders. It matters to this Government that we make these products in the UK. There have been specific procurement issues, mainly with local areas. I promise him the meeting that he needs to take that forward, but I assure him that the industrial strategy will cover this issue.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): My constituent Kirsty is self-employed and is looking to adopt a child, but she does not qualify for adoption leave or adoption pay and, because she is not having her child biologically, she does not qualify for maternity allowance. Would the Government support changing that, whether through the Employment Rights Bill or otherwise, so that brilliant future parents are not put off from adopting because they cannot afford it?

Justin Madders: That is an interesting question. There is a great interplay with rights for self-employed people. We are committing to a review on that in due course, together with a wider look at the parental leave system. We will get back to the hon. Lady on that.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I welcome this Government's commitment to getting more disposable income in the pockets of working people. At Christmas time a lot of people will want to buy concert tickets; what conversations is the Minister having with Cabinet colleagues on reforming the secondary ticketing market?

Justin Madders: Hopefully, we will make an announcement very shortly about plans in that area.

Business of the House

10.32 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 16 December includes:

MONDAY 16 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Water (Special Measures) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 17 DECEMBER—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 18 DECEMBER—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill [*Lords*], followed by Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 19 DECEMBER—General debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Christmas recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 19 December and return on Monday 6 January 2025.

The provisional business for the week commencing 6 January will include:

MONDAY 6 JANUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Further business will be announced in the usual way.

Jesse Norman: What a marvellous time of year it is when I see the Christmas tree in New Palace Yard, and the trilling sounds of the parliamentary and Salvation Army choirs to boot. On a slightly more sober note, you will recall, Mr Speaker, that the story of this Government so far has been one of early scandal, a first reset and a delayed Budget, and now what we can expect to be a delayed spending review. We must hope that at some point the Government will get round to actually making policy.

I am afraid that this week has brought further confirmation of the disastrous effects of the November Budget. As Members will recall, the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicted at the time that the rise in national insurance would hit lower-wage and more labour-intensive parts of the economy hardest, and predicted that the Chancellor may need to raise taxes again soon. The Chancellor's reaction, as she told the CBI, was:

"I'm really clear, I'm not coming back with more borrowing or more taxes."

We will see how long that promise lasts. Only this week, the *Financial Times* reported that hiring has fallen more sharply in the UK than in other major economies over the past year, including the US, France, Germany, Canada and Australia.

Luckily, however, we now have the Government's new plan for change. I think the whole House should welcome the fact that the Government now have a plan, only

14 years and seven months after they first started in opposition, and that their plan is to change direction. I would describe the plan for change as a fine, fat Herefordshire beef cow that has been inadequately fed with the Reform party's favourite anti-methane feed supplement, Bovaer: it is a beast full of nutrition, but with a certain amount of unnecessary flatulence. A lot of media commentators have had fun with the Government's blizzard of to-do lists, including their six first steps, six milestones, five national missions and three foundations, but I am afraid that they have missed the Christmas spirit of the thing—all we need now are policy announcements on turtle doves and partridges in pear trees to complete their new initiatives advent calendar.

I jest, Mr Speaker. I come not to bury Caesar, but to praise him. I am not going to indulge in the easy mockery of the commentariat: on the contrary, I can report genuine signs of reality breaking through in the plan for change—something rarely seen in a document from this Government. The Prime Minister says:

"In 2010, the incoming government inherited public finances in desperate need of repair."

He is absolutely right: public finances in 2010 were in desperate need of repair. He also says that we need

"a profound cultural shift away from a declinist mentality, which has become...comfortable with failure",

and again, I think he is absolutely right. Finally, and most notably, he says that

"we cannot tax our way to prosperity or spend our way to better public services."

Not only that, but the Government have sensibly dropped their commitment to 100% clean energy by 2030, as Conservative Members have called for, and as I specifically highlighted only a couple of weeks ago.

The plan for change is a revolutionary gospel indeed: honest about the poor performance of the previous Labour Government, realistic in not seeking to blame Governments for wider global events, seeking to adopt a longer-term approach and recognising the need to limit tax and spending. All we can hope now is that someone spreads this revolutionary gospel, in the Christmas spirit, to the rest of the Government.

But I also have various concerns about the plan for change that I would like to put to the House. It barely mentions the crucial short-term issue—and long-term issue—of defence, highlighted once again this week by events in Syria, or the vital long-term issue of social care, which all parties concede has been inadequately handled over the past 30 years. These are extraordinary omissions in what purports to be an inclusive, long-term reset for the Government.

There are more fundamental questions to be addressed, too. The idea of a mission is a fashionable one in policy circles, but it implies a total commitment to the goal. How will that be reconciled with the obligation of the civil service, and the Prime Minister's new efficiency tsar, to demonstrate short-term value for money? How will all this be reconciled with the Government's intense desire to campaign aggressively against those they see as their political enemies, rather than recruiting them soberly to a political consensus that could provide a sustainable basis for these missions? I would be very interested to know what the Leader of the House thinks on these issues, and how they will shape her approach to the conduct of future business in this House.

Lucy Powell: May I start by saying how appalled I am—I am sure the whole House is—about the details that have emerged on the murder of Sara Sharif? May I say, on behalf of the Government, that nothing is more important than keeping children safe? We are committed to further reform of children's social care and much stronger safeguards for children being taken into home education. That is long overdue and further details will be announced imminently.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the new Chair of the Liaison Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier). I know the Prime Minister is very much looking forward to his regular appearances before it. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) on his appointment as the UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I am sure he is looking forward to his very frequent and very regular meetings with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I also remind the House that the Modernisation Committee's call for views ends next Monday. We have had huge interest in this agenda from Members old and new. I encourage everyone to submit their ideas.

I thought we might have had a little bit more Christmas cheer from the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), but it was another rather strange and confused contribution. Perhaps he can work on his Christmas jokes a bit more ahead of next week's business questions.

Let me share some merry news instead, Mr Speaker. We are making the big changes that people voted for: rebuilding Britain and fixing the mess that the Conservatives left us; reshaping the state and society to put ordinary people at the front of the queue. Over half our King's Speech programme is progressing through Parliament: the biggest change for workers in a generation, giving security and dignity at work; putting powers back in the hands of renters so that they can get the secure, quality tenancies they deserve; switching on Great British Energy for lower bills and energy security; bringing rail services back into public ownership, already delivering better reliability; taking on water bosses to clean up our waterways; and reforming our planning laws to build more affordable homes. The right hon. Gentleman does not like it, but nobody can deny that these are the big necessary changes in the service of ordinary people, rooted in our values.

And yes, we have a plan for change—the right hon. Gentleman asked about it—and we are delivering it. The country voted for change: they voted to change from the Conservatives' government and record; they voted to improve their living standards; they voted to change the NHS; and they voted because they wanted this country to be fixed. He raises defence and social care spending. Perhaps that is his best Christmas joke so far, because the Conservatives' record on that is woeful. We will not take any lectures from them on that, I am afraid.

The truth is that we are six weeks into the new Leader of the Opposition's tenure and the Conservatives' strategy for opposition is as clear as mud. They seem to have learnt nothing. They have no new ideas. They disown their record one day and defend it the next. Perhaps instead of the right hon. Gentleman's ridiculous tired commentary, they could reflect and apologise for the mess they left, and ensure that the country gets the change it deserves.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House rightly mentioned a live case. I hope nobody will add to that, because it is in the courts at the moment.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Next year, Bradford district will take on the honour of city of culture. My constituency will be hosting events celebrating local artists and our industrial heritage. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Bradford 2025 well, and will she consider granting time for a debate on the contribution of northern cities to our British culture?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Bradford as the city of culture. She is absolutely right to point out how much of our British culture is rooted in our northern cities like Bradford, Manchester and others—Chorley and elsewhere, Mr Speaker. I am sure that will make a great topic for a debate.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): This week the Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned us that local authorities' special educational needs and disabilities deficit is currently £3.3 billion, and that without proper reform it could rise to £8 billion within three years. It is clear that, even with the deficit at £3.3 billion, the Government's Budget announcement of £1 billion is less than a third of what local authorities need for SEND just to allow them to stand still. Meanwhile, according to analysis by Special Needs Jungle, the £740 million of capital funding announced recently is less than the average amount of similar funding over the last three years—and besides, it is capital funding, which means buildings and equipment. I am not saying that the money is not welcome, but what is the point of having more classrooms if we do not have the teachers, teaching assistants and support staff to fill them?

Online reports suggest that the Education Secretary told teaching unions this week that schools would have to find money for their underwhelming 2.8% pay increase from efficiency savings in existing budgets. She suggested, I understand—I am checking my notes, because it seems a little optimistic—that schools could pay for it by switching their bank and energy providers. Will the Leader of the House ask the Education Secretary to come to the House as a matter of urgency to lay out her plans for education and special educational needs? Nothing that the Government have announced so far is going to make things better, and there are children's lives at stake.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue of special educational needs. She is entirely right: the crisis that was left in SEND support in our schools was appalling—it was one of the terrible legacies of the Conservative Government—and demand is higher than ever. This is one of the big issues facing the education sector, which is why in the Budget, as the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, we announced an extra £1 billion for SEND, the biggest uplift that it has received for many years. Of course, that will not solve all the problems overnight; it is a down payment on the work that we will do, and are already doing, to reform SEND and get the resources in, which is vital to our education sector.

[Lucy Powell]

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of teachers' pay. I am proud that one of this Government's first acts was to agree to the independent pay review body's recommendation of the pay rise that they had long deserved, and we will continue to support our education sector in respect of all its needs.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): This week some year 8 students from Ark Blake academy, in my constituency, wrote to me raising concerns about food security both globally and locally. They highlighted the impact of conflict on access to food, the unacceptable increase in the number of food banks in our country, and the shocking rise in the number of children skipping lunch because their family cannot afford it. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on what the Government can do to improve access to food both here and at home, and will she join me in thanking the pupils from Ark Blake for raising these important issues?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating those pupils on raising the issue of food poverty, especially at a time of year when the people's needs in relation to both food and presents—Christmas poverty—are so stark. We all see that in our constituencies. I am sure that this would make a very good topic for a debate, and I expect we will shortly hear from the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee!

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Your wish is my command.

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, on Tuesday 7 January, with your permission, Mr Speaker, there will be a debate in Westminster Hall on pay gaps in the workplace, and on Thursday 9 January, provided that that date is provided for us, there will be two debates, one on seizing frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine, and the other on the impact of food and diet on obesity—which will be quite appropriate after the Christmas festivities. May I urge colleagues who wish to participate in the pre-recess Adjournment debate next week to apply to you, Mr Speaker, to be put on the speakers list so that we know how many people are likely to want to speak?

Two years ago, on a cross-party basis, it was agreed to abolish the Vagrancy Act 1824. The only thing that was not provided was a commencement date. What is needed now is either a statutory instrument or further primary legislation to remove the Act from the statute book once and for all. There appears to be a dispute between the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which neither seems able to resolve. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made on when such legislation will be introduced, so that those who are homeless on our streets will not face being arrested but instead will be assisted?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for announcing some of the forthcoming debates. After Christmas, I will probably very much need to attend the obesity debate—I do a mean Christmas gravy, which I am already looking forward to.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the important matter of a commencement provision for the repeal of the Vagrancy Act. He has done so much to bring about the changes that are needed, and I commend him for all his work. I will ensure that the Department has heard his question, and that an update is given to him and the House at the earliest opportunity.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Given the widespread revulsion at the violent crackdown on peaceful protesters in Georgia, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on that matter? Imedi TV, the main propaganda arm of that brutal Government, operates and is directed from the UK through a company called Hunnewell Partners, so in such a debate we might be able to discuss whether it is time for a National Crime Agency investigation into those operations and the direction from this country of pro-Russian propaganda and incitement to violence against peaceful protesters.

Lucy Powell: The Government continue to call on the Georgian Government to halt their move away from democratic norms and their isolation from western partners, and we continue to condemn the excessive use of force against protesters and journalists. My hon. Friend mentions the important issue of holding companies operating in that area. I think I heard the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), highlight a debate that might be a good opportunity for my hon. Friend to raise that matter.

Mr Speaker: Just to inform the House, we may have until only 11.30 am for this business, so let us all help each other to get in. I call Martin Vickers, who will set a good example.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. During the last Parliament, I initiated a Westminster Hall debate about the growing evidence that bright LED lights on vehicles were resulting in more road traffic accidents. I know that the Leader of the House might tell me that I can initiate yet another debate, but it would be even better if she arranged for a Minister to make a statement about the evidence that the Department for Transport is collecting on that matter.

Lucy Powell: The impact of LED lights in road traffic accidents is an important issue. I will indeed ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a full response from a Minister, or that a Minister comes to the House.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Labour committed in our manifesto to phasing out animal testing—a goal that is not only widely supported by the public, but critical to advancing scientific innovation. However, that achievement requires cross-departmental work. Will the Leader of the House allow time to debate that issue so that Parliament can explore how to turn that commitment into concrete action, and will she join me in hoping for a cruelty-free Christmas?

Lucy Powell: I do join my hon. Friend in hoping for a cruelty-free Christmas. She raises important issues on which we have a number of manifesto commitments. She will know that they are not currently in the legislative

programme for this Session, but I am aware of the strength of feeling, and I am sure that things will be brought forward in the usual way.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Last week, the Government stated that they would move away from SEND safety valve agreements, which have seen many local authorities across the country enter short-term funding deals with the Department for Education. Although that is welcome news, it has left those in existing arrangements—including my local authority, South Gloucestershire council—worrying about the future. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time about the nature of the changes and ensuring that existing arrangements are fair, and to discuss how to provide all children with special educational needs and disabilities the quality education that they deserve?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises yet another important issue. The Government are trying to ensure that we have early intervention, and that the power to take action on that is in the hands of local authorities and others. We will introduce the children's wellbeing Bill imminently, to tackle some of those issues at their core.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): Small businesses are at the heart of our local economies, and they are crucial to our ambition to deliver sustained growth. Last weekend, it was great to meet so many inspiring small businesses in Rossendale and Darwen during Small Business Weekend.

I was also privileged to attend the Rossendale business awards, which was a great celebration of entrepreneurial and community spirit. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the business award winners? Bear with me, as there were quite a few: Bacup Museum, Baha Accessories, D.O.G. Grooming, The Chubby Duck, Rossendale Radio, Carvansons, SolvAssist, Kelsea Bennett, Be You Lifestyle, Design Hut, Whitworth leisure centre, Olive Branch, The Ashcroft, Dansworks, Unscripted—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are not meant to name a full list of different businesses. In fairness, I think the Leader of the House has had a real flavour of the importance of Rossendale and Darwen.

Lucy Powell: I am very well aware of how important small businesses are in Rossendale and Darwen. Over the years, I have enjoyed many a nice cup of tea and cake in Rossendale and Darwen, and I thought my hon. Friend was going to invite me. I am sure I will have one soon.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Leader of the House may not be aware of this, but Vodafone franchises across the country, including in my constituency, have launched a High Court action because the company has cut remuneration without notice and with no justification, despite benefiting from Government payments during the pandemic to support struggling franchises. Can we therefore have a debate on how these soulless, heartless corporate businesses are costing livelihoods, oblivious of the consequences? These struggling franchises will close, and the workers will be sacked.

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about the case in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, and I am glad that he has taken the opportunity to raise it on the Floor of the House. He will know this Government are committed to taking on the vested interests in this country and putting ordinary people and communities back at the front of the queue, but I will ensure that he gets a proper reply.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): On Friday, I had the joy of visiting a couple of local organisations: the Southend business partnership and the Southend art collective. What is apparent from these meetings is the will and the talent in Southend East and Rochford to reanimate the city. However, like many constituencies, we struggle with the loss of grassroots sport, music venues, leisure facilities and high street shops. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the hard work of both collectives and grant a debate on the importance of extracurricular activities in low socio-economic areas?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. He is right to highlight the importance of grassroots sport, culture and others to our local communities and high streets. He will be aware that we have a curriculum review at the moment. We are also ensuring there is funding for grassroots sport in England, and he might want to note that the Government's plans for devolution and supporting our high streets will be announced imminently to this House.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Both the Scotland Office and the Northern Ireland Office tell me that the Northern Ireland enhanced investment zone is still alive and still in play, and has not fallen into the fictitious £22 billion black hole. However, there is no indication of when it will actually be delivered. Given the multiple agencies involved, could we have some clarity on this? And can we address the policy of "devolve and forget" operated by this Government, which is so damaging to both Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman might want to raise this matter at Northern Ireland questions when we return. In the meantime, I will ensure that Ministers have heard his question.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Queensway Gateway in my constituency is known as the "road to nowhere" because it has been left unfinished for over a decade, so my constituents in Hastings and Rye were delighted that the Labour Government confirmed more than £2.5 million to finish the road. However, Conservative-run East Sussex county council has let the works overrun for months and months, leaving residents and businesses stuck in delays. Local businesses have lost millions. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on East Sussex county council to get the road finished?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises an important matter for her constituency, and I join her in encouraging the council to get on with making sure that the road to nowhere finally goes somewhere.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): There is a Dunkelflaute across the UK and the whole of Europe, meaning there is no wind and therefore reduced power generation. That highlights the importance of alternative energy sources, such as nuclear. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero to update the House on the expansion programme for small modular reactors, to ensure we have alternative power sources?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that nuclear will play an important part in our ambition to be a clean energy superpower by 2030, a target I am sure he will join me in welcoming. I assure him that he will have the opportunity to question the Secretary of State on this matter very soon.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): During UK Parliament Week, I met students at the Orchards education health and needs unit in Leadgate in my constituency, which focuses on the emotional and educational needs of key stage 4 pupils. They told me their concerns about long waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services, and other mental health support services, to address the needs of young people and allow them to do well in their exams. They feel lucky to have focused support, but would like it to be available to other people. They have asked me to ask if we can have a debate in Government time to explore urgent and strategic action to ensure that the mental health needs of all young people are met.

Lucy Powell: I really enjoy hearing about Members' visits during Parliament Week; I know you had many such visits, Mr Speaker. I was on "Newsround" this week talking about Parliament Week—I have never had more cut-through. My hon. Friend raises important issues about CAMHS and mental health support for our young people. We are committed to getting more mental health support into our schools, and I will ensure the topic is considered for debate.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I have recently noticed an increase in case work from pensioners about accessing the west midlands pension fund, a pension scheme that appears to be run jointly by local government and the Department for Work and Pensions, administered by City of Wolverhampton council. Will the Leader of the House assist me in trying to get Government Departments to come together to unlock what is becoming a very slow process that is affecting people from a number of constituencies in the west midlands?

Lucy Powell: I am happy to look into that issue for the right hon. Lady. As she knows, we have had a big drive to ensure that pensioners who are eligible for pension credit get it. We have also put extra resources into the household support fund budget for local authorities. She highlights an issue about Departments working together better to ensure that support gets to those who need it most, and I will take up her question.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Today, the integrated care board in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland is due to consider a paper on the removal of prescription support for people who require gluten-free products because they are coeliac. That would mean

people in North West Leicestershire, as well as the wider Leicestershire area, will no longer have prescription services for those products from January next year. Around 50% of trusts in England are now in that position. I personally know how expensive it is to manage a restricted diet, and while gluten-free products are becoming more widely available, they are still extraordinarily expensive. Will the Leader of the House offer Government time to discuss the prescription postcode lottery for people who are coeliac?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. As she knows, the national prescribing position in England remains that gluten-free bread and mixes are provided to everybody who requires them, but, as she says, the local integrated care boards are now responsible for arranging provision in their areas. I will ensure that the Health Secretary has heard her question and gives her a full reply.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Dalton Mills in Keighley, which has previously been the film set for "Peaky Blinders" and the like, has unfortunately experienced continual arson attacks. The most damaging fire was back in March 2022, when £15 million of damage was caused, and the most recent arson attack happened only two days ago. The situation is causing deep concern to many constituents across Keighley because the site, which is owned by the Crown Estate, is dangerous and derelict, and needs to be secured. Can we have a debate in Government time on the responsibility of landowners, including the Crown Estate, to ensure that derelict sites that are dangerous are properly secured?

Lucy Powell: The situation the hon. Gentleman describes with the film set in Keighley is deeply concerning; I will ensure that he gets a full reply about it. The Crown Estates Bill will shortly be coming back to the House, so there may be an opportunity for him to raise the issue during its passage.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Dementia is the leading cause of death in the United Kingdom. In my constituency of Wolverhampton West, it is estimated that nearly 30% of dementia cases are undiagnosed. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate to give dementia the political priority it deserves, so that there is earlier diagnosis, with timely social, medical and nursing care for sufferers, as well as mental health and other support for carers, and so that positive steps are taken to find a cure for dementia?

Lucy Powell: We can all relate to my hon. Friend's question on the blight of dementia and the suffering of those who have it and of their families. The Government are committed to tackling those issues. The matter has been raised in business questions a number of times, so I am sure it would make a popular Backbench Business debate were he to apply for one.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Trains between Rose Hill Marple and Manchester Piccadilly are timetabled to run every 30 minutes in the morning, yet this morning, only one made it between 7 o'clock and 9 o'clock and it had only two carriages. Such a lack of service is not unusual; it happens once or twice a week. Since the breakdown of discussions between the conductors and

the already nationalised Northern, there have been no services on a Sunday. That is massively impacting my constituents, who are having to reject job offers because they cannot have faith that they will get to work on time. Will the Leader of the House allocate some Government time for a debate about services on the Hope Valley line?

Lucy Powell: I am all too well aware of the challenges on the Northern network that the hon. Lady describes and the issues on Sundays and with cancellations and capacity. I know that there are ongoing discussions and that this is at the top of the agenda for the Secretary of State for Transport. I will ensure that she comes to the House as soon as she has any further information to share.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sussex Circus Fish Bar in Chaddesden for its 50 years of frying, and its owner Ronnie, who was two weeks old when his parents opened it? With one in seven of us choosing to have fish and chips for Christmas dinner, a debate on the enduring contribution of chippies to our national culture and cuisine and as a focal point in our communities would be timely, allowing us to discuss how we can support and thank those high street food business that serve us at this time of year.

Mr Speaker: They'll be cold at this rate.

Lucy Powell: I think we can agree that we are all a bit partial to some lovely fish and chips. Ronnie's Sussex Circus Fish Bar sounds like one place we should all be visiting. I congratulate them as well. My hon. Friend might want to raise the issues she mentions in the Adjournment debate next Thursday, which is a great opportunity for people to raise issues to do with Christmas, and I am sure we will have good attendance. Invitations to local eateries are always welcome.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am sure that the Leader of the House will agree that we should always acknowledge and congratulate Great British sporting success stories and that every Member was glued to their television on Sunday to watch McLaren secure its first constructors' championship since 1998. Will she join me in congratulating McLaren, that Great British icon, on its success? Also, to make up for the apparent lack of acknowledgment from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, can we have a debate on the value of motorsport to the British economy?

Lucy Powell: I would rather not talk about sport today, as a Manchester City fan. Anyway, I certainly join the hon. Member in congratulating McLaren. My son is a big Formula 1 fan and has all the McLaren gear, so it does not go unnoticed in my house. McLaren is a Great British icon and on behalf of the Government, I congratulate it.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): Last week, the University of Northampton published its economic impact assessment, which showed that for every £1 of income it receives, it generates £4 in my local economy, and that 54% of graduates entered full-time jobs in the

health and education sectors, compared with 38% nationally. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the importance of universities such as mine to local economies? Will she also make Government time to support fair funding for universities, such as the University of Northampton?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the University of Northampton. It sounds like it has a strong track record. He will know that we have inherited a really difficult situation when it comes to higher education funding in this country, but the Secretary of State for Education is focused on that matter and I know that she will keep the House updated on her plans.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate so that we can pay tribute to our young sporting heroes? I am sure that all Members have many examples, but 22-year-old cyclist Oscar Onley from Kelso was recently awarded the title of male rider of the year by Scottish Cycling after becoming the first Scottish-developed rider to start the Tour de France for 31 years. Will she take this opportunity to congratulate Oscar on behalf of us all?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I join the hon. Member in congratulating Oscar on his fantastic achievement. Oscar was really breaking some ground there—cycling in the Tour de France as a Scottish-developed cyclist.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Pippa, Britain's first ever illegal vape sniffer dog, won a special hero award this week from the Chartered Trading Standards Institute. Springer spaniel Pippa was honoured along with Rochdale trading standards and police for their work seizing vapes targeted at children by organised crime groups. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Pippa and the Rochdale team on their dogged detective work?

Lucy Powell: Now that is a good Christmas joke! That's how to tell 'em, I say. I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Pippa on her very paws-itive work. [HON. MEMBERS: "Urgh".] Never mind. Perhaps the team want to come to Manchester Central to clear up some of the vapes we have there.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In Sawtry, in my constituency of Huntingdon, Freda and John Grace have created a Christmas display at their home to rival the bright lights of Regent Street. They have overcome the damage from Storm Bert, rebuilt the display and opened their home for all to enjoy, raising £267 on opening night alone. The lights will be on every afternoon until 9 pm, until 1 January, should anybody wish to look at them—I am looking here at the hon. Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes), if he should find himself passing by. Will the Leader of House join me in congratulating Freda and John on their fantastic effort to raise money for charity and to spread some Christmas cheer? Can she make time in the parliamentary schedule to celebrate fundraisers in all our constituencies, especially during this Christmas period?

Lucy Powell: May I join the hon. Member in congratulating and thanking Freda and John for their very generous activities and all their fundraising work?

[Lucy Powell]

He is absolutely right that we should all come together as often as we can in this House to congratulate and celebrate our constituents for the great work that they do.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): On Saturday, I will be going to the Newmarket Street winter festival in Ayr in my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. Music, food and dancing will help us get into the Christmas spirit, and it will also allow me to sort out my shopping. Although my right hon. Friend is welcome to join me, I appreciate that the journey to Scotland, and possibly the weather, may make her feel like she is going to the North Pole. However, will she join me in welcoming festive events such as this and supporting small businesses, and will she find time for a debate on supporting our high streets?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating those involved in Newmarket Street's winter festival, which sounds like a really great place to get some last-minute Christmas shopping. I am very behind on mine this year, so perhaps it would be quicker for me to go up to Scotland to do it.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Many of my constituents in Bridgwater are worried about the risk that flooding poses to their homes, businesses and farms. They are concerned that the Environment Agency fails to adequately dredge our rivers and maintain our streams and brooks, rhynes and culverts. Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the Environment Agency and flood prevention?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for that question. Obviously, this is a growing issue, as we see the effects of climate change in many of our communities. He will know that the Government's floods resilience taskforce is at work trying to co-ordinate many of these issues. We have been forthcoming with statements and updates to the House on our flood resilience, and I will ensure that that remains the case.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the recent opening of two permanent banking hubs in my constituency—one in Horwich and one in Westhoughton—both of which I had the immense pleasure of opening? Will she join me in thanking the hard-working staff, including Jackie, Rabina and Ghulum in Horwich and Siraj in Westhoughton who provide a vital service to communities and businesses across the Bolton West constituency?

Lucy Powell: It is a refreshing change in these sessions to hear about a banking hub opening and providing greater access to cash in a local community, such as that in his constituency, instead of hearing about its closure. I very much join my hon. Friend in congratulating and thanking the hard-working staff involved.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I would very much like to congratulate the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary on their decision to appoint a new special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. The right hon. Lady knows that, after numerous attempts, we finally have one—the hon. Member for North Northumberland

(David Smith). However, can she outline the specific objectives and expected outcomes of this appointment, whether the position is enshrined in law and how the position will contribute to advancing the Government's priorities on both a national and international level? I am ever mindful of Proverbs 31: 8-9:

“Open your mouth for the voiceless, for the rights of all who are destitute.

Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

I know that the hon. Member for North Northumberland will do just that.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) as the UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I am only sorry that it was not the hon. Gentleman himself, but I know that he will play a keen and active role in ensuring that my hon. Friend carries out his advocacy role properly, and that the many issues that the hon. Gentleman raises in this House, week after week, are taken up by the Government.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Since the closure of the *Harlow Star* in 2019, Harlow has not had a town-wide print newspaper, although the online platform *Your Harlow* has a number of articles that go out town-wide. May I ask for a debate in Government time about the future of print media and, in particular, the requirement in legislation for planning applications to be published in print media, rather than on online platforms.

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in noting the importance of this matter. Local print newspapers, as well as online media, are vital to sharing factual, correct information about what is happening in our communities in an age of social media, misinformation and disinformation, which we have seen time and again recently. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is very committed to these issues, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend and the House are updated.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Rural communities often feel neglected when it comes to crime. House of Commons Library research shows a 32% rise in rural crime since 2011, compared with 24% in urban areas. That includes 130,000 more reported offences, and 30,000 additional cases of criminal damage and arson. Those figures highlight—[Interruption.] I will come to the question, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope so.

Paul Davies: May I ask the Leader of the House for a debate on rural crime in Government time?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important topic. Tackling rural crime is really important to the Government, and we are committed to safeguarding our rural communities. Were he to apply for a debate on the subject, I think it would be very popular.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will share my concern about the evidence presented today in Imperial College's national

patient safety report. For the first time in 10 years, more women are dying during or shortly after pregnancy, and more babies are dying within 28 days of being born. This is a particular concern in East Thanet, where our maternity services had to be taken into special measures only a few years ago. Will she ask her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to present a plan to the House for addressing this worrying situation?

Lucy Powell: Like my hon. Friend, I was shocked to hear those statistics this morning. What a damning indictment it is of our healthcare system that more children are now dying at a young age than have done in recent times. I will certainly ensure that the Health Secretary has heard her question, and that she is given a full response.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Peterborough lido is one of the jewels in the crown of our city. Just two years ago, we had a hydrotherapy pool and an indoor pool as well as the lido, but due to the reckless behaviour of the previous Conservative Administration, the hydrotherapy pool was bulldozed and the indoor pool was closed. The lido will be at risk in future years. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Government recognise the vital role of swimming for leisure, sport and wellbeing, and join me in congratulating the thousands of residents, including me, who are rallying to keep our lido safe?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in noting the importance of indoor and outdoor pools, and of swimming generally, to a healthy society and to our agenda for preventive public health. It is vital that we keep local lidos such as his alive. He will have a strong ally in the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, who is partial to an outdoor swim.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): An investor in my constituency is interested in regenerating a site, which would create jobs and growth in a community that really needs it, but the owner of the site seems unwilling to engage with the local authority or my office, which has contacted them seven times since August. What avenues can I take, through Parliament, to bring the organisation to the table and get the project off the ground?

Lucy Powell: I am always sorry to hear of local investors, businesses or other agencies in constituencies that will not engage with a Member of Parliament. My hon. Friend has mentioned them in Parliament today, and I hope that will make them more forthcoming in response to his request for a meeting.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I am frequently contacted by biodiversity, nature and climate groups across my Hexham constituency that are encouraged by our commitment to climate, nature and biodiversity. They are concerned, though, about the timescale for the Government's ratification of the global oceans treaty. Will the Leader of the House give some clarity on the timeline?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend will know that the Government are committed to the global oceans treaty, and we are an international leader on climate and

nature. The Foreign Secretary is committed to ensuring that we ratify the treaty, and I will ensure that an update is given to the House in due course.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Parties with Members elected to this place should uphold the British values of tolerance and respect, but many constituents have contacted me to express alarm about the way that local officers of the Reform party in County Durham are harassing and smearing local charities and town councillors, and are using their social media platforms to promote hatred, Islamophobia and misogyny. No other party in this place would accept such behaviour; they would chuck those people out and ensure that they do not stand as candidates. Could the Leader of the House advise me on what we can do to ensure increased civility in public life?

Lucy Powell: I am incredibly sorry and disappointed to hear of the harassment being perpetrated against elected officials in my hon. Friend's constituency, and the whole House will have heard his calls. I hope the leadership of Reform and other parties that may be carrying out such harassment will hear his question and take action against those thugs, because we need to defend democracy and our elected representatives at all costs.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I do not know if the Leader of the House has been caught up in the wild swimming trend, which we in the Western Isles just call "swimming in the sea". One of my constituents has taken that to the limit: Colin S. Macleod, charity fundraiser extraordinaire, has been swimming a mile's length of the beach every day this year, and he will have raised £8,000 for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution this Saturday when he completes his 1,000-mile Land's End to Shetland charity swim. Would the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Colin, find time for a debate on open-water swimming, and perhaps join Colin for a dip?

Lucy Powell: I do love a swim in the sea, though I am not sure anybody is ready to see me in my swimsuit any day soon. I will certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating Colin for swimming a mile a day and completing his 1,000 miles—what a great achievement—and for raising all that money for RNLI, which is such an important cause.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): Recent BBC news analysis found that burning household rubbish in waste incinerators is the dirtiest way that the UK produces power. When might the relevant Minister update the House on exactly how and when we will move away from harmful incinerators? Will the Government support my campaign to implement a moratorium on building new incinerators in South Dorset and nationwide?

Lucy Powell: The Government are committed to developing a circular economy in which we do not need waste incinerators, and my hon. Friend is right to raise the issue. It has been raised with me a number of times, so I am sure that if he applied for a debate on the use of waste incinerators, it would be well attended.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Last week, I had the honour of witnessing the first flight to Doncaster Sheffield airport since its closure

[*Lee Pitcher*]

in 2022. This was made possible not just by the hard work of Doncaster Mayor Ros Jones and the whole team, but by 2Excel, an aviation company that has maintained its base at the airport. Will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating this incredible achievement for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely will. My hon. Friend has been a dogged campaigner for Doncaster airport, and I am thrilled that he got to see the first flight to that airport in many years. I also congratulate Mayor Ros Jones and 2Excel on all the work that they are doing to ensure that this important airport in my hon. Friend's constituency goes from strength to strength.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Earlier this year, Swanscombe and Greenhithe town council in my constituency applied in round 4, window 1, of applications to the community ownership fund for money to refurbish Swanscombe pavilion. That pavilion once was, and could again be, a wonderful hub for our community, providing opportunities for people to engage in sports, culture and arts. The council was told that decision making had been put on hold for the general election, and has not yet received a yes or no from the Government. Might the Leader of the House arrange for the relevant Minister to make a statement to the House, giving clarity on whether crucial community projects such as Swanscombe pavilion will receive the funding that they so desperately need?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that my hon. Friend has not had a response about Swanscombe pavilion in his constituency. The vital role that these hubs—these culture and leisure facilities—play in our local communities cannot be overestimated, and I will ensure that he gets a ministerial response forthwith.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Leaseholders in Hendon constituency—in Colindale, in West Hendon and in Edgware—are getting a raw deal. The big property managing agent companies that maintain their developments have put up service charges this year by as much as 40%, but all too often are failing to provide an adequate service, or even a basic explanation of why charges have gone up so much. It has to stop. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on regulating managing agents?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I know from my constituency what a shocking scandal this is. As my hon. Friend knows, the Government are committed to full leasehold and commonhold reform; the Minister for Housing and Planning is sitting next to me nodding his head. We will consult next year on proposals to strengthen the regulation of managing agents.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): A constituent recently shared with me his experience of applying for his dream job with Border Force. Initially, he was told that he would be placed on a reserve list three months after completing the recruitment process. Six months later, he was offered the role, which would require him to relocate to England. He was informed two days later that due to his past employment as a holiday rep, he would no longer be considered. Five months later, his case was

flagged for review and he was told that roles in Scotland would be available to him. Recently, while recovering from cancer, he was chased for a response, and he re-engaged with the process, only to be told—two and a half years after applying—that he would no longer be considered. Will the Leader of the House support me in requesting time to discuss recruitment practices for our increasingly important Border Force, so that we do not deter enthusiastic, trained and empathetic young people from joining?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important that our border security force is staffed by the brightest and the best who want to work with it, and I will ensure that the Home Secretary gives my hon. Friend a full response on this case.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): On Friday, I attended the opening night of panto at the fantastic South Hill Park arts centre in Bracknell. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh, no, you didn’t!”] Oh, yes, I did. Local arts venues such as South Hill Park suffered years of funding cuts under the previous Government. Will my right hon. Friend arrange for a debate on funding local arts centres?

Lucy Powell: He's behind me, Mr Speaker! The importance of panto season for our local theatres cannot be overestimated—it is usually what funds them through the rest of the year. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of local theatres and arts venues, and I am sure it would make a great topic for a debate.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I welcome the debate on LGBT veterans that will take place later. My constituents Martin Bell and David Kelsey have been severely wronged by the ban on LGBT people serving in the military. Will the Leader of the House join me and the Government in recognising the wrongs that they have suffered, and welcome the steps to bring forward financial reparations?

Lucy Powell: I strongly welcome today's debate, and announcements on reparations and recognition for our LGBT veterans. Like my hon. Friend, I have constituents and others who were affected by this terrible practice over many years, and I am delighted that today, we are putting that right.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): Last week, I visited the Ferns primary academy, which I am pleased to say has had its termination warning removed because of its significantly improved Ofsted judgment. It is clear to me that, as stated by Ofsted, the school is determined “that all pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities...achieve their best.”

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the school on its progress, and can we have a debate about supporting our schools to be aspirational for every student?

Lucy Powell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the primary school in her constituency on its Ofsted rating being turned around. She is right to highlight that we need to support schools in making sure that they support everybody, especially those with special educational needs, to get the education they deserve.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): The recently proposed closure of a council-owned museum and theatre in Cannock Chase has shone a bright light on how much culture and heritage venues such as those mean to communities like mine and on the challenges facing the arts and museums more broadly. Would the Leader of the House join me in commending the campaigners fighting to save our museum and theatre, and would she make time for a debate on how we can safeguard and develop culture and heritage, particularly outside our big cities?

Lucy Powell: I think this is the fourth question I have had today on the vital role that local culture and theatres play in our communities and in keeping our high street as the vibrant centres that we want them to be. I am sure the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee has heard those questions, and I would advise everybody to club together and get a good debate on this issue.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Grange community primary school in Winsford has just retained its status as a centre of excellence through the inclusion quality mark. This award recognises the school's commitment to make sure that inclusion is a priority, and that the educational and personal needs of every child, including those with SEND, are met through its curriculum. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating everybody at the school on this fantastic achievement, and will she arrange a debate in Government time on the importance of inclusive provision in mainstream schools?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Grange community nursery and primary school in his constituency on its great work on inclusion and supporting children with special educational needs. We have had lots of discussion of that topic this morning, and I am sure it would make a great topic for a debate.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Two weeks ago today, after much anger and the worst stink possible, Walleys Quarry landfill site was closed by the Environment Agency. This is a victory for my constituents and all of

us who live in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Notwithstanding any legal action—and the loss of my voice from talking about it so much—will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to all those who campaigned so hard to finally get these cowboy operators closed down?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate my hon. Friend, as well as those in his community, on his dogged campaigning—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must stop this. The hon. Gentleman has just asked a question, and the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) has walked straight in front of him. That is the second time in these questions.

Lucy Powell: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on his dogged campaigning to get Walleys Quarry in his constituency closed down because of the actions of those running it. He has raised it with me a number of times, and I am sure his constituents will be very grateful for the action he has taken.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware of speculation about certain high-profile individuals seeking to interfere in our politics with their money, and about concerning examples from the last Parliament of opaque foreign funds finding their way here. Will the Leader of the House make time to debate updating our election laws to ensure that foreign money stays out of our politics?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important matter. It is clear that foreign donations to political parties in this country are not allowed, but the Government do recognise the risk posed by malign actors who seek to interfere with and undermine our democratic processes. I am sure that the relevant Secretary of State will want to continue to update the House on this important matter.

Mr Speaker: I think we did really well, and it is great that we have managed to complete business questions only a minute or so over time.

Building Homes

11.33 am

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on our plan to build the homes our country so desperately needs.

This Labour Government were elected five months ago with a mandate to deliver national renewal. Standing on the steps of Downing Street on 5 July, the Prime Minister made it clear that work on that urgent task would begin immediately, and it did. Within our first month in office, we proposed a bold set of reforms to overhaul a planning system that is faltering on all fronts after a decade of piecemeal and inept tinkering by the Conservative party. Today I confirm to the House that we are delivering the change we promised by publishing an updated national planning policy framework, meeting our commitment to do so before the end of the year, and supporting our ambitious plan for change milestone of building 1.5 million new homes in this Parliament.

The case for grasping the nettle of planning reform in order significantly to boost housing supply and unleash economic growth is incontrovertible. England is in the grip of an acute and entrenched housing crisis, and as you, Mr Speaker, and every Member of the House will know, its detrimental consequences are now all pervasive: a generation locked out of home ownership; 1.3 million people languishing on social housing waiting lists; millions of low-income households forced into insecure, unaffordable and far too often substandard private rented housing; and, to our shame as a nation, just shy of 160,000 homeless children living right now in temporary accommodation. Our economy and the public services that our constituents rely on are also suffering, because as well as blighting countless lives, the housing crisis is consuming ever larger amounts of public money in the form of a rapidly rising housing benefit bill. It is also hampering economic growth and productivity by reducing labour mobility and undermining the capacity of our great towns and cities to realise their full economic potential.

The Government are under no illusions about the scale of the task before us or the challenges that must be overcome and the pitfalls avoided if we are to succeed. But we are absolutely determined to tackle this crisis head on. The previous Government, of course, took a different view. Not only did they fail to meet, even once, the target of 300,000 homes a year that they set themselves, but in a forlorn attempt to appease their anti-house building Back Benchers, they consciously and deliberately chose to exacerbate the housing crisis by making changes to national planning policy that have contributed to plummeting housing supply. We know that the changes required to start putting things right will be uncomfortable for some. We know we will face resistance from vested interests. But this Labour Government will not duck the hard choices that must be confronted to tackle the housing crisis, because the alternative is a future in which a decent, safe, secure and affordable home is a privilege enjoyed only by some, rather than being the birthright of all working people.

Let me turn to the changes that we are making to the framework. We received more than 10,000 responses to our consultation, alongside which my officials and I have held extensive engagement with private house builders,

affordable housing providers, local authorities and other organisations from the sector. The views shared with us have been invaluable in helping to refine our initial proposals so that we are able to introduce an effective package of reforms.

Before I set out a number of important areas in which we have made changes, let me touch briefly on some of the proposals that we intend to implement unamended. First, we have reversed the anti-supply changes introduced by the last Government almost exactly a year ago. From the abandonment of mandatory housing targets to the softening of land supply and delivery test provisions, the policies that gave local authorities the freedom to plan for less housing than their nominal targets implied are no more. Secondly, we have made explicit the importance of growth supporting development, from labs to data centres, to supply chains and logistics. In the same vein, we have made clear that the default position for renewable energy deployment should be yes. Thirdly, we strongly promoted mixed tenure development, reflecting robust evidence that attests to the fact that such developments build out faster and create diverse communities. Fourthly, we have made a series of changes to bolster affordable housing delivery and enable local authorities to determine the right mix of affordable housing for their communities. That will support our commitment to deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation.

There are four important areas where we have refined our proposals, and I will turn first to housing targets. As we made clear when launching the consultation in July, restoring a mandatory standard method for assessing housing needs is insufficient if the method itself is not up to the job. As the House will know, we proposed a bold change, increasing the total annual national target from 300,000 to 370,000, ending the reliance on decade-old population projections, and removing the arbitrary 35% urban uplift that resulted in a skewed national distribution that was disproportionately focused on London to the detriment of the rest of the country. We fully intend to maintain the level of ambition outlined in July, but we heard through the consultation a clear view that we should do more to target housing growth in those places where affordability pressures are most acute. We have therefore made the method more responsive to demand, redistributing housing targets towards those places where housing is least affordable, while maintaining the overall target envelope.

Next, let me turn to our reforms to the green belt. As the House knows, ours is a brownfield-first approach to development. As a result of a number of targeted changes we are making to the framework, and our proposals for a brownfield passport, we are prioritising and fast-tracking building on previously developed urban land wherever possible, but we know that there are simply not enough sites on brownfield land registers to deliver the volume of homes that the country needs each year, let alone enough that are viable and in the right location.

In the summer, we proposed that local authorities take a sequential approach to releasing land to meet their housing need: brownfield first, followed by low-quality land in the green belt and only then higher-performing land. To identify low-performing sites we proposed a definition of grey-belt land that reflected the fact that there are areas currently designated as green belt that contribute little by way of aesthetic, public access or

ecological value. That approach received broad support through the consultation, but a strong desire was expressed to limit the room for subjectivity. We have therefore set out a clearer description of how to assess whether land meets the definition of grey belt, and we will be providing further guidance to local authorities in the new year to support them with green-belt reviews.

At the centre of our green-belt reforms lies our golden rules, which are designed to make sure that where green-belt land is released, the public derives real benefit from development on it, including more affordable housing to meet local need. In the consultation, we proposed a flat 50% affordable housing target, but we recognise that because land values vary across the country, the limited use of viability assessments should be permitted. Through the consultation, we have recognised that that approach risked uncertainty. If flexibility was needed in some parts of the country because land values were lower, the precise amount of affordable housing to be secured would become a protracted site-by-site negotiation. If a local authority did not allow flexibility, there would be a risk that sites were rendered unviable, with the result that no houses, affordable or otherwise, would get built.

Our final policy therefore takes a different approach to managing variation in land values. Rather than a single 50% target, we are introducing a 15 percentage point premium on top of targets set in local plans, up to a maximum of 50%. Because that means the target itself will be responsive to local circumstances, we will be restricting the ability for site-specific viability assessments until such time as we have amended viability guidance in the spring of next year. By prioritising pragmatism over purity, the golden rules we are putting in place today will give communities the confidence that they will be met and will maximise the number of affordable homes delivered across the country.

Another area where we have made changes is to the presumption in favour of sustainable development. The presumption sits at the heart of the national planning policy framework and means that where a local authority has under-delivered or an up-to-date local plan is not in place, the balance of decision making is tilted in favour of approval. We are determined to ensure that where the presumption applies, it will have real teeth. At the same time, we are clear that development consented through it must be consistent with the clear requirements in national policy relating to sustainability, density, design and the provision of affordable homes. The changes we have made deliver on both those fronts.

Finally, in the consultation we sought views on how our changes apply to local authorities at an advanced stage of plan making. Our proposed transitional arrangements aim to strike a balance between maintaining the progress of plans at more advanced stages of preparation, while maximising proactive planning for the homes our communities need. The core of our proposal—that we only hold back a draft plan where there is a significant gap between the current proposed housing requirement and the new housing target—was well supported. However, we are making three changes.

First, we have taken on board concerns that the transitional period was too tight, so we will provide local planning authorities with an extra two months to progress their plans, extending the transitional period from one month to three. Secondly, and again responding to an

ask we heard repeatedly from councils, the transitional arrangements will apply where the draft housing requirement in the plan meets at least 80% of local housing need, rather than the numerical 200 homes threshold we originally proposed. In those instances, the plan will not be held back. Thirdly, where plans are adopted under these arrangements, and where there are existing plans based on the old targets due to run for a number of years yet, we want to see the level of ambition raised sooner rather than later. As a result, from 1 July 2026, we will expect authorities with plans adopted under the old standard method to provide an extra year's worth of homes in their housing pipeline, helping to accelerate the delivery of new homes.

We recognise that we are asking much from many local authorities, and we are determined to support local leaders trying in good faith to deliver homes for their communities. That is why across dedicated local plan funding, the planning capacity and capability support announced at the Budget and income from raised fees, we will be injecting more than £100 million into the system in the coming year.

We are confident that the revised framework that we are introducing today will support significantly higher rates of house building and sustained economic growth. We have listened carefully to the views expressed in the consultation and adjusted several areas of policy accordingly; now it is for others to do their part. Developers must turn supportive words into action, bringing forward new sites and building them out at pace. Local authorities must embrace the challenge of higher targets and push for more and better development in their areas.

We have moved fast. We have not held back. We have not shied away from controversial decisions, or wavered in the face of those who have sought to chip away at our resolve. With focus and determination, we have pushed on to ensure that we are putting in place a planning system geared toward meeting housing need in full and unleashing economic growth. Change will take time as homes are not built overnight and our dire inheritance means that the climb out of the trough we are in will be a steep one, but by implementing this revised framework today, we have taken another decisive step toward a future in which everyone will enjoy a decent, safe, secure and affordable home in which to live.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

11.45 am

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. First, I welcome the ambitious target of 1.5 million homes in this Parliament. I think he may have unintentionally misled the House regarding the “dire inheritance” that he claims. Conservative Members are rightly proud of our record on housing delivery. *[Interruption.]* Really. Between 2013 and 2023, we saw a record level of new housing formations, greater than any other period since the 1960s. We delivered 550,000 affordable homes since 2010, including 63,000 in 2022-23 alone.

What we do not welcome is the war on rural England that the Minister is pursuing. Following on from the family farm tax and the withdrawal of the rural services delivery grant, we now see a massive shift to mass house building in rural areas and on green belt. We do not welcome the bulldozing of democratic accountability.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

We do not welcome the lowering of housing targets for urban areas, including a 20% reduction in London, which is already missing its targets by 50%. We also do not welcome an average doubling—a 100% increase—for predominantly rural areas.

The reality for local residents in areas such as Westmorland, Cumberland, North Yorkshire and the home counties is that they will one day wake up to realise that they will face targets of up to 600% increases. They will call their local councillor to ask them to oppose a specific application and be shocked at the response, which will be, “I am sorry; we no longer have the right to vote against an individual application.” They will be even more shocked if they become aware of what Labour said in opposition. Its Opposition motion on 21 June 2021 called on the previous Government to

“protect the right of communities to object to individual planning applications.”

The Minister is now taking that away.

Local residents will be more shocked again when they become aware that the Minister himself used that right in 2021 to object to an application for 1,500 homes on a brownfield site in his constituency. Indeed, the Secretary of State also used that right to object to a development in her constituency in 2017. Same old Labour: do as I say, not as I do.

The reality is that the Government will fail to deliver on their target. Members need not listen to me; they should listen to the chief executive officer of Homes England, who admitted in a leaked email that it is a two-Parliament objective rather than deliverable in this Parliament. The Centre for Cities and the Office for Budget Responsibility have both said that only 1.1 million homes will be delivered in England in this Parliament, and indeed there will be only 1.3 million homes across the UK, which is lower than we delivered in the last Parliament—another broken promise from Labour. As the Leader of the Opposition said, we will be there for the Minister and the Secretary of State when they fail to deliver on that promise.

This planning framework pushes development to rural areas, concreting over green belt, green fields and over our green and pleasant land, rather than focusing and supporting building in urban areas where we need to build the most. And to what end? Due to the loosening of restrictions on visa requirements such as the salary threshold, and the scrapping of the Rwanda deterrent, the majority of the homes that the Government deliver will be required for people coming into this country rather than for British citizens.

Labour has also consistently failed on affordable homes. Under the London Labour Mayor, new affordable housing in London is down by 88%, yet across England, the Conservative Government delivered more than half a million homes. They have already weakened their requirement for 50% affordable homes on the green belt by allowing the use of viability assessments. That change will mean fewer affordable homes.

The Labour Government have already failed first-time buyers. The Conservative Government doubled the number of those buying every year compared with 2010, by means of the stamp duty discounts, Help to Buy, right to buy and our affordable homes programmes—some

of which helped the Secretary of State herself get on the housing ladder. Those have been axed by this socialist Government pulling up the housing ladder. They will build over rural areas while claiming it is grey belt land, but we delivered over 1 million homes in the last Parliament alone. It is vital more than ever that we build in the right places with the right infrastructure, but the Prime Minister has already admitted that he will bulldoze through the concerns of local communities. If the Government really want homes to be built where they are needed, they must think again.

Finally, how many of the Minister’s 1.5 million homes will be affordable? What does he expect will be the split for social rent, affordable rent and affordable homes to purchase, particularly given the use of viability assessments? On planning capacity, will he set out why his resourcing of planning authorities, which we broadly welcome, has risen from £20 million in his manifesto, to £46 million in the Budget, to £100 million today? How is that consistent with the Budget? Why is he deliberately making it more difficult for first-time buyers to buy a home? What percentage of the 1.5 million target does he expect will be needed for immigrant households?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for some of his responses, and for those questions. I am glad that he broadly supports the Government’s target of 1.5 million homes. As he will know, the previous Government did not achieve their target—300,000 homes a year when disaggregated—once in 14 years.

There were so many inaccuracies and misleading statements in that response, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the framework that we have planned, that I am not sure where to start. The assertion that we are waging war on rural England or that we have distributed housing targets predominantly towards rural areas is simply wrong. We are focusing—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman might wish to listen to the response and focus on the detail of the framework that we have published. We are focusing growth across our city regions. Housing need across mayoral combined authority areas will increase by over 20% compared with the current standard method. Similarly, on the green belt, it is not the case that we are allowing viability assessments—I was very clear in my statement. We are restricting the use of site-level viability assessments on green belt release until we have refreshed viability planning policy guidance in the new year, at which point we will consider exemptions for previously developed land and large sites.

We prioritise the importance of up-to-date local plans. We inherited a system from the previous Government of less than a third up-to-date local plan coverage. That is unsustainable. We want communities more involved at an early stage, shaping their local plans. That is the best way that they can shape development. The hon. Gentleman mischaracterises our working paper proposals on planning committees; as we discussed at length in the urgent question earlier in the week, we are simply talking about streamlining the planning system to ensure that trained, professional planning officers take the appropriate decisions, and elected members get to focus on the largest and most controversial applications.

I am not going to respond to the taunt about sites in my constituency.

Hon. Members: Why not?

Matthew Pennycook: Because I have outlined my position many, many times before. I objected to a 1,500-home scheme that I thought was poor quality—I thought we could do better. It is very interesting, I note to Opposition Members, that consent for that was given many years ago, but not a spade has been put in the ground. That is the type of speculative development we need to see less of. We need more planned development through the planning system.

I will briefly answer the hon. Gentleman's questions. We cannot put a precise number on the proportion of homes under the 1.5 million target that will be affordable for the following reasons. We expect to see many more social and affordable homes come through developer contributions. Our golden rules, which apply to the release of land through the green belt, will ensure that the proportion rises—that 15% premium on local affordable housing rates. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, affordable provision is partly related to grant funding from Government. We will set out details of future investment in next year's multi-year spending review, along with what the successor to the affordable homes programme looks like and the precise split between social rented homes and other forms of tenure. We have been very clear that we want to maximise the delivery of social value homes.

Details on planning capacity will be set out in the response to the consultation. The £100 million figure I cited is the amount of support in the round going into local plan support, planning capacity and capability support and other things.

On migration, the hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that the majority of homes that developers sell in this country are to British nationals; that most parts of the country have local allocation rules and residency requirements that mean that non-British nationals cannot access housing; and that only those who are eligible for no recourse to public funds can do so. He knows those rules. It is scaremongering; it is beneath him. I know that the hon. Gentleman does not really believe that, and that the House does not believe that either.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the greater detail on the changes to the NPPF that the Minister has outlined this morning. He is right: we have to be bold. As he has outlined, the social housing sector is in crisis. At the Select Committee's recent evidence session, he mentioned a figure of around 160,000 children in temporary accommodation. Those children will be spending this Christmas away from their friends and families. For the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), the shadow Secretary of State to reduce this issue to migration is wrong. He should think about the many children who will be sleeping rough this Christmas. This is about how we improve housing and ensure that we build the right housing to help those children.

We need more social housing to get people off our waiting lists. Our councils are at breaking point, with some developers using the viability clause as a way of not delivering on the much-needed affordable homes that they have promised. Communities must be able to

trust the planning process. Will the Minister assure the House that local councils will see a significant increase in the affordable homes programme next year to allow them to meet the Government's housing targets?

Secondly, I want to touch briefly on the land classification outlined in the strategy, which could affect the way in which communities are able to shape local developments. Too often we see a disproportionate impact on high-end developments, which does nothing to help people to get on the housing ladder. Is the Minister confident that the update to the NPPF will ensure that new homes will be based in improved developments with amenities such as schools, GP surgeries and other accessible things, so that local residents can see tangible benefits in the developments coming forward in their area?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for those questions and for her broad support for the framework we have announced today. On social rented housing in particular, she is absolutely right. The previous Conservative Government's record on social rented homes is absolutely dire. The figures speak for themselves. Not only did they fail to deliver new social affordable homes beyond anything more than 10,000 units a year, but they engineered the decline of social housing and ran down our stock through various interventions, including the slashing of affordable homes programme funding and increased generosity in the right-to-buy discounts, which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister did not benefit from. We have returned the discount to the rate at which she accessed housing. The Conservatives' record on social rented housing speaks for itself.

On future investment in affordable housing and social rented homes, as I have said, we will set out details in the multi-year spending review next year. We want to prioritise the delivery of social rented homes given the important role they play in addressing the housing crisis, and in resolving the particularly acute end of that crisis in the form of temporary accommodation.

On the NPPF more widely, I can give my hon. Friend those assurances. The targeted changes to the framework we have made today will support the delivery of infrastructure. As I have already said, when it comes to the release of green-belt land, our golden rules will ensure that we get a higher proportion of affordable housing, and also infrastructure and amenities and access to green space through that additional public benefit.

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

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The Liberal Democrats support the provision of new homes. Somerset West and Taunton district council in my constituency, under Liberal Democrat control since 2019, has approved thousands of new homes to the extent that the town is now one of the fastest-growing in the UK, with 9% population growth to 2021, partly because it is such a wonderful place to live. Somerset is now pioneering the first new council houses in a generation in parts of the county, many of them zero carbon. We welcome the policy change on renewable energy and the extension in the transitional arrangements, although I urge the Minister to consider, in exceptional circumstances,

[Gideon Amos]

a six-month transition rather than three months. I know that Members on several Benches wish to see that on behalf of their authorities.

Trust in the planning system, like trust in politics, is not where it should be. As with bypassing planning committees, imposing housing numbers on councils takes decision out of the hands of elected councillors and local people, which is undemocratic. We would reverse that. Trust in planning demands that people know that our most precious green spaces are fully protected. Every authority should have the same level of green belt protection, plus precious green wedges and green spaces in their areas. Rather than Whitehall diktat, plans for new homes should be led by communities and our councils, and those homes should be genuinely affordable to local people. Councils such as Eastleigh have shown that where those new homes come with jobs, schools and public transport, community consent follows. We will not solve the crisis in care, for example, unless we have the homes for older and vulnerable people, supported by the GP surgeries and care services they require.

If any target is to be mandatory, therefore, it should be our country's need for 150,000 new social homes per year and for low-cost home ownership through options such as rent to buy to give people a real foot on the ladder. That should be funded from capital borrowing, just as Labour Governments and, historically, Liberal Governments funded our stock of council houses in the past, including the use of compulsory purchase, before Conservative Governments sold them off hand over fist until soon there will be almost none left.

Top-down planning diktats risk a surge in speculative greenfield permissions of the kind that the Minister is concerned about, for homes that are out of people's reach. Instead, let us fund, incentivise and focus on the social and affordable homes that we need: zero-carbon homes that tread lightly on the land, restoring nature and in doing so restoring trust in local people and the councillors whom they elect to take the decisions that most affect them and their communities.

Matthew Pennycook: I am not sure I detected a question there, but there were several points. I will endeavour to respond to at least a few of them. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's broad support for the framework and, in particular, for renewable energy deployment.

On the charge that we are bypassing local democracy and local communities, I refute that entirely. We are encouraging, in the way that the previous Government did, the adoption of up-to-date local plans that are the best means of shaping development in any particular part of the country. That is where local people and communities can get involved to determine what development looks like and where it goes, but it must be a conversation about what development looks like and where it goes, rather than whether it happens at all. Under the current system, as a result of the NPPF changes in December 2023 and the fact that we have less than a third up-to-date plan coverage, there is too much speculative development outside of plans, which communities are rightly taking issue with.

On social rented homes, as I have said to the hon. Gentleman previously, until he comes up with a less vague way of funding 150,000 social rented homes, we simply

cannot take the point seriously. The Liberal Democrats got away with having no housing spending totals in their election manifesto. I applaud the ambition, but we take a more realistic path to boosting social and affordable homes, putting forward only what we know we can deliver within the spending constraints that we face.

Lastly, I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to reform how CPO works. We are taking forward the discretionary power to disapply hope value that the previous Government took through—I commend them for doing that in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023. We need that power tested, but we need to go further and we intend to do so in the forthcoming planning and infrastructure Bill.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Following 14 years of neglect, indifference and, at times, downright obstruction by the Conservatives, housing in Newcastle is the No. 1 issue that constituents bring to me, and my inbox is full of heartrending stories of families unable to put a roof over their children's heads. I therefore welcome the statement, and look forward to working with Newcastle city council to build the homes that my constituents need so much.

Will the Minister explain in a bit more detail how he will ensure that these homes are of the quality that my constituents deserve, and that the necessary infrastructure, particularly schools, will be built alongside them?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is right. The Conservatives can try to scrub the record all they like, but it speaks for itself. The so-called planning concern group in the last Parliament persuaded the previous Government to make changes to the national planning policy that allowed local areas to plan for fewer homes than their target required. That has led to a rush of plans coming in "under number", some of which we will have to undo through changes in the framework.

As I have said, we are making targeted changes to the framework to support the delivery of infrastructure provision. The Government also support essential infrastructure, especially in the areas that are most unaffordable, through a range of spending programmes. On infrastructure-led development and quality, supported by our framework changes in the presumption for saleable development, we are determined that there is not a rush to 1.5 million regardless of what the units look like. They must be well designed, quality units, with the infrastructure, amenities and services that communities need in order to thrive.

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

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): As the Minister will know, Three Rivers district council, which has been controlled by the Liberal Democrats for many years, does not have an up-to-date local plan, and there is already a presumption for development. What would the Minister say to councils that either choose not to have a local plan or are unable to meet the housing targets?

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman's point is well made. We are determined to drive up the coverage of up-to-date local plans. We want universal coverage:

that is the way to secure sustainable development in which communities can have confidence because they have been able to shape it.

When areas refuse to engage, we will take appropriate action. Today we are setting a 12-week deadline for local authorities to give us a timetable detailing how they intend to put local plans in place, through various measures relating to the transitional arrangements, and how the new six-year housing land supply will bite. We think we can incentivise authorities to come forward and put those plans in place. Where they do not do so, however, we will not hesitate to use the full range of ministerial intervention powers at our disposal. The last Government introduced deadlines and let them slip repeatedly, but we will not make the same mistakes. We will ensure that up-to-date local plans are put in place so that we end the speculative out-of-plan development that, as I said, communities across the country are rightly taking issue with.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Joe Powell, another Select Committee member.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I welcome the statement and especially welcome what the Minister said about affordable homes, given the dismal numbers that were provided under the Conservatives. Those 1.3 million people on the waiting list deserve a voice in our planning system too, and I only wish the Opposition would recognise that.

What approach will the Minister take when there are multiple local plans, for example the London plan and the London borough plans? How will the targets be worked out between those different plans?

Matthew Pennycook: As my hon. Friend may know, the new method produces a figure for London of nearly 88,000. That is more than double recent delivery, and it constitutes the biggest proposed percentage increase against delivery in any region in the country by a significant margin. We expect London to step up and improve its housing delivery record. As for my hon. Friend's specific question, it will be for London and the Mayor to consider how the aggregate local housing numbers are distributed across the whole of London. Because there is a spatial plan in the form of the London plan, the targets for individual London boroughs need to be viewed in that context. The same cannot be said for other parts of the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call another member of the Select Committee.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): Nothing in this statement outlines the new powers for councils to build development infrastructure—including roads, schools and GP surgeries—before new housing. What powers will my local councils of Broxbourne and East Hertfordshire get to build development infrastructure before these massive housing targets are forced upon them?

Matthew Pennycook: Local authorities are already required to put in place plans for infrastructure delivery, and to set out how that infrastructure is funded and should come forward. We have made a number of targeted changes to the framework today, to support

the delivery of infrastructure. That will not be not the last word on our reforms to the housing and planning system, and we are considering what more we can do to ensure that we get infrastructure for developments up front, in the way that communities want.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): One in four Barking households is privately renting, which is higher than the national average, and 40% of residents are homeowners, which is 20% below the national average. The number of people in temporary accommodation is through the roof because of the housing crisis. My constituents will welcome the Government's steps to address the housing crisis. Viability and land value considerations often hold up shovel-ready development schemes, which then cannot be built. The six infrastructure commitments that the Government have made since the general election are critical. Can the Minister give assurances that the Government will deliver infrastructure to ensure that land values increase, viability is met, and homes can be built?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Viability is stalling development in lots of areas in the country. We need to look at what support can be put in place for particular schemes—our new homes accelerator, for example, is providing planning capacity support and other forms of support—and at why some schemes, particularly consented or near-consented large schemes, are being held up. As I have said before in the House, we are giving further thought to how we examine these issues, and to what more we can do to ensure that consented schemes are built out in good time.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): This centrally driven intervention drives a coach and horses through green belt areas such as Aldridge-Brownhills and through local democracy. How will the Minister ensure that local communities are respected and have a voice, so that we build the right homes in the right places?

Matthew Pennycook: I return to a point that I have made several times during this statement. The onus is on local communities and elected leaders to put in place up-to-date local plans that shape where development is to take place. I know from previous conversations with the right hon. Lady that she wants brownfield-first developments—so do we. We have put in the framework published today a number of targeted changes to support the delivery of brownfield sites. We have also consulted, through a working paper soft consultation, on proposals for a brownfield passport to further accelerate and fast-track brownfield development. Local areas can look to bring forward and densify brownfield sites. However, in response to the point that there are not enough such sites, or that communities cannot work across boundaries with neighbouring authorities, we are saying, "Please look at the release of low-quality land within the green belt."

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I salute my hon. Friend's energy for and commitment to these targets. It is great to see that they are supported by the Prime Minister. The Environmental Audit Committee is looking at the new planning framework and its environmental consequences. I am pleased that, since the original consultation, there have been changes to strengthen environmental protections. Can my hon. Friend say a little more about how he will ensure that

[Mr Toby Perkins]

nature is not the victim of his passionate commitment? Brownfield sites are often very biodiverse, and trying to achieve the biodiversity net gain alongside all the other commitments simply means that they are not profitable. How will he ensure that those sites can be brought forward viably by both the private and public sectors?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. He is right: we have made a number of changes to the framework to further strengthen references to climate mitigation and adaptation. We have made a number of other changes relating to flood risk and sustainable drainage systems, and how we can support those through the planning system. On BNG specifically, I am more than happy to have a detailed conversation about our thinking on how to successfully roll out BNG across the country and ensure that it works not just on large sites, but on small sites in particular.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): In his statement, the Minister referred to the undermining of the capacity of our great towns and cities to realise their economic potential. Does he not realise that by effectively absolving the Mayor of London of his housing responsibilities, he is exacerbating the problem of inner-London boroughs, such as Lewisham and, dare I say, Greenwich and Woolwich, using the green fields of Kent as a dumping ground for their housing problems? We are fighting a rearguard action to protect our farmland from development, in the interests of our countryside and, more importantly perhaps, of sustainability. He refers to brownfield sites. What he has announced today is the undermining of the Secretary of State's right to rule finally on planning issues after they have been to the Planning Inspectorate. She will now have no credibility at all.

Matthew Pennycook: I have a lot of time for the right hon. Gentleman, but I think that sort of hyperbole is beneath him, if I may say so. We are not absolving the Mayor of London of his responsibilities. The previous Government put in place a system whereby the arbitrary 35% urban uplift applied not merely to the core of a city region—as it does in every other part of the country—but to every London borough. That produced a fantastical figure that was completely divorced from reality. We have abolished that urban uplift and reset the standard method. That still leaves London with an incredibly stretching target of 88,000 homes per year, which is more than double recent delivery. We want to work in partnership with the Mayor of London, but we will be pushing him to increase his ambition for what can be achieved in London, and his delivery.

We place great importance on agricultural land and food production. The national planning policy framework remains clear that where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer-quality land should be preferred to those of higher quality. Those protections remain in the framework.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Thirty-five colleagues are bobbing, but the questions and answers are getting longer. Can we please keep them short?

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): On the Wirral, our housing shortage leaves thousands on waiting lists. The issue goes further, with children and grandchildren having to leave the area to get on the housing ladder. We want to build quality, affordable houses in the right places. We share the Government's approach to building on brownfield first, so what steps can the Department take to support Wirral council in achieving that?

Matthew Pennycook: I refer my hon. Friend to my previous answers on our targeted changes to the framework to strengthen expectations around brownfield development. We are in the early stages of a consultation, through the working paper, on proposals for a brownfield passport, and we are exploring how we can go further to prioritise and fast-track the development of that land. We absolutely want to work with local areas to look at where brownfield sites might be densified and at how we can get the majority of development through that route, where possible.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Mid Sussex district council has a local plan, and it is well advanced in making its next local plan, which, significantly, has cross-party support from Conservative, Green and Labour councillors. We also have a design guide, and are delivering 1,000 houses a year, including 300 social and affordable homes last year. We are an example of what good planning looks like. We are even purchasing our own temporary accommodation. I invite the Minister to come to Mid Sussex and see for himself what good planning looks like.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I think a yes or no will suffice, Minister.

Matthew Pennycook: I am afraid that I cannot give either, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will add the invitation to the list of requests for visits that I receive from Members across the House. However, I commend the hon. Lady's local authority for its focus on quality and good design. We want to see more of that across the country.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I declare my interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

I welcome the commitment to overall house building targets—we cannot hit a national target with clear local targets. I welcome in particular the commitment to social housing. Will the Minister confirm that that means social housing, not the affordable housing that the shadow Minister mentioned? There is a big difference there. The viability of brownfield sites is lower and section 106 contributions will be lower, so if we are to concentrate on brownfield sites, will the Minister make the point to the Chancellor that to deliver social housing in the numbers needed, she might have to reconsider the amount of social housing grant that she provides?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend has real expertise in this area. We are making a distinction between social rented homes—the most affordable type of affordable housing—and others, and we have sought to express that through a change to the glossary in the framework

that separates social rented housing from other forms of housing. He is right that brownfield delivery involves additional challenges. We are very cognisant of those, and we are exploring how the variety of Government funds that support the delivery of brownfield sites might be improved as we go forward.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Minister has alluded to one of the challenges with planning permissions—namely that, on any one day, there are something like 1 million unbuilt permissions for new housing. Developers ration the supply in order to keep the price high, so will he consider, as I think he did in opposition, the principle of “use it or lose it”? At the moment a developer will get a permission, which is repeatedly sold on until viability means the site cannot be developed. If the planning permissions were either brought forward or lost if they were not used in time, we could get the houses and homes that people want.

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman, like my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), has great expertise in this area. He will know that local authorities already have powers to issue a completion notice to require a developer to complete a stalled development. To bring greater transparency and accountability to this area, we seek to go further by taking the necessary steps to implement build-out reporting. I assure him that I am giving a lot of attention to what more we might do on build-out, because developers have made commitments to increase the pace of build-out across the country. We need to make sure they follow through with that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With an example of a short question, I call Barry Gardiner.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on his statement and, in particular, on the importance he places on the presumption in favour of sustainability and getting the design of developments right.

My hon. Friend is a champion for the natural world, and I am aware that he is sympathetic to the need to include biodiversity measures in all new builds, such as swift bricks, which are an essential nesting habitat for the survival and recovery of cavity-nesting birds. Will he provide this much-needed boost for a declining population that has sadly been placed on the critically endangered red list? Will he ensure that these simple requirements are not only in the NPPF but are translated into the national development management policies to ensure they have statutory weight?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we have added text to the NPPF to encourage the incorporation of features to protect threatened species, including swifts, but also bats and hedgehogs. We will consult on the NDMPs in the spring of next year.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The town of Wimborne in my Mid Dorset and North Poole constituency has doubled in size, with new homes built on three sides right up to the Stour. These homes are pretty much out of reach for local people, and they come with no infrastructure. Shops were supposed to be

included in one development, but the developer claimed it could not get them filled, so now we have another care home. Meanwhile, Aldi has made a planning application for a green-belt site to which everyone will need to drive. What can the Minister do to force developers to deliver the infrastructure they promise, so that developers cannot play the system?

Matthew Pennycook: There are measures in the framework that will help to achieve the objectives that we both seek. The Government are also committed to strengthening the existing system of developer contributions, so that we hold applicants to the promises they make as part of section 106 agreements, while arming councils to better negotiate with them in the first place.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council submitted its draft local plan for examination in July but, under the new targets, it has planned for only 53% of its housing need. Can my hon. Friend elaborate on the steps the Government will take to work with local authority areas at this stage to make sure they fill that significant gap?

Matthew Pennycook: In the formal Government response to the consultation, which will be published at the end of this statement, we set out very clearly how we are dealing with local authorities at an advanced stage of plan preparation—both those that will meet the regulation 19 stage requirement and those that will not—and how we will help those with up-to-date plans to top up their housing supply so that they come closer to the new standard method. I share my hon. Friend's wish that her local authority takes steps to close the gap.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the Minister reaffirm the principle of “infrastructure first” in order to get homes built? In Tendring and Colchester, we are planning to build a 9,000-home borders community project, but it can go ahead only if the A1331 is completed, and it has to be funded.

Matthew Pennycook: I support that objective, but I gently say that the previous Government had 14 years to address concerns in this area. I remember repeated calls from Conservative Members at the time that the previous Government should get serious about this. We will. There are measures in the framework that support infrastructure delivery, but there is more work to do.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. Last week, I met my constituent Mr Anwar Hussain, who lives with his wife and five children in a two-bedroom house. Doctors have told him that his eight-year-old autistic daughter needs her own bedroom. Mr Hussain tells me that he has been on emergency banding for a larger house with more bedrooms for two years, and he is still waiting. Does my hon. Friend agree that we desperately need to improve our social housing, and can he please confirm that the Government's plans will help people such as Mr Hussain?

Matthew Pennycook: That question sits slightly outside the framework, although, as I said, there are targeted changes to support the delivery of new affordable homes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we have to do

[Matthew Pennycook]

more about the decency of the existing social housing stock. We will be consulting on a new decent homes standard in the new year, as well as introducing Awaab's law to clamp down on the most severe hazards.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Labour's new housing target for Harborough is a 40% increase, and the target for Oadby and Wigston has doubled. Yet we can see that the overcrowding problem is worse in urban areas, and the gap between population growth and housing growth is worse in those areas, too. We can see the environmental arguments, too.

However, the Minister has announced today that the new target for London is about 11% lower than the old one. In the original round of numbers, Nottingham was down 21%, Birmingham and Leicester were down 31%, and Coventry was down 50%. Can he tell me what the numbers are now for those midlands cities? Are they all still going down, even as the targets for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston are going up?

Matthew Pennycook: I think the hon. Gentleman slightly misunderstands the situation for urban authorities. The housing targets are going up across metro areas.

Neil O'Brien: What about the cities?

Matthew Pennycook: I have been very clear about this. We have dropped the arbitrary 35% uplift introduced by the previous Government, which bore no relation to housing need. Metro area targets are going up. The hon. Gentleman will find out from the specific targets, which have been produced by our redistribution of the formula within that envelope, what the new numbers are for his two local authorities.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I listened to the Minister on the radio this morning and I listened to his statement, and I welcome his comprehensive steps to tackle the housing crisis. While I work with colleagues across the House—Opposition Members know that—I thought the shadow Minister's speech was beneath him. It is the kind of gutter politics we should not be engaging in.

As we seek to tackle the crisis, we must do things with people, not to them. I gently say to the Minister that communication and engagement will be vital to getting this right. I invite him to confirm from the Dispatch Box, for constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme, that productive agricultural land will not be the default in his brownfield-first approach to development.

Matthew Pennycook: As I made clear in my response to the shadow Minister, our approach to agricultural land remains the same. Ours is a brownfield-first approach. We want to maximise delivery on brownfield first, wherever possible. Only when that type of delivery cannot come forward—where brownfield sites cannot be densified, or where cross-boundary strategic co-operation of the kind we intend to introduce is not possible—will we ask local authorities to review their green belt, with a view to identifying and releasing the lowest-quality, most poorly performing land within it.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is a thoughtful and diligent Minister who shares my disdain for the identikit, soulless, ubiquitous housing estates that have been built during his lifetime and mine. I welcome the NPPF's commitment to design codes that provide

“a local framework for creating beautiful and distinctive places”.

Will he write to every local authority to make it clear that design is a key planning determinant, and is absolutely salient? Will he also write to the Planning Inspectorate to ensure that, when local authorities turn down an application on the basis of poor design, the inspectorate will back them up?

Matthew Pennycook: Well-designed places remain at the heart of planning policy; as the right hon. Gentleman will know, an entire chapter of the NPPF remains devoted to well-designed places. The changes we are making to the presumption today will ensure that when it comes to national policy on design, those expectations need to hold in the balance of decisions that the Planning Inspectorate makes. There is much more we can do outside of policy. In the new year, my Department will bring forward updates to the national design guide and national model design code. As part of those changes, we will make clear our expectations about what local authorities can do to improve the quality of design.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Chris Curtis, who I should have called earlier as a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—my apologies.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): That is okay. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Thanks to the failure of the Conservative party, over 150,000 children will be waking up on Christmas day in temporary accommodation. If that is a record to be proud about, I have absolutely no idea what would make Opposition Members feel any shame. May I get two reassurances from the Minister? First, business needs certainty, so will he assure me that we will not see the chopping and changing we saw from the Conservative party and that we will stick by the policies? Secondly, the issue is not just about the planning rules but about capacity in our local councils, so what will he do to speed up the process of getting more planners into our local councils to add capacity to the system?

Matthew Pennycook: We need consistency in national policy. We had too many changes to the national planning policy framework under previous Governments. We intend this to be the big change in terms of substantial policy development. There will come a point next year when we will look to consult on NDMPs, and we will have to make changes to the framework to account for the evolution of those. As I said, today's statement sets out the big changes we intend to make, and we want them to hold and to be delivered through this Parliament.

On local planning capacity and capability, I made reference in my statement to the £100 million of funding that is being injected into the system, in particular as part of the transitional arrangements to help local authorities that will fall foul of the requirements set out in the new framework today.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): As a former house builder, I know some of the challenges about viability. I welcome the Minister and the Government's focus on affordable housing targets and viability assessments, but there is a basic mathematical calculation about affordable housing: 20% of something is better and more than 50% of nothing.

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman makes a somewhat cryptic statement. Perhaps the point he is driving at is related to golden rules. One of the changes we have made that puts pragmatism above purity is dropping the straight 50% requirement across the country, and looking at how we can get more locally sensitive rates by putting in place a 15 percentage point premium on local affordable housing targets. In the round, we think that will provide more certainty and maximise the delivery of homes coming through that route.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Cherwell district council's housing waiting list quadrupled over the past decade under the Conservatives, which is why I committed to my constituents in Banbury during the general election campaign that I would make addressing the housing crisis a priority. We all recognise that planning reform, which the Conservative party ducked during its time in office, is crucial to fixing the housing crisis, but does the Minister agree that it is also crucial to helping us get the growth that we want in our economy, because it is good for businesses, whether they are sandwich shops or high-tech engineering firms, across the country?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is right that the situation we are in, with an acute and entrenched housing crisis and an ailing planning system, is not just blighting lives but holding back our economy and the way our great towns and cities can maximise their potential. This is a growth-focused national planning policy framework, and we are very proud of it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Unless questions are kept short, colleagues will not be able to get in, so think about everybody in the Chamber.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I know that the Minister is a man of considerable integrity, so can he be honest with my constituents about the fact that the combination of mandatory targets, a massive increase in those mandatory targets and the fig leaf of the grey belt policy means that in a constituency like mine, which is almost entirely green belt, apart from that which is developed on, there will be massive new development, an expansion of London sprawl and a change in the character of the area forever?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his compliment at the outset of his comments. I do not agree with him for the following reasons. We are not abolishing the green belt but preserving it. We think it has played a hugely important role over recent decades, not least in checking unregulated urban sprawl. On his constituency, I say to him gently that I do not know how he can know the definition of grey belt when we have just published it. He does not know how much grey-belt land there is in his constituency, but in parts of the country like his, the answer lies in cross-boundary

strategic planning, so that we can sensibly plan for housing growth, rather than every local area having to account for those numbers on its own.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): As has already been mentioned, there are 1.3 million people on the social housing waiting list and there will be 150,000 kids in temporary accommodation this Christmas, but the number of under 30s who own their own home is half what it was in the last generation. Does the Minister agree that it will take serious and sustained action over the course of this Parliament and beyond to turn that around?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Contrary to the crowing by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) about the Opposition's record on home ownership, the rates are stagnant and they are particularly bad for the younger generation. We have a generation locked out of home ownership. We are taking action in that area, not least through our plans to take forward a comprehensive and permanent mortgage guarantee scheme. One of the largest contributory factors, although not the only one, at the heart of why housing is unaffordable, is our failure over many decades to build enough homes of all tenures. Going forward, the framework will support our target of 1.5 million new homes.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): The Government have announced that housing targets for Reigate and Banstead will increase significantly. We will move from an advisory target of 644 houses per year to a mandatory and completely unrealistic target of 1,264—a 96% increase. A large proportion of my constituency is green belt. If all areas must play their part in building the homes we need, why is the Minister reducing housing targets for London and other urban areas, while increasing them in rural areas like mine?

Matthew Pennycook: I have made clear the point on urban areas and how the 20% increase across the board means we are asking more of all parts of the country. I say gently to the hon. Lady that she speaks as if there are no housing pressures in her constituency. People want homes in her constituency to rent or to buy as much as in any other part of the country. Yes, the targets are stretching but they are achievable, either through brownfield development from the release of low-quality grey-belt land within the green belt, or through cross-boundary strategic planning.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Representing a large and rural constituency, I am constantly contacted by families who are concerned that members of their youngest generation are having to leave Northumberland to find the homes they need. That is just one example of the Conservative party's war on the countryside. Will the Minister confirm that the new framework is the only way that we can get the homes that are needed, and ones that are appropriate, into our rural communities so that a generation is not forced out of rural Britain?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To be clear, the reforms to the planning system that we are making today are not the only part of the answer; delivery of homes is an entirely different challenge

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

from bringing forward planning permissions. We need to over-supply planning permissions into the system to get the number of homes we need in his constituency, and across the rest of the country.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I wrote to the Secretary of State in November concerned about the impact on local authorities, such as South Gloucestershire, that are at an advanced stage of bringing forward plans to deliver much-needed homes. I welcome the extension of the transitional period, but I remain concerned that areas whose figures have increased will be vulnerable to planning by appeal, while they get the new consents lined up. Will the Minister explain how authorities that are doing the right thing will be protected from their strategy being wrecked by speculative applications, while their plan goes through the process for adoption?

Matthew Pennycook: I gently say to the hon. Lady that the expectation of having an up-to-date local plan in place is nothing new. Authorities have known for some time that they should be doing that. It was a failure of the previous Government that they did not use the powers at their disposal to ensure there was more up-to-date local plan coverage. Those areas that do not have up-to-date local plans in place will be vulnerable to development taking place outside the plan process, but we are committed to supporting those who share our ambition and are working in good faith to get a plan in place to be able to do so.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): Can the Minister set out how today's announcement will help our small and medium-sized enterprise house builder market and bring forward more sites suitable for SMEs to develop?

Matthew Pennycook: There is more to be done in this area, and SMEs and small sites can make a huge contribution to the 1.5 million home target. There are changes that have been published today in the framework that will help SME builders, not least the focus on mixed-tenure sites that we know build out faster and where SMEs can play a big role going forward.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Minister intends to impose thousands more houses on my constituency, when there are already not enough school places, not enough doctors and congested roads. Will he at least look at ways in which financial arrangements can be established that would mean that developers can be made to fund necessary infrastructure ahead of house building and sale, rather than waiting for months and possibly years after completion?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have said, we are giving a considerable amount of thought to what more we can do, in addition to the changes being made today, to ensure that the right infrastructure comes forward. I am happy to give the right hon. Gentleman's point serious consideration.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): The Minister knows, because we have discussed this before, that my constituency of Dartford is already getting on with the challenge of

building new homes. Ebbsfleet garden city, the first garden city in a hundred years, aims to build 10,000 new homes over the next decade, with 50 new parks and open spaces, as well as a network of green corridors. I am delighted that the Minister has confirmed he will be visiting shortly. What more can we do to up the levels of affordable and social housing in new developments like Ebbsfleet so that everyone has the chance to live in them?

Matthew Pennycook: I look forward to my visit to Ebbsfleet, which is now building out at a faster rate than it was. We welcome its contribution. I have already referenced the changes we intend to make to strengthen the existing developer contribution system to get more out of section 106 agreements. There is more we can do in that area and, of course, through Government investment in affordable housing. We will bring forward more details in the spending review next year.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): My constituency of Cheltenham is already built up to its boundaries and is working with its neighbours on the joint local plans referenced by the Minister, in part to deal with a housing waiting list of more than 2,500 bequeathed to us by the last Government. We also have a big, sprawling town centre and plenty of empty space. What is the Minister's message to councils that have that combination of challenges?

Matthew Pennycook: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman's area is working in co-operation with its neighbours. As he knows, we have in place a duty to co-operate; it has not been particularly effective and we think we need to go further on strategic cross-boundary planning. To those parts of the country that wish to densify their town centres, we fully support that and are open to any conversation in particular areas about what more they think needs to come forward to allow them to bring forward plans to rejuvenate town centres and bring more residential development back into them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): He is always slightly out of my eyesight, but I call Martin Vickers.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): In reply to an earlier question, the Minister spoke of streamlining the planning system. In my 26 years as a councillor and 14 years in this House, I have heard successive Governments talk about streamlining the planning system, by which they mean taking more central control. It results in frustration among ward councillors, frustration among their constituents who feel that they are not able to participate properly and frustration for Government because, in effect, they fail to meet their targets, as I am sure this Government will. Does the Minister accept that one way of involving local communities, other than in the local plan, is to allow local councillors to work closer with their communities and have some influence over individual major developments? In that case, we would have better quality and the Government would meet their targets a lot quicker.

Matthew Pennycook: Where appropriate, local councillors, with advice from trained planning officers, should of course have a say on major outline applications. Some of

the proposals we are asking for views on—we are asking for nothing more than views at an early stage, on a working paper—are about ensuring we get planning officers taking the right decisions using their expertise, with members focused on the largest and most controversial developments. I do not know if the hon. Gentleman has ever sat on a planning committee, but can he say, hand on heart, that every reserved matters application, as technical as some of them can be, should come to full planning committee? We think there are ways to streamline the system that do not involve the removal of local control and that adhere to the plan-led system philosophy that we are taking forward and value very much.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. Across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we clearly have an ageing population. I believe there is a desperate need for dedicated apartments for those in the over-55 age group, which would free up homes, as well as social housing, back into the market. Will the Minister consider having discussions with colleagues in the Cabinet and, I suggest, the Northern Ireland Assembly to secure funding for the over-55s complexes that are needed not only in towns but in rural areas?

Matthew Pennycook: The previous Government, as the hon. Gentleman may know—again, I commend them for it—appointed an older people's housing taskforce “to look at options for the provision of greater choice, quality and security of housing for older people.”

That taskforce recently published its report, with a series of recommendations that we are engaging with. However, we need to give serious consideration as to how the planning system evolves to take into account demographic changes that we know we need to adapt to.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): May I suggest to the Government that this subject really warrants a full-day debate and not just a statement with questions and answers? For now, however, may I ask about one straightforward matter? Will the Minister look carefully at the relatively small number of places, including East Hampshire, with a planning area that is part-in, part-out of a national park and at the case that housing targets should be set separately for those two parts of the planning area?

Matthew Pennycook: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. There are local authorities around the country where the boundaries are such that they stray into areas where environmental protections are in place, such as national parks and other things.

Local areas will need to engage with the mandatory higher housing targets that we are bringing forward when coming up with local plans. Those local plans will be tested by the Planning Inspectorate to see whether there are hard constraints of the type he speaks to and therefore whether a plan is sound on that basis. Hard constraints will still be taken into account in the development and examination of local plans.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): In an earlier answer, the Minister confirmed that the Government support an infrastructure-first approach. Will he work with colleagues in the Treasury and the Department for Transport to ensure approval of A10 West Winch housing access road funding, which is essential to unlock thousands of homes that are in the local plan on the edge of King's Lynn?

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman's request has been put on the record and I will make sure that my ministerial colleagues are made aware of it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the ever-patient Ben Obese-Jecty.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister today launched the NPPF in my constituency of Huntingdon, at Alconbury Weald. However, that development was planned and built under the previous Government and phases 2 and 3 will see a further 4,000 homes and significant brownfield development at scale, but it has nothing to do with the revised NPPF. It is a shame the Deputy Prime Minister did not travel the extra couple of miles down to the Envar medical waste incinerator approved by the Minister on her behalf, against local wishes, a couple of months ago.

The Minister talks about guaranteeing infrastructure. When I asked the Government about a new east coast main line station to support the 6,500 homes at Alconbury Weald, they fobbed me off with talk of an internal review. How will the NPPF unlock the infrastructure that large developments desperately need?

Matthew Pennycook: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous answers on that point.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has been in the Chamber for well over an hour. He will no doubt recognise the strength of feeling towards this subject, because it has taken so long to talk about building homes. I will give Members on the Front Bench a short moment to swap over very quickly for the next statement.

Qualifications Reform Review

12.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will now make a statement on the outcomes of the review of qualifications reform at level 3.

The priority for this Government is to build a skills system that will drive forward opportunity and deliver the growth that our economy needs. The post-16 skills system in England that we inherited from the previous Government fails both of those tests. In particular, the qualifications landscape is too confusing and fails to provide the clear routes to success that is needed by learners and employers. We heard strong arguments that the previous Government's plans to remove level 3 qualifications and to limit the flexibility for schools and colleges meant that they risked leaving students with too little choice and too few opportunities.

This year, we have paused the defunding of qualifications and have undertaken a review of the qualifications that are set to have their funding removed, to see where we need to retain alternative qualifications, such as applied general qualifications or BTECs, and to consider how long we need to keep them in place. We undertook extensive stakeholder engagement, delving into the detail of qualifications with employer representative bodies, colleges, practitioners, awarding organisations and industry experts.

We recognise that certainty is very important to education providers, to students and to their parents and guardians. I reassure the House that our decisions make the position clear up to 2027. We are clear that students deserve high-quality qualifications that meet their needs, and that we must continue to develop and improve qualifications, so that they provide for the needs of students and employers.

The curriculum and assessment review will take a view on qualifications in the long term, as part of its wider consideration of how we prepare all young people for life and work, but there are some areas where we need to act in advance of its recommendations. The first change that we will make is that we will not tell providers and students which types of qualifications they can and cannot mix together. It should be for colleges and sixth forms to work with students, employers, mayors and higher education to devise the best mix for each individual and deliver the skilled young people that their local economy needs.

We will therefore not be applying the previously proposed rules of combination. There are a confusing number of qualifications in the system, and through this review, we have already identified more than 200 qualifications with low or no enrolments. We will remove funding from these in line with already published dates. This gives students and employers a simpler range of qualifications to choose from.

T-levels provide an excellent qualification option, which should be available to more learners. We introduced three new T-levels this September, and a further T-level in marketing is to be introduced from September 2025. It was fantastic to see the energy generated by this year's T-levels Week, which highlighted the huge benefits that young people are gaining from T-levels, and their enthusiasm

for the qualification. The unique industry placement aspect of T-levels is a real draw for students and is all too often not offered by other qualifications.

We have recently introduced new flexibilities to support industry placement delivery, to enable more young people to benefit from the opportunities that T-levels provide. It follows, therefore, that where learners wish to study a large qualification in a T-level route, the T-level should be the main option for them. We have moved away from blanket restrictions, such as automatically defunding any qualification that overlaps with a T-level. Instead, we have taken a practical, evidence-led approach, looking at the qualifications route by route. This will ensure that we can be confident that students have high-level choices.

On this basis, we have concluded that we will not proceed with defunding qualifications on published lists in agriculture, environment and animal care; legal, finance and accounting; business and administration; and creative and design before 2027. Following our review, we will retain funding for 157 qualifications that were due to be defunded by 31 July 2025.

In engineering and manufacturing, we will keep funding for the qualifications that were previously identified for defunding until 2027. This will allow time to update the occupational standards that are designed by employers and that underpin this large and complex route, and to establish new qualifications that meet the needs of learners, providers and employers.

In the digital sector, we are working with the T-level awarding organisation to make assessments more manageable, and plan to have the necessary changes in place for the next academic year. We are also making T-level placements more flexible, expanding the option for remote learning. This will be particularly important in the digital route. We will keep funding for the six existing large digital qualifications until 2026, to allow time to embed these key improvements. Beyond that, we will also keep funding for 13 smaller digital qualifications, so that learners have a range of choices until reformed alternatives are available.

On health, science and social care, the previous decision to defund social care qualifications left a gap, as there was a heavy T-level focus on health and science, rather than on social care. We will therefore keep funding for nine qualifications in health and social care until new qualifications in the care services route have been developed. We expect that to happen in 2026-27. We are also keeping funding beyond that for 11 qualifications in science-related subjects to give learners even more options.

On education and early years, we have heard strong support for the T-level, and so we will remove funding from existing large and medium qualifications as planned in 2025. This will direct learners who want to study a large qualification to the T-level as the highest-quality option. We are also retaining funding for six smaller qualifications to support specific occupations, such as teaching assistants, giving learners a smaller alternative.

Construction is a key part of this Government's mission, and I am delighted to report that two of the construction T-levels continue to grow and offer high-quality options for learners. The on-site construction T-level is also providing valuable education, industry experience and a positive route into employment for those who wish take it. However, its success has been limited because of a lack of overall demand for a larger qualification

at level 3. We have, as a result, concluded that the needs of learners and the economy are best met through apprenticeships and other classroom provision, and decided to cease taking new enrolments for the on-site construction T-level. Those already taking it will be able to complete it as planned and progress into positive destinations post-graduation.

To meet the economic needs of this important sector and to ensure that we can support our missions around high-quality housing, we are also keeping one large qualification in site carpentry, and in 11 other medium and small qualifications.

We must continue to improve opportunities and the quality of qualifications. We will keep qualifications only until they are no longer needed, so that learners can do the T-levels that they need to do. We will invite awarding organisations to submit further new level 3 qualifications in the spring, to continue the process of reform.

We are currently considering whether proposed T-levels in catering and beauty therapy meet the needs of learners and the economy, and we will update the sector in due course. I can confirm that any new T-level in these areas will not be rolled out until at least 2026.

These changes are a fair reflection of what we have heard, and offer a balanced approach that supports our missions of spreading opportunity and supporting economic growth. We want high-quality options, strong choices and a simpler system that is easier for learners to navigate. The approach and timescales that I have set out today represent a pragmatic and achievable journey to where we want to be. We are putting the needs of learners and our economy at the heart of how we move forward. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.58 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement.

For many years, people have worried about the huge number of different qualifications in further education. For many years, people have wanted us to be more like Germany and called for new, higher-quality, higher-funded, simpler qualifications. T-levels, introduced under the previous Government, are an attempt to do exactly that, with a higher unit of funding and much more work experience. Finally, we have a clear, prestigious qualification mirroring A-levels on the academic side. As the Minister will know from talking to Lord Sainsbury, part of the vision was to use T-levels to simplify the landscape, which everyone agrees is too complex. I think the sector will heave a sigh of relief that today's announcement is finally out—we were getting to the point where literally any decision would have been better than continued indecision—but it leaves some huge unanswered questions. The Minister says that things will be clear up until 2027. In other words, we will be back here again in two years. We had a pause and a review. We will now have a longer pause and another review. At some point, the Government will have to decide. The sector wants certainty, but we know from the statement that it will not get that yet.

The Government must spell out some kind of vision for how they plan to simplify the landscape of qualifications, which for my whole lifetime everyone has agreed is far

too complicated and fragmented. The Minister said in her statement that the qualifications landscape is too confusing, even as she announced that the Government have decided to keep more qualifications, particularly overlapping qualifications. I do not want to be too mean to her—these issues are not easy. In Government, we had the Wolf review. More recently, we removed a further 5,500 qualifications that had sustained low take-up, but what is this Government's vision to simplify the landscape? Never mind the detail, what is the rough vision, and when will they set it out? If it is not T-levels and what the previous Government were planning to do, what is it?

There is also a lot more work to be done to improve T-levels. As the Minister said, the Government will allow part of the work experience to be delivered working from home, but we need much more than that. What is the plan to reduce drop-out rates, and make T-levels more appealing and easier to deliver? One of the great things about T-levels is the need to produce so much work experience—about 50% more than previous qualifications. That makes them much harder to deliver. What are the Government doing to help colleges to deliver them? On a point of process, the Government—extraordinarily, I thought—refused to publish the terms of reference for the review that has just concluded, even in response to freedom of information requests from *FE Week*. Will the Minister agree to publish the terms of reference now that the review has concluded? There is no reason for them not to be in the public domain.

No qualification structure will work unless the review gets the funding landscape for technical education right, so will the Minister set out the funding implications of her announcement? The Government promised that they would protect public services from the national insurance increase, but first universities and, this week, nurseries and early years providers have discovered that that was a false promise. The university fee increase has been entirely eaten up by the increase in national insurance. Now, early years providers say that the failure to compensate them for the national insurance increase is “catastrophic” and will mean that

“countless nurseries, pre-schools and childminders will be left with no option but to raise costs, reduce places or simply close their doors completely.”

So far, the Government have refused to come clean about the cost to the further education sector of the national insurance increase—a piece of information that this House deserves to know. The Government have it, but they will not release it. When staff in non-academised colleges complain about their different treatment on pay compared with academised colleges, the Government say that there will be £300 million for post-16 education, but they will not say how much of that will be eaten up by the increase in national insurance. I hope that today the Minister will finally give this House the information that it deserves to know. The Government have the information, and this House and people in the sector deserve to know it.

It is early days, but what we are looking at is ongoing uncertainty over these qualifications, no clear vision to bring about the simplification that the Government say they want, and no proper plan yet to support T-level students and providers. The House is not allowed to see the terms of reference of the review that has just concluded, or know how much the national insurance increase will cost the sector. For students and teachers alike, we have to do better than this.

Janet Daby: I thank the shadow Minister for his many points. The reason the review was so pertinent and needed to take place was because of the confusion around T-levels and how much work needed to take place—work that the Conservative Government had a lot of time to do. This Government believe that T-levels are an excellent qualification that should be available to more young people. Qualifications that overlap with T-levels will be able to co-exist while we continue to develop and improve qualifications, so that they provide for the needs of learners and employers, and support the transition to T-levels as the large technical qualification of choice. The Conservative Government's rushed plans would have left young people looking to move into crucial sectors such as engineering or social care without options. Instead of blanket restrictions, the review will deliver on the Government's ambition to fix the foundations of the economy and deliver growth.

As the shadow Minister mentioned, T-levels are still in the early stage of implementation, and the retention rate is improving. We expect that trend to be maintained as they continue to bed in. Career guidance for potential students is key, and we are raising careers advisers' awareness of the benefits of T-levels. The shadow Minister will be aware of the announcement in the October Budget of £300 million of additional revenue funding for further education and £300 million of new capital investment. That settlement reaffirms and expands the Government's commitment to skills by providing an additional £3 million for further education to ensure that young people are developing the skills that the country needs. In addition, the Government have provided £300 million of new funding to support colleges to maintain, improve and ensure the suitability of the FE estate, and address conditions and capacity issues. We will set out in due course how that will be distributed.

There are many areas in which the Government are making advancements, and we are very aware that students need to be supported. Combinations of learning are absolutely the right thing for them. We remain ambitious for students. I will endeavour to get back to the shadow Minister on the terms of reference.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I pay tribute to everyone who works in further education—a vital sector that makes a transformative difference, and whose importance is often not properly recognised. Vocational and technical courses and qualifications are a critical part of our education system, yet schools, colleges and students have faced great uncertainty as a consequence of the previous Government's decision to defund a number of applied general qualifications. I welcome the additional certainty that the Minister has provided by committing to maintain some AGQs and pause any further changes until 2027.

The landscape of vocational qualifications is indeed too complex and confusing, but the cliff-edge approach adopted by the previous Government had significant adverse consequences. My Committee has heard evidence that the previous Government's plans have already had material impacts, because some colleges have modelled the proposed reduction in courses and now face potential insolvency as a result. What support will the Government

provide to colleges that have already planned and committed to their qualification offering for September 2025, based on the previous Government's decision to defund, and now face further changes?

The Committee has also heard evidence of the success of T-levels for those who complete them, particularly in areas such as healthcare. However, T-levels account for just 10% of all vocational courses, and continue to have a worryingly high drop-out rate. What further work are the Government planning between now and 2027 to reform T-levels and make them accessible to a wider range of students, including students with special educational needs and disabilities, before any further changes to AGQs are made? My Committee understands the value and potential of T-levels, but it is vital that in pursuing this route as the predominant option for technical and vocational training, the Government are not locking some young people out of the opportunity to learn, succeed and thrive.

Janet Daby: I join the Chair of the Education Committee in praising many colleges, the sector, and teachers themselves. She is right to mention the track record of the previous Government. We very much want to support students in their learning, and especially colleges. Where colleges find that they have to change course, or where there are issues with courses, I invite them to make that known to the Department, to see what support can be provided. The £300 million that has been invested in this area should go some way to providing it. T-levels need much focus through positive communication, and we need to ensure that young people enrol in the right courses. There is a series of events and webinars to inform schools, colleges and other professionals working in educational settings about the outcomes of the review. The Department will publish further information, advice and guidance in relation to 16-to-19 study programmes in the new year.

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

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. In the years since the Conservatives' first botched moves towards prematurely scrapping a range of vocational qualifications, the Liberal Democrats have repeatedly warned of the consequences of that ill thought-through, counterproductive policy, so it is to be welcomed that the Government have heard our and the sector's concerns. The announcement is a welcome step forward to protect student choice and local decision making, and it is a more pragmatic, rather than ideological, approach. It was clear that the decision to defund was premature. T-levels, while a welcome innovation, had not had enough time to bed in to allow an informed decision, and that risked too many young people being left without appropriate options. Now the Government are providing clarity up to 2027, will the Minister lay out the processes for monitoring and reviewing the impact of those changes until then? Will she lay out the timeline for the longer-term curriculum and assessment review in greater detail?

I have one particular area of concern in the statement, and that is around early years education. Research last year showed that rather than embracing the T-level in education and early years, students overwhelmingly opted for the overlapping qualifications earmarked for defunding. Now we hear the Government will go ahead and proceed

with that defunding. Given that reality, how does the announcement square with the Government's focus and rhetoric around prioritising early years? How will the Government improve recruitment and training in that sector if it is not meeting students' needs where they are? The point is reflective of a broader question on the announcement, which is: what are the Government's overarching guiding principles as to which courses will be funded and which will not? The rationale laid out by the Minister suggests they are working on a case-by-case basis, but in the interests of long-term stability and clarity, should the Government not be laying out their principles for how they will approach those decisions more strategically?

Finally, as students face a welcome range of post-16 options—as we have heard, it is a confusing landscape—it is essential that they have excellent support in making those important decisions. How will the Government ensure that all students have access to high-quality careers guidance?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for the many points she made and for acknowledging the Government's pragmatic response. It was recognised that the previous Government were not focused on social care and childcare, so we needed to relook at those areas and ensure that level 3 and level 2 placements were available. She will be aware that we are conducting the curriculum and assessment review, and the qualifications reform will be connected to the wider review, which will be published next year. There are various other ways that qualifications reform is being monitored in terms of the national audit. We are reviewing the process on an ongoing basis. As well as seeing where the uptake is from students—this is where Skills England will come into play—we are looking at ensuring that organisations and employers are involved in the types of training and courses available for young people, so the connection is very much there. We will follow through with more detail in due course.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The certainty that the statement provides will be an early Christmas present for the further education sector. Last month, I visited Bracknell and Wokingham college, a fantastic FE provider in my constituency where students learn everything from green construction to nursing, electric car maintenance to career guidance, which shows the breadth of opportunities available through the FE sector. Incidentally, those are all skills that will underpin the Government's missions. The FE sector is vital not only in breaking down barriers to opportunity but as a vehicle for growth, providing the green skills that are necessary to our economy and to support those missions. What more support can the Government put in place for the FE sector, in particular around the difficult issue of pay settlements for FE teachers?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the many important contributions of the FE sector. Pay is not currently set by the pay review bodies, including

for FE, and the Government do not set recommended pay in further education. With that said, my noble Friend the Minister has full knowledge of the needs and crucial role of the FE college sector.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): When the Minister's other noble Friend—the distinguished Labour peer Lord Sainsbury—conducted his landmark review of technical and vocational qualifications, he found that they were not only multitudinous and heavily overlapping but had become divorced to a large extent from the very sectors of industry that they were supposed to serve. The overhanging qualifications reform is a massive power grab that the new Government are carrying out, creating a body called Skills England and abolishing the independent institute that oversees technical education standards. Skills England is not even a separate body; it is part of the Department for Education management structure. Under the legislation going through Parliament, the Secretary of State will take to herself the power to oversee standards in technical education. That would not be acceptable for A-levels so, as I asked in Westminster Hall the other day, how can it be possibly acceptable for T-levels? What does that say about this Government's commitment to parity of esteem?

Janet Daby: I will ask my noble Friend the Minister to get back to the right hon. Gentleman on that point.

May I make a correction to what I said in my statement? Qualifications in agriculture, environment and animal care, legal, finance and accounting, business and administration and creative design will not be defunded before 2027, not 2024.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am minded of that old adage—I suppose I am old enough to remember all these things—that when you ask a fish to climb a tree, it does not make the fish stupid; it just cannot do it. My concern with the qualification review is that we will not have the breadth of scale that allows for student choice and accessibility, and it will try to pinpoint people into roles that they cannot be successful in. How can the Minister ensure that those gifted in academia will have that clear path, and those gifted with job skills will find their place as well, alongside those still searching for their calling who are looking for wide subjects to keep many doors open for their future?

Janet Daby: We are keeping 157 of the courses that were outlined to be defunded. That will be reviewed on an ongoing basis depending on uptake. Our focus is very much on economic growth, and our mission is for growth and ensuring that young people have opportunities in T-levels and other qualifications to ensure that they are able to get the jobs that are desperately needed in our country. We are not removing the rules of combination. More variation should support 16 to 19-year-olds to have access to the jobs they wish to do in the future.¹

1. [Official Report, 19 December 2024; Vol. 759, c. 1WC.] (Correction)

Prison Capacity Strategy

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before we come to the statement on the Government's 10-year prison capacity strategy, I note that it was published yesterday, the day after Justice questions in the House. This timing was unfortunate, as publishing it a day or two earlier would have given hon. Members an opportunity to put topical questions to Ministers on the new strategy, so I am very pleased that the Minister has come to the House today to make a statement.

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I hear your comments. With your permission, I will make a statement on the 10-year prison capacity strategy and annual prison capacity statement that the Government published yesterday. As the House will be aware, publishing these documents makes good on a pledge made to this House by the Lord Chancellor in July when she came before the House to set out the emergency measures that we were forced to take to prevent our prisons from filling up entirely.

Let me begin by setting out some context on prison places. As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, on 4 December, the National Audit Office published a scathing report, "Increasing the capacity of the prison estate to meet demand". That report is unequivocal in its criticism of the previous Government's approach to the criminal justice system, including their failure to deliver on their commitment to build 20,000 additional prison places by the mid-2020s. Only 500 additional cells were added to the overall stock of prison places. While the previous Government continued to promise prison places, there were significant delays to projects—in some cases, they ran years behind schedule—and a failure to address rising demand has left the system thousands of places short of the capacity it requires.

The expected cost of the Ministry of Justice and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service's prison expansion portfolio to build the 20,000 additional places is currently estimated to be £9.4 billion to £10.1 billion, at least £4.2 billion higher than the estimate in the 2021 spending review carried out by the previous Government. None of this was revealed by Ministers at the time; it only came to light when the Government were elected in July of this year.

It is now clear that even the original mid-2020s commitment was not sufficient to keep pace with the expected demand on prison places, according to the last Government's own projections. This put the viability of the entire system in jeopardy. Had we run out of prison places, police would not have been able to make arrests and courts could not have held trials. It could have led to a total breakdown of law and order in our country, with all the associated risks to public safety. That is why we were forced to take emergency action, releasing some prisoners earlier than they otherwise would have been—in most cases, by only a few weeks or months. That bought us precious breathing space, but if we do not act, our prisons will fill up again. We must therefore act, including by building more prison places as a matter of urgency.

Integral to our plan for change is ensuring that we have the prison places we need to lock up dangerous criminals and keep the public safe. The 10-year prison

capacity strategy sets out how we will deliver that. The strategy is detailed, setting out our commitment to build the 14,000 places that the last Government failed to deliver as part of their 20,000 prison places programme, with the aim of getting that work completed by 2031. It further sets out what we will do: where, when and how we will build new prisons and expand existing ones through additional houseblocks, refurbishments and temporary accommodation.

The strategy is also realistic. As the House knows, prison building is an extraordinarily complex and expensive undertaking. In particular, the planning process to get sites approved for development is complicated and time-consuming. That is why our delivery plans include contingency prison places, which will provide resilience in our building programme should a project become undeliverable or provide poor value for money that cannot be taken forward. We are also ambitious; the strategy sets out how we will work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to streamline the delivery of prison supply, including important reforms to the planning system and delivering on our commitment to recognise prisons as nationally important infrastructure. It is also this Government's ambition to secure new land, so that we are always ready should further prison builds be required in the future.

We are committed to improving transparency, now and in the future. As such, when parliamentary time allows, we will legislate to make it a statutory requirement for the Government to publish an annual statement on prison capacity like the one we have published. That annual statement will set out prison population projections, the Department's plan for supply, and the current probation capacity position. It fulfils our transparency commitment for 2024 and, crucially, will hold us and future Governments to account on long-term planning, so that decisions on prison demand and supply are in balance and the public are no longer kept in the dark—as they have been—about the state of our nation's prisons.

Finally, we are being honest with this House and the public about what must happen next. Building enough prison places is only one part of a much wider solution; as the Government have already made clear, we cannot simply build our way out of these problems. In the coming years, the prison population will continue to increase more quickly than we can build new prisons. That is why in October, we launched the independent sentencing review chaired by the former Lord Chancellor, David Gauke, alongside a panel of experts including the former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Burnett. That review will take a bipartisan look at an issue that has been a political football for far too long, punted about by both sides.

The aim of the review is to ensure that we are never again left in a position where we have more prisoners than places available. It will help us to ensure that there is always a prison place for dangerous offenders, that prisons help offenders turn their lives around and bring down reoffending rates, meaning fewer victims, and that the range of punishments for use outside of prison is expanded. The review will make its recommendations in the spring. The Government look forward to responding as quickly as possible so that we can begin to implement any necessary policy changes urgently.

When this Government took office just five months ago, we inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse. Instead of dithering and delaying, we have taken the difficult decisions necessary to stop the criminal justice

system from grinding to a halt altogether, which could have led to a total collapse of law and order in our country. However, this is not an overnight fix, and the journey ahead of us is long. This 10-year prison capacity strategy and annual statement, along with the independent sentencing review, are critical steps on that journey. The last Government left our prisons in crisis, putting the public at risk of harm. We will fix our prisons for good, keeping the public safe and restoring their confidence in the criminal justice system.

I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.27 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her remarks. I also thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling out what was quite obviously an attempt to avoid scrutiny this week. I also thank the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), for his efforts to ensure that we had a proper statement today.

I begin by making one thing absolutely clear: if Labour MPs think that spending the next few years talking about our record in government is going to stop this Opposition from holding them to account, they are dead wrong. There will be no free passes for them on these Benches. It is already clear to the British public why the Government desperately want them: they are floundering and they know it.

I say to the Minister that I will happily spend all day comparing records of Governments and inheritances. Labour MPs and the Minister decry our record of having had to release 5,500 prisoners early, but the last Labour Government released not just 5,500 or even 10,000 prisoners early. By the end of their time in office, they had released 80,000 prisoners early. That was the state of the system when Labour was in charge, and that does not even include the systematic erosion of the punishment element of our justice system brought about by Labour's introduction of blanket halfway release for essentially the entire prison population. Labour did not call it early release, but that is what the British public know it to be.

That was the record of the Labour Government that we had to try to turn around. I am proud of the fact that we began to unpick that record by reducing early release for the most serious offenders from halfway to two thirds, and that we introduced a whole-life tariff for premeditated child murder and increased maximum sentences for child abusers and others. Let us be absolutely clear: the root cause of the problem that we now face is a spike in the remand population. We have approximately 7,000 more people in prison on remand than we normally would. That unprecedented spike has occurred as a direct result of covid, and the Government know that.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Will the shadow Minister give way?

Dr Mullan: No—you cannot give way on a statement.

In fact, prior to covid, we had got the Crown court backlog down to a lower level than it had been under the last Labour Government, another record of which

we can be proud. To try to tackle the problem, we increased sitting days and introduced Nightingale courts, and contrary to what the Government have said, we were clear that we would carry on doing everything possible to bring that number down. We did not refuse the judiciary extra sitting days, as this Government have done, nor would we have refused them.

We had agreed a floor on sitting days, not a cap, and negotiations were ongoing. If the judiciary had come to us and asked for more sitting days, we would have responded to that—and not by saying no, which is what this Labour Government have done.

In the prison population estimates that sit alongside this plan is the proof that the Government truly have already given up on fixing this problem. Not only do their projections not target the remand population being brought down, but they show it going up, which means more victims waiting for trials and more prisoners released early. We should be building more prison spaces, and under our leadership we actually increased prison capacity at the fastest rate in living memory. That was not so we could accommodate more people on remand, but so we could go even further in ensuring that offenders are properly punished and victims get justice.

The Government want to talk about the last 14 years, but I am afraid this plan leaves me asking what they were doing for those 14 years. They came into office telling the British public they had it all worked out. What have they done on sentencing? They have asked someone else to do a review. What have they done on how we prosecute murder? They have asked someone else to do a review. What ideas have they come into office with for tackling the court backlog? Absolutely none. Today, as the Minister knows, we have simply had a reannouncement of our planned prison building programme, with four new prisons, all of which were already announced or under way before Labour took office. This is not a bold new strategy; it is a continuation of work started under the Conservative Government.

There are of course some important questions for the Minister. First, given that we did not do so, why have the Government refused additional Crown court sitting days to the judiciary? Secondly, why do their prison population figures project an increase in the remand population? Thirdly, given that they are committed to building more prison spaces whatever the sentencing review says—they will have to decide that; they cannot park responsibility with an independent review—will she commit to continuing our programme of increasing the amount of time that the most serious offenders stay in prison? Fourthly, missing from the prison population figures is any transparency at all about the number of foreign offenders, so what are their estimates for the foreign offender population in our prisons in future years?

The Government blame us for their early releases, but the situation was nothing compared with the scale of the early releases they themselves oversaw when they were last in office. They released prisoners they should not have done, they botched the legislation and had to come back to this House to correct it, they let people out without tags who should have been tagged, and they have given up on fixing the fundamental issue of the remand population. The Leader of the Opposition has said that

“we did not get everything right in government”,

[Dr Mullan]

and she knows there are no easy answers to these challenges, only trade-offs. However, this Government are making it clearer and clearer how not to do it, and we on these Benches will be there every step of the way so that the British public know exactly that.

Alex Davies-Jones: Yet again, zero humility from the people who put us in this crisis—it is absolutely staggering to think that that is what the Opposition want to tell the British people. There was no apology for the crisis they left us. When we took office in July, we were just days away from a complete collapse of our criminal justice system because of the inheritance we received from the previous Government. The fact is that this Government are taking action. We have increased Crown court sitting days—there are 500 more—to ensure that we have capacity in the system, and magistrates' sentencing powers have been increased from six to 12 months, freeing up 2,000 more days in the Crown court.

I am glad the shadow Minister mentioned foreign national offenders, because like him I believe that we need to be doing more to deport the foreign national offenders in our jails. However, there is a difference between him and me, because this Government are actually doing something about it—less rhetoric, more action. We are on track to deport more foreign nationals from our prisons than at any time in our recent history. Since coming into office, this Government have deported more than 1,500 foreign national offenders, which is more than at this time last year, and who was the Immigration Minister then? Oh, that's right: it was none other than the shadow Secretary of State for Justice himself. If it was that easy, why did he not do it after 14 years in Government? This Government are taking action to ensure that we have a criminal justice system that is fit for purpose.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I welcome the prison capacity strategy. Given the crumbling condition of much of the prison estate, it is right that the Government are pressing ahead with the delivery of modern prisons. I also welcome the explicit linking of this strategy to the independent sentencing review, and the recognition that, without changes to sentencing policy, prisons could be full again in a year's time, which would mean extending early release. Does the Minister agree that a long-term reduction in prisoner numbers in a way that best protects the public requires a strategy for rehabilitation to reduce reoffending, and when will the Government share their proposals for achieving that?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend the Chair of the Justice Committee for his questions. I am aware that the Lord Chancellor is due to give evidence to his Committee next week, and I am sure she will outline those steps in more detail. The capacity strategy that we have published is just one step in our plan, as well as going forward with building more prisons. We need every single element of our justice system to be working, and that includes the independent sentencing review. We look forward to the recommendations coming next year, so that we can take them forward and we never have to be in this position again. We look forward to setting out our plans in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement, and I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), for the point of order that I think helped to bring the Minister to the House with this statement today.

Years of neglect under the previous Conservative Government have left our prisons overcrowded and unequipped to provide the tough rehabilitation required, which has let down victims and survivors in my patch and across the country. In fact, as recently as this week, the Conservative Opposition let down those victims and survivors by voting against the measure to exclude people such as stalkers and murderers from the early release scheme.

The result of the Conservatives' incompetence is the SDS40 scheme—the standard determinate sentences early release scheme—which has seen thousands of ex-offenders released early to unlock emergency prison places. The Minister knows my concerns about that scheme, particularly in relation to domestic abuse, and I hope she will support my proposals to patch it up. Will she, however, confirm what the criteria will be for reviewing the scheme next year?

Ultimately, Liberal Democrats believe that we need a sustainable solution to tackling this problem, because more prisons mean more offenders, more offenders mean more victims, and more victims mean more failure. With 80% of people in prison being reoffenders, we know that reducing reoffending must be the key. I know that from having spent my career before reaching this place supporting kids out of crime and gangs, so why, in a prison capacity statement of over 1,000 words, was reducing reoffending mentioned just once? Will the Minister reaffirm her commitment to that effort, and can she provide more details on how she will reduce reoffending to protect victims and survivors across this country?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesman for his comments, and he is right to raise the issue of reoffending. It is important to note that we have prison capacity available to protect the public, to lock up high-risk offenders and to ensure we have public safety measures available, but we obviously see tackling reoffending as a serious priority. We are looking at it across Government and pulling every lever available to us. Every Department must come together to tackle it, and part of that is the independent sentencing review. As he knows full well, however, when we have a prison population that is running at boiling hot, we cannot get into our prisons and do rehabilitation work. Yesterday, I was really pleased to visit His Majesty's Prison Downview and see the vital work being done with the women in that prison, which is really important to achieve rehabilitation on the outside, prevent reoffending and protect the public.

On SDS40, the hon. Member will know that we had to take immediate action within days of coming into office to protect the public, and to ensure we had places in our prisons to lock up high-risk offenders and keep the public safe. Legally, we could only exclude offences, not offenders, and we did introduce a wider set of exclusions than under the last Government's early release

scheme. All offenders released under the scheme are on licence and are subject to recall. We are working to ensure that we never again get into the position of having emergency releases, and that we have prison places available and can work on rehabilitating our prisoners so that they can serve a vital role in society.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Justice Committee member Alex Barros-Curtis.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I was just going to refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am a qualified solicitor, and I am also a member of the Justice Committee under the excellent chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter).

I thank the Minister for the statement and the commitments she has made. I must admit that my head is still spinning from the extraordinary response from the Tories' spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), given their absolute failure over the last 14 years to build the prison places that they legislated for, so we will have no more of that hypocrisy.

I welcome the publication of the 10-year prison capacity strategy, which I know the Justice Committee will scrutinise carefully. Concerningly, however, it notes that we could run out of prison spaces by as early as November 2025. Aside from the findings of the independent sentencing review, when they come, what other steps does the Minister anticipate the Department taking to bridge the potential gap in prison places?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend will know that we are straining every sinew to ensure we get this right. This is a whole-system approach. Justice is a system, and we need every part of it to be working for it to work correctly. My colleague the Prisons Minister in the other place is due to visit Texas to learn from the interesting model there, where offenders earn time off their custodial sentence for good behaviour. Texas has cut crime by a third. We are also looking at new advances in technology to see how they could help. For example, in Singapore artificial intelligence, combined with surveillance cameras, monitors offenders and spots moments that could escalate into violence. That is also being done in the Netherlands. A lot of options are available to us.

The other thing we are doing in the immediate term is increasing the sentencing powers of magistrates courts from six to 12 months' maximum imprisonment for a single triable either way offence. That will also help us to bear down on the large remand population by ensuring that those on remand are sentenced far more quickly.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): This strategy does little more than commit to deliver the 14,000 places that the previous Government committed to delivering, except that it will cost more and take longer. To what extent have the Government factored in optimism bias when working out the delivery timeframe?

Alex Davies-Jones: Honestly, the display from the Conservative party is staggering given the inheritance we were left with, and there is still no humility whatsoever. We have published a realistic strategy for how we plan

to deliver this, with contingency timelines built in, offering real solutions. As I said, this is less of the rhetoric than we got from the Conservative party, and more actual action on delivering these places. You failed to build—*[Interruption.]* The Conservative party failed to build these places, but we are going to deliver them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Exactly. The Minister knows that "you" would refer to me, and that would not be appropriate.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Conservative Government's dereliction of duty meant that they failed to deliver 20,000 promised prison places, which exposes the hypocrisy in any Conservative claims to be the party of law and order. I welcome the new Government's 10-year prison capacity statement. Does the Minister agree that publishing an annual statement on prison places will allow transparency, accountability, and affirm that Labour is the party of law and order?

Alex Davies-Jones: I could not agree more. The Labour party is being honest with the public about the situation that we inherited. We are publishing our plan to be transparent about how we will deliver, and we will commit to doing that annually to ensure that the public are never again left in the dark about the state of our prisons.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Since this Government introduced their early release policy, we have seen criminals who should be in jail out on the streets enjoying themselves with champagne, with one even thanking the Prime Minister personally. Instead of letting those dangerous people out of jail, it would be much better to sort out the remand backlog and the increase of 7,000 in the number of prison places taken up by people on remand. Instead, the Government are capping the number of sitting days. The Minister says that the number of sitting days is adequate. At what point will the number of prisoners in our jails waiting on remand be returned to the pre-pandemic level? What is the date by which that will be achieved?

Alex Davies-Jones: I have outlined the actions we are taking to tackle the remand population in our prisons. We are dealing with the inheritance that we received from the previous Government. We have increased Crown court sitting days and increased sentencing powers for our magistrates courts. We will publish our plans in due course, and we are being transparent with the House. The Lord Chancellor will be in front of the Justice Committee next week, and I am sure she will be happy to answer those questions then.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Having listened to some of the contributions from Conservative Members, I cannot quite believe my ears. They are coming to this place and suggesting that they should be proud of leaving this Government a justice system with fewer than 100 places in men's prisons across England and Wales. Would a better response to the statement not have been a much simpler, one-word answer—sorry?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. Sorry seems to be the hardest word for the Conservative party. This Government have started as

[Alex Davies-Jones]

they mean to go on. That is why within the first six months we have already delivered nearly 500 places, and pledged to continue building the remaining places of that 20,000-place prison building programme. We have also launched the independent sentencing review, in parallel with our 10-year prison capacity strategy. That review will ensure that sentences deliver better outcomes for prisoners and protect the public, and that we will always have space to lock up dangerous offenders.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): The Minister likes to talk about inheritances, but if she checks the record, she will discover that prison overcrowding was higher in 2008, 2009 and 2010 than it was in 2024. It is true that we brought back longer sentences for the worst offenders. That was the right thing to do. It is also true that crime came down.

There are two enormous areas that the Minister needs to work on—or perhaps I should say continue the work we were doing in government. One is the population on remand and the length of time people spend on remand. The other is at a different point in someone's sentence, and the length of time they wait for a Parole Board hearing. We need more capacity to replace the older capacity with newer prisons, which are more conducive to rehabilitation and to getting people on to a stable path and into work.

I welcome the Minister's continuing with the previous Government's programme. I just hope it is more successful than when Gordon Brown's Government tried to build the Titan prisons. If they had been built, we would not be having this conversation at all.

Alex Davies-Jones: I believe the right hon. Gentleman was the prisons Minister in the previous Government, so he will know all too well the impact that this situation has had, yet they failed to build the amount of prison places we need and there is no apology, yet again, to the British public for the crisis we have inherited. We need a resilient and functioning prison estate to ensure that prisoners have the opportunity to be rehabilitated, as the right hon. Gentleman said. We are tackling our remand population, increasing the sentencing powers of magistrates, and building those new prison places he mentioned. As I said, we are taking action and delivering on our promises, whereas the previous Government failed to deliver.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): The Minister is aware of my view that it is folly to build new prisons to increase capacity. All we will do is create more prisoners and more overcrowding—it is a supply-led industry. Will she confirm what new ideas will be incorporated into the new prisons? Rehabilitation, not incarceration, is the key to addressing criminality.

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. We cannot build our way out of this problem, and the prison population will only continue to increase more quickly than we can build new prisons. That is why the 10-year prison capacity strategy is just one part of that prolonged solution. The second part is the independent sentencing review, which we have outlined. Focusing on preventing reoffending is crucial to this Government's mission to build safer streets. For example, the Government have committed to halving the prevalence of violence against women and girls and halving knife crime within a decade, and I will work closely with Ministers across Government to ensure that we deliver on those bold ambitions.

LGBT Veterans: Etherton Review

1.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered Lord Etherton's independent review into the treatment of LGBT veterans.

In July last year, Lord Etherton's report on LGBT veterans shone a much needed light on a dark period in Britain's military history: an era between 1967 and 2000 when LGBT people were banned from serving in our armed forces; an era when homophobic bullying, harassment and abuse were widespread; an era when LGBT personnel were demoted, dismissed, or driven out of the forces because of their sexuality. The testimony of those who gave evidence to Lord Etherton's review and who have courageously campaigned for justice are truly harrowing. The very values of a tolerant western democracy that we expected those forces personnel to defend were denied to them. It was profoundly wrong. I have been determined as Defence Secretary that we will continue the work of the previous Government to deal with the injustices suffered by so many LGBT personnel.

I am grateful to Lord Etherton for his work and for his report. I am grateful also for the support of Fighting With Pride and the coalition of more than 20 charities that back its work. I am grateful to them for providing the Government with invaluable guidance and advice on a range of restorative actions, some of which I am able to announce today. I am also grateful for the very small team of officials who have worked from the outset within the MOD on this area. I am grateful, too, for how Members from all parts of the House have come together to recognise the injustice and to support the actions that first the previous Government and now this one are willing to take.

This is unfinished business for Labour. We lifted the ban in 2000. We argued for the Etherton review in the Armed Forces Bill in 2001. We welcomed the Etherton review's recommendations and publication. In opposition, we called on the previous Government to deliver on the previous Defence Secretary's pledge for a debate in this House to, as he said,

"make sure that the House properly debates the report and the Government's response to it".—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 921.]

Today, this Government delivers on that commitment, and it is an honour for me as Defence Secretary to open the debate.

In doing so, I will update the House on the actions we are taking as a new Government to right the historic wrongs to LGBT veterans. First, among the remaining recommendations made by Etherton, I can announce today that we are establishing a financial recognition scheme. When that scheme goes live tomorrow, it will mean that almost all of the 49 recommendations made by Lord Etherton will have been delivered. Recommendations 28 and 29 in his report specifically refer to financial award—a tangible payment—to reflect Government accountability and our determination to recognise these historic failings.

I am pleased to announce today that we are launching an LGBT financial recognition scheme, with a total budget of £75 million. That is 50% higher than the level recommended in the Etherton review and the cap set by

the last Government. This financial recognition scheme will open tomorrow, one year to the day since the previous Government responded to Lord Etherton's report.

The scheme provides two types of payment to recognise the discrimination and detriment suffered by LGBT personnel under the ban. The first is for those who were dismissed or discharged. It will be available to veterans who were dismissed or administratively discharged, including officers instructed to resign because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or their gender identity under the ban. The payment will be at a flat rate of £50,000. The second is for those who were impacted in other ways. This LGBT impact payment is open to all those who experienced pain and suffering under the ban, including harassment, intrusive investigations and in some cases imprisonment. The impact payment will be assessed by an independent panel, with tariffs ranging between £1,000 and £20,000 to make the awards fair and proportionate to each individual. The two payments will run concurrently as part of a single financial recognition scheme. We have also set aside funding from the MOD to support those charities that can advise applicants on the schemes.

As a result of the additional funding we have allocated, payments can reach up to a maximum of £70,000 for those who were most impacted and most hurt and who qualify for both awards. The scheme will remain open for two years, and applications for payments from the scheme from terminally ill veterans will be prioritised. All payments, from both schemes, will be exempt from income tax and will not affect benefits that applicants may receive. The scheme will open tomorrow morning, and fuller details will be online at that point. I hope that our decision to listen to the views expressed on the last Government's plans, to uplift the value of this scheme and to deliver it within one year of the recommendations being accepted demonstrate our profound regret and our determination to do right by our LGBT personnel.

Today, I can make three additional important restorative announcements. First, those who were administratively discharged based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation will be able to apply to get their records set straight. As a result, the ban will be shown as the reason for their discharge, finally removing any blame or dishonour on their record for those who have served. Secondly, we will restore the ranks of veterans who had them reduced as a result of the ban, ensuring that they regain the rank they rightfully earned in service. Thirdly, while not within the scope of Lord Etherton's review, which covered the ban between 1967 and 2000, we also want to acknowledge any LGBT veterans who served before 1967 and who may have suffered under the ban. We are taking further action to recognise their service and contribution. As a result, these veterans can now apply to have their administrative discharges qualified, their rank restored if it had been reduced, and their certificates of service reissued. Former officers may also apply to have their service details published in the *Gazette* as part of the official record.

Working on these restorative measures and meeting affected veterans have not been easy, but they have shown me how much progress our modern armed forces are making. There has been a change in culture and a change in prevailing attitudes, and Britain's military today is more inclusive and more tolerant than in the past. Each of the services has held presentation ceremonies

[John Healey]

to welcome LGBT veterans back into the family, where they have always belonged. While there has been change, and there has been progress, there is no place for prejudice in the modern armed forces. We still have more to do to reinforce zero tolerance of any discrimination or abuse anywhere in defence.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I have a constituent who was not a member of the armed forces, but a member of the secret service. He lost his job in the 1980s because he was gay. There is no compensation for him at the moment. I suspect it may not be the responsibility of my right hon. Friend, but does he not agree that there should be parity of treatment across the forces? We rely on our secret service as much as we do our armed forces. Surely what is fair for them should be fair for those who have given their time and risked their lives in the service of our country.

John Healey: My right hon. Friend makes the powerful point that this discrimination, harassment and abuse—systematic in some cases—is not and was not confined in the past to the military. That concern has been raised by civilians at times within the wider defence field. I and Ministers in this team are as concerned about it there as in the military, but I think she will appreciate that we ask those who put on a uniform for our country to take on a special role, to step forward and to be willing to give their lives to defend the rest of us. When those basic values that they fight for and that our country stands for are denied to them as part of their service, that is a deep injustice, and Lord Etherton's report gives us the basis for recognition and restoration. That is the focus of my concern in this debate.

In September, the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) and I were proud to present the first Etherton ribbons to veterans, as a way of acknowledging the mistreatment of those affected by the ban. The Government are delivering for defence and delivering for LGBT veterans.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I am intervening on my right hon. Friend because I have to chair Westminster Hall in an hour, so I cannot take part in the debate.

My constituent not only lost his career in the Royal Air Force but was subjected to abuse when he was arrested, including constant internal examinations. He was beaten, he was kicked and he was spat at. He was marched across the parade ground to his billet, where his personal belongings were gone through. He was humiliated. Was that sanctioned by the Ministry of Defence at the time? Was it sanctioned by senior officers, or were those individuals working on their own? They acted like sadistic animals towards my constituent. Something needs to be done to investigate that.

John Healey: My hon. Friend has been one of the most consistent and forceful voices on this historic abuse and demands for the Government now to provide some justice. He has raised that case in this House before. I do not know whether his constituent gave evidence to the Etherton review. If he did, he would have been one of over 1,100 individual LGBT veterans

who served and had stories to report to Etherton, often of the sort of abuse that my hon. Friend talked about. It was based on that experience that Etherton made his recommendations. It was based on those recommendations that we make these announcements today. It is from tomorrow that we will open the scheme to start assessing and then making payments that recognise that injustice.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for making a really passionate speech. My constituent Ed Hall, who is in the Gallery, was one of the founding members of the legal campaign to lift the ban. Ed was sacked from the Royal Navy for being gay in 1988 and founded the first legal challenge group in 1994. When I met him, he spoke about people who had been investigated, about humiliation and stigma, and about people who were sacked. Many were made homeless simply because of who they loved and their sexuality. Will the Secretary of State join me in commending my constituent Ed Hall for his tireless work? It has helped to deliver justice today for so many LGBT+ veterans, and which is, as Ed has said,

"A close to the shameful chapter in recent British military history".

John Healey: My hon. Friend makes a moving and powerful intervention. Although courageous, relentless, energetic groups such as Fighting With Pride have in many ways led the charge, that was opened up by the stance of courageous individuals such as her constituent who had suffered but were prepared to speak out about their experience, which gave voice to the experience of many more.

The whole history of social change and progress in our country is based on brave individuals who at the outset will not stand for injustice, will not stand for that sort of harassment and will speak out. They start the movement that can bring pressure on Governments and others to change. The case that she cites stands for a number of LGBT veterans: people who served this country and were not served well by our military at that time. I hope that her constituent and her constituent's family will welcome the announcement, and I hope that they will be able to take advantage of the schemes that we will open up tomorrow.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I welcome the tone and tenor of the Secretary of State's speech. I wonder if he could assist the House in setting out the steps that the Government intend to take to ensure the reliability of gathering data about the size of the cohort who are affected and may be eligible for the compensation scheme.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible point. The shadow Defence Secretary will know—he and his colleagues started this work before the election—that one of, I would argue, the strengths of the announcement and the scheme we are able to put in place today is the close work we have done with veterans' groups and Fighting With Pride, as well as with historians and those with access to records, to make our best assessment of the number of veterans who may be affected and may be eligible, and may therefore want to take advantage of these financial recognition schemes. We have set the budgets for the schemes and set the levels of award in the light of them. We will see how that goes.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I wholeheartedly welcome the Secretary of State's announcement, and in particular the additional funds found to support charities who will help LGBT veterans with their applications. One of my constituents wrote to me with a most harrowing story about how his career in the armed forces ended with an investigation by the Royal Military Police. He said that every aspect of his life had been greatly affected since the initial investigation, with his housing, employment, health and family life all having suffered as a result of the ban, which was ruled illegal in 1999. Will my right hon. Friend outline when eligible LGBT veterans impacted by the ban can expect to receive their financial recognition?

John Healey: They can expect to be able to get the full details from 9 o'clock tomorrow. They can expect to be able to complete the details and respond to the information required from tomorrow. I am conscious that, for many of these veterans, time is ticking, and I am determined that the scheme will not take long to make its proper decisions. Therefore, soon into the new year, LGBT veterans who are confirmed as eligible should expect payment.

I look forward, by the way, to the large number of contributions that there will be in the debate. As I wind up, I want to emphasise two or three points. This is a Government delivering for defence. This is a Government delivering for LGBT veterans. On behalf of the Government, I want to apologise without reservation for the pain and injustice caused during this dark chapter of our armed forces' history. The treatment of LGBT veterans was a moral stain on our nation. It is shameful that those who put themselves in harm's way to defend our country were treated in such callous and unjust ways.

Our Government will now right those wrongs of the past. That is why we are providing financial recognition to veterans. It is why we are making sure that payments will be fair, proportionate and prompt, and it is why we are delivering on the remaining recommendations of the Etherton report. We will learn the lessons from that report. We will never forget the pain and trauma that LGBT veterans were subjected to between 1967 and 2000. We will root out any remaining prejudice and abuse wherever it rears its head in the forces and we will look to build a more diverse, stronger military that better reflects the society that it serves and protects; a military in which everyone can serve without fearing injustice or discrimination. That is the one nation mission that the Government are committed to: a modern, representative, unified armed forces, proud to keep Britain secure at home and strong abroad.

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

2.9 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Let me start by sincerely thanking Lord Etherton and his team for undertaking this hugely important review, commissioned under the previous Government and taken forward by the present one. As in any such situation, the financial quantum will come under scrutiny, but the Opposition recognise that the £75 million announced today is 50% above Lord Etherton's recommendations, and we support and welcome it.

In my ministerial and shadow roles, this is the first time that I have spoken on the issue of homosexuality in the armed forces, not having had responsibility for veterans at the Ministry of Defence. I regard it as a great personal honour to stand here and put on record my reflections as shadow Secretary of State. First, I recognise the terrible pain, humiliation and degrading treatment experienced by far too many people who simply wanted one thing: to serve their country.

Secondly, alongside the Secretary of State, I echo the previous Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), and the former Secretary of State Ben Wallace, in apologising unreservedly, given our position as a party in government for a significant part of the time that the ban remained in the military, long after the law for the rest of the country had changed. Thirdly, ultimately this is about recognising that the values of freedom, patriotism and public service are not confined to any part of society, but are common to all. We stand stronger as a nation and our armed forces are best served if we recruit every talent from every possible walk of life.

Lord Etherton has shone a bright light on a shameful, historic wrong, and I am grateful to everyone who submitted a response to the call for evidence. I appreciate that for every person affected, that would have been very difficult—dare I say traumatic. It was right that on the day that Lord Etherton's report was published in July last year, at Prime Minister's questions my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton said that the ban was

“an appalling failure of the British state”.—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 897.]

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Earlier this year, a veteran from Bailden in my constituency contacted me. Victoria served in the women's Royal Army Corps, but was dismissed due to her sexuality. She was subjected to imprisonment and mistreatment, which many would consider abuse. As a result, Victoria has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder for over 40 years. I welcome the Government's commitment to raising the compensation funds to £75 million for veterans such as Victoria. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman supports that, and I ask him to join me in welcoming today's historic announcement, which completes the important work that the Conservative party began when it was in government to deliver on the recommendations of the Etherton review.

James Cartlidge: Victoria and all those with first-hand experience, or anyone who has read the testimonies or received constituency correspondence, such as that mentioned by the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), will know how harrowing and horrific those experiences were. They are at the front of our minds as we debate this subject. I join the hon. Lady in welcoming what the Government have announced today.

As the report makes abundantly clear, the ban on LGBT people serving in the military saw brave service personnel face awful sexual abuse, violence, harassment and bullying. Lord Etherton's report also found that invasive investigations undertaken into individuals' sexuality caused long-lasting and severe impacts for some. It found that many veterans subjected to the ban developed mental health issues including PTSD, and experienced difficulty with their employment, finances and homelessness,

[James Cartlidge]

as we have heard. They found it hard to form long-term relationships due to shame and trust issues and, perhaps inevitably, some turned to alcohol and drugs. Compounding that, due to an absence of transition support, many veterans felt isolated.

Tragically, the stress caused by the ban means that we have lost LGBT veterans to suicide, and others have contemplated it. When meeting campaigners I was struck by a particularly powerful point: what they want most of all is to feel a full and equal part of today's veterans family. As a House, I know we speak with one voice in saying to everyone affected: you are as much a veteran as anyone else who served this country.

The financial package announced today will not undo the past, but it means that both parties in government have taken significant steps to deliver redress. Important progress has been made in recent years to improve the experience of LGBT personnel, particularly in terms of training. The Home Office's disregards and pardons scheme was set up to ensure that those who received a conviction for same-sex sexual offences can have that conviction wiped. The Office for Veterans' Affairs awarded £250,000 last year to LGBT organisations to provide support services for impacted veterans. That was on top of the £45,000 provided in 2022 to help organisations gather evidence for the review.

In office, we launched the Etherton review and accepted the intent behind each and every one of Lord Etherton's recommendations. We were committed to implementing them in good time. We set deadlines and made good progress, and we will support the Government as they conclude that work. We understand that 38 of the 49 recommendations have been delivered—the Veterans Minister is welcome to correct me in his wind-up, but I am sure that we would all welcome his providing clarity on the timeline for delivering the remaining recommendations.

For all the work of the previous Veterans Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), it was never going to be straightforward coming up with a deliverable package of financial compensation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) said in his intervention, there is the crucial issue of gathering data, which is complicated. That being so, I welcome the two-pronged approach to the scheme, and in particular the fact that payments will be exempt from income tax, although I believe that means that the timing is linked to the passing of the Finance Bill.

My understanding is that those affected will be able to apply under the dismissed or discharged payment scheme from tomorrow but, inevitably, the impact cohort will take longer due to the involvement of the independent panel. I urge Ministers to keep us posted on how the scheme works in practice. As the Secretary of State said, time is ticking and we all want to see this resolved and money awarded as soon as possible. We fully support the plans to restore rank and amend official reasons for discharge, and ask the Minister to clarify when those affected will be able to ask for that to take place.

Finally, I pay tribute to the many colleagues who have campaigned on this issue with passion and persistence, and to those in the last Government for their work getting us here, particularly Ben Wallace, Johnny Mercer and the previous Veterans Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire. Finally, I pay

tribute to Craig Jones, Caroline Paige and Ed Hall of Fighting With Pride, for their extraordinary effort to campaign, raise awareness and deliver this change. They have helped to ensure that a tangible righting of a deep wrong is now happening in practice, underscoring the equal place for people of all backgrounds in our veterans community and our armed forces.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. As Members can see, a large number of speakers wish to contribute to a very important debate. I have no plans as yet to impose a time limit, but perhaps Members might be respectful about the number of interventions they take.

2.17 pm

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): I warmly welcome today's debate, and I thank the Defence Secretary and the Veterans Minister for the way that they have gone about this, working with LGBT veterans and charities such as Fighting With Pride, and building on the work of the previous Government. I know that the Defence Secretary and the Veterans Minister care deeply about this issue. The Defence Secretary rightly said that this was unfinished business for Labour, and the Veterans Minister assured me when I first raised this matter with him many months ago that the scheme would be up and running by the end of the year. We can put that under the "promises kept" part of the Government's record, and I am grateful for that.

This is a profound injustice and a moral stain on the nation, as the Defence Secretary rightly said a few moments ago. Thousands of servicemen and women over many decades were interrogated, persecuted and punished for their sexuality—people who only wanted to serve our nation, but were let down in the most profound way. A constituent of mine in Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven told me that he felt "washed in shame" at the way he was discharged, imprisoned and discarded by the RAF, despite his exemplary service record. Thousands more veterans fall into that bracket, some of whom we have already heard about this afternoon and, hopefully, we will hear more about.

Those people lost their career, their pay, their pension and often their family and friends, but also, as the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, their sense of self, value and belonging. The emotional, psychological and physical impact is still being understood. That is the central point of this debate and the injustice we face—how do we ever go about rectifying something on such a scale? Harder still, how do we put a value on it and a process around it?

I thank Lord Etherton for his work on this issue over many years, and recognise that the Defence Secretary and Veterans Minister have worked incredibly hard to build on the work of the previous Government to deliver this hugely welcome financial recognition scheme, which will be set up tomorrow. I know it will be welcomed by veterans in my constituency and others across the country. I will do everything I can to encourage the many LGBT veterans in my constituency to apply for it, as I hope other Members will, and as I know the Defence Secretary will.

I welcome the increase in funding that has been allocated—a 50% increase is not insignificant. This is a significant commitment from this Government, and it is

welcome. I also welcome the creation of two clear funding schemes: first, for those with formal discharge and dismissal; secondly, importantly, for the many who never suffered that discharge and dismissal, but who suffered much wider loss—emotional, financial and physical—as many Members have spoken about.

As the Defence Secretary has said, it is also incredibly important that the option of restoring rank and removing the record of discharge has been brought forward—a point raised by many LGBT veterans I have met in my constituency surgeries and around Brighton Kempdown. It is, in some senses, as important as the financial measures announced, so I welcome that, too.

However, if I may be so bold, I would also welcome clarity on a couple of points. First, what estimate has the Ministry of Defence made of the number of people likely to apply for each of the two tranches under the scheme? Secondly, what estimate has been made of what the average payment is likely to be? No two cases are the same, as the Defence Secretary said earlier. Of course, the headline figure of £70,000 is very welcome, but how many people does the Secretary of State believe will ever receive that? How many are likely to fall into those two tranches? I would welcome some clarity on that.

Thirdly, how does the Secretary of State respond to the concern that by keeping a hard cap on compensation—albeit a significantly increased one—many applicants will ultimately receive quite low sums, particularly given the level of injustice that we have all stated? Fourthly, will he explain why there is a two-year cap on applications, and what the Government will be doing to ensure that all who are eligible will come forward and will be able to apply? As we know, and as we have all heard from looking at this over many months, many people are only just willing to come forward on this issue. It might take much more time to reach the many people who have suffered this injustice. I am slightly concerned about that cap, and I would welcome some clarity on it.

I am conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know there is a lot of work to do to get these schemes up and running and to get the compensation out as quickly as possible. Today is an incredibly welcome step on that journey. As we have heard, it has been a very long journey for many people—decades in the making—and time is running out to deliver justice. Above all, I thank those who have made that journey possible, especially the extraordinary LGBT veterans whom I have had the pleasure of meeting in the past five months, and Fighting With Pride, which has done so much for so many to achieve the progress we are discussing today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, I will just make the point that it is imperative that Members be present for the opening statements of any debate if they wish to be called—perhaps particularly so for those on the Front Benches.

2.23 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): We are here today to discuss the implementation of the recommendations laid out in Lord Etherton's independent review into the treatment of LGBT veterans, following the unjust and appalling treatment of LGBT+ veterans who served in

our armed forces under the shadow of a discriminatory and dehumanising ban. It is not just a matter of historical injustice, but an ongoing fight for dignity, recognition and fairness for those who gave so much to our country and were repaid with shameful betrayal. We must also recognise all those who served before 1967, and the injustice they faced before that time.

Between 1967 and 2000, thousands of LGBT+ personnel were dismissed or forced out of the military simply because of who they were. The anti-gay ban had and continues to have an enormous impact on people's lives; careers were destroyed, lives upended and futures taken away. LGBT+ veterans were outed to their friends and family without their consent, facing extreme stigma. Not only did they lose their jobs, but they had their medals removed and were stripped of their pensions. In some cases, a conviction made it impossible for people to move on and rebuild their lives due to the barriers a criminal record creates when trying to find employment. It is indefensible that those who put their lives on the line for our country should continue to be treated with disregard.

The independent review by Lord Etherton lays bare the devastating impact of this discriminatory policy on LGBT+ veterans and makes 49 recommendations to address those wrongs. While progress has been made, this process is far from complete. The Government must ensure that all the review's recommendations are acted on as swiftly and comprehensively as possible.

Let me share two harrowing examples from constituents of my colleagues, which illustrate the enduring trauma caused by this policy. This morning, I met Michael Sansom, who sits in the Public Gallery today, who is a constituent of Monica Harding MP. He joined the Royal Air Force—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. As a Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Lady, first, should be on the Bench when I am on my feet. Secondly, we must not refer to colleagues by name in the House but by their constituency.

Helen Maguire: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Michael joined the Royal Air Force at just 16 years old, filled with pride and ambition, and served with distinction for five years before his life was shattered in 1992. After innocently sharing details about attending London clubs, Michael became the target of a covert investigation: his barracks were searched in a humiliating manner, exposing deeply personal items such as a romantic letter; he was extensively and inappropriately questioned about his personal life, offered electroconvulsive “conversion” therapy, and underwent what at the time was described as a “medical examination”, but would today be called sexual assault.

Ultimately, Michael was charged with homosexuality and detained for 14 days before his discharge, during which time he was subjected to cruel physical and verbal abuse. Following his discharge, Michael lost not only his career, but his home and his sense of purpose. He was left homeless, battling severe depression and rejection from his family. Despite his immense contributions to lifting the military ban, Michael continues to struggle with the deep scars of his past. He now seeks justice for himself and others who endured similar horrors. The current compensation scheme, capped at £70,000, is an inadequate acknowledgment of the profound harm suffered

[Helen Maguire]

by individuals such as Michael. Michael said to me that he was proud to serve his country, and his country was ashamed of him.

David, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin), also served in the RAF during the 1980s, fulfilling a lifelong dream. However, his career was marred by persistent rumours, bullying and verbal abuse. Despite never being charged, he was subjected to constant surveillance and intimidation. After years enduring shame and distress, David left the RAF following an interview with his commanding officer, who bluntly stated that there was no place for him “in this man’s RAF”. To add insult to injury, David had to buy his way out of the RAF. He spent years unable to live openly as himself, and has faced diminished career prospects and a significantly impacted pension. Like Michael, David finds the proposed compensation deeply disappointing, and urges the Government to reconsider their approach.

These stories are not isolated incidents. They represent a systematic failure that affected thousands of LGBT+ veterans. Lord Etherton’s review revealed the immense toll this policy took on mental health, with 87% of LGBT+ veterans reporting that their dismissal impacted their mental health, and 75% stating that their finances had been affected.

The Government have accepted 38 of the 49 recommendations made in the review, which I acknowledge, and have also acknowledged the need for compensation. I am also pleased that the total budget for the compensation scheme has now been increased. However, the flat cap of £50,000 for dismissed or discharged applicants is inadequate. Veterans charities have rightly called it “inadequate and unacceptably low”. For people who lost their careers, homes and futures, it is a small offering. Justice demands better. It is unconscionable that veterans such as Michael and David are left fighting for recognition and fairness after already enduring so much. The LGBT impact payment of between £1,000 and £20,000 is also unacceptably low for what one veteran described as “state-sanctioned sexual assault”.

The Liberal Democrats are unequivocal in our stance: LGBT+ veterans deserve full and fair compensation for the harm they suffered. We call on the Government to reassess the compensation scheme, ensuring that it truly reflects the gravity of the injustices endured. We welcome the four non-financial measures outlined by the Secretary of State today for veterans who served before 1967, but it is vital that all 49 recommendations of the Etherton review are implemented swiftly and comprehensively, including the return of medals, clarification of pension rights and the establishment of a memorial to honour LGBT+ veterans.

Justice delayed is justice denied, and the Government must expedite support for elderly or ill veterans such as Joe Ousalice, who served with distinction for 18 years but now fears he may die before seeing justice. Joe deserves to have suitable compensation swiftly. He dedicated his life to serving our country and asks for very little in return.

This debate also reminds us that discrimination in the armed forces has not been limited to LGBT+ personnel. The 2021 Atherton report highlighted the pervasive challenges faced by women in the military, including bullying,

harassment and sexual assault. Some 62% of female veterans reported experiencing some form of abuse during their service. Such systemic issues are unacceptable and undermine the very values our armed forces are meant to uphold. We must ensure that the recommendations of the Atherton report are fully implemented and that diversity, inclusion and respect become cornerstones of military culture.

The armed forces represent the best of our nation. They are made up of individuals who have pledged to protect us, often at great personal cost. For too long, LGBT+ veterans were denied the respect and recognition they deserved. It is time to right that wrong. The Liberal Democrats stand firmly with our LGBT+ veterans. We will continue to fight for fair compensation, the implementation of all recommendations from the Etherton and Atherton reports, and a culture of inclusivity in the armed forces. Let us honour the sacrifices of these brave individuals by delivering justice swiftly.

2.30 pm

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving an update to the House. I also thank him for showing a clear understanding of the hurt and pain suffered by LGBT veterans over the years. It is important to acknowledge that no amount of financial compensation will ever wipe the painful memories away. However, these are clear steps towards cleaning the stain on our nation that these violations have caused. As Lord Etherton says in his independent report, the failure to get this right “risks prolonging the sense of injustice rather than achieving closure.”

This debate, of course, goes beyond financial redress. It is about correcting an injustice lived by veterans who lost their livelihood and their place in society. It is about acting to repair long-lasting damage that cost many men and women their physical and mental health. It is about giving people back their sense of pride and freedom. They defended our freedoms, while we were denying them their own.

One such individual is a constituent of mine whom I sat with in November as he explained the very real horrors he suffered. He joined the Royal Navy in October 1979 shortly before his 17th birthday. He trained originally as a naval airman, and then later as a marine engineer. In 1982, after three years in service, he was accosted in the middle of the night by four military police, placed in a blacked-out van and taken to the Royal Navy hospital, Stonehouse. There, he was forced to strip and was subjected to what he calls “an invasive medical procedure” carried out by Royal Navy doctors. In front of an audience of military police, this physical abuse was just the start. With his uniform given to forensics, he was issued a dirty dressing gown, driven to a cell block and placed in a strip cell. He encountered silent guards. He was given his meals on the floor. He was accompanied to the toilet and to the showers.

The silence continued for three days. My constituent was never offered any legal advice, nor any legal representation. He was interrogated several times by senior officials, who told him they saw him as a threat to other servicemen because of his homosexuality. He was told he would be detained until such time as they believed it safe to release him. He was not charged with

any offence, nor was he aware of when he would be released. For 20 days, he was consigned to a strip cell with the light permanently on, and with silent guards banned from talking to him.

During that time, my constituent's father contacted the Ministry of Defence in London to say that his sister, who had leukaemia, was now being kept on a life support machine. His father wanted to give him his chance to say goodbye, but was told he was at sea. When my constituent was released into the custody of the regulating branch of HMS Drake, he was told his sister had passed away.

Months went by and, while not detained, my constituent was classed as an "offender at large". On 28 March 1983, without warning, every available rating and officer not on duty at HMS Drake was ordered to gather in the gym. Alongside others who had also previously been detained for being homosexual, he was ordered to dress in full dress uniform. They were then marched into the gym. There, in front of an audience of hundreds, an officer with sword drawn stood in front of him and removed his cap. The captain of HMS Drake read out numerous charges in full graphic detail—charges that had never been put to him. His description of the shouts, insults and threats from a baying crowd was awful to listen to. No attempt was made to silence the crowd. He was then dismissed from the service with immediate effect. He was handed his civilian clothes and dumped on the streets of Plymouth far from home with £54 to his name.

The long-lasting effects of that experience were—his word—"catastrophic". Drug and alcohol addiction plagued his life for almost 30 years, with a vicious cycle of precarious work and unemployment. At this point, I want to quote directly from him:

"I carried with me a sense of great shame, for not only was being gay seen as criminal still in the armed forces, but something you were almost forced to declare you had been dismissed for from the armed forces every time you applied for work. Further to this, I spent those 30 years of self-destruction believing I deserved the treatment I received, for I had been caught and as such blamed myself for the mess my life became."

Only 30 years later has he been able to recover a sense of pride, self-worth and self-confidence. He subsequently went to university and gained a first-class honours degree in English literature and creative writing, and recently obtained a master's research degree in English literature, both at the University of Chester.

That is just a snapshot—a small part of the physical and mental health impacts that the LGBT ban had on my constituent's life. We have an opportunity to bring an honourable end to this dishonourable attack against members of our own armed forces. The way LGBT armed forces personnel were treated does not reflect today's armed forces. I welcome the fact that Lord Etherton and the Ministry of Defence have worked together with an incredible community of veterans to achieve this announcement today.

Finally, I urge the Government to continue to work with the community to promote the scheme and ensure that every veteran affected by the ban receives the compensation they deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It might be helpful if I provide a small business update to hon. and right hon. Members. The second debate that

was scheduled for this afternoon will now not go ahead. That gives this very important debate the full time up until 5 o'clock, which will certainly enable me to get all Members in.

2.37 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Soon, many of us will be held rapt by television's "SAS Rogue Heroes", which returns to screens soon. The series will focus on the elite unit as, back from initial success in the desert war, it faces the much sterner challenge of Ayrshire, where it was briefly based until it went into action in Italy and occupied Europe. With legendary founder David Stirling languishing in Colditz, the focus will be on new commanding officer Blair "Paddy" Mayne. Mayne should by rights have been decorated with the Victoria Cross, our premier gallantry award, for his action rescuing pinned-down troops in Oldenburg, Germany, in 1945. Yet the award was downgraded. This was perhaps because of Mayne's enthusiastic off-duty drinking and his penchant for punching senior officers, but it might also have something to do with the suggestion that he was a homosexual.

It is quite remarkable that such a martial giant should be doomed to be "the bravest man who never won a VC" over something so entirely irrelevant, yet today we must confront the reality that outmoded views of LGBT people persisted in the military for far longer than they ought to have done. Nothing can be done now to right the wrong done to Blair Mayne, but the Government are addressing the suffering of people very much alive today. Take my constituent Alan, once a teenager proud to serve in RAF blue. He told me:

"Arrested for being gay, I was sexually assaulted by the Special Investigation Branch and made to endure horrific, humiliating treatment during a gruelling three-day interview. As a 18-year-old kid, I lost all contact with my family and attempted to take my life five times due to the way I was treated. The long-term effect this has had on my mental health and family connections has not been easy."

The Government are in a position to deliver the element that veterans such as both Blair Mayne and my constituent Alan would recognise as vital to all military operations: speed. As we have heard, the clock is ticking and time is moving on. The Minister for Veterans and People, the hon. and gallant Gentleman who will sum up the debate, is no stranger to combat, but he may yet find the Treasury a difficult opponent when it comes to the timings; indeed, he may need the courage of Mayne to prevail in that struggle. We must all hope that this scheme is streamlined and delivered apace, in a way that the Post Office Horizon compensation system was not.

2.40 pm

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): I thank Members on both sides of the House for the many compelling and moving speeches that we have heard so far today.

When I made my maiden speech in this Chamber during the general debate on remembrance, I spoke of the bravery and personal sacrifice of all those who have served and continue to serve our country in our armed forces. When reading the testimonies in this review of veterans who have relived their trauma, pain and suffering in the pursuit of justice, we are once again reminded of that bravery and personal sacrifice. There can be no

[Tom Rutland]

doubt in anyone's mind that they belonged in our armed forces, and that in banning them we did a great disservice to them and to our country.

The policy of banning LGBT people from serving is rightly referred to as a stain on the history of the UK's armed forces, but the evidence of the culture of homophobia, bullying, blackmail, sexual assaults, abusive and humiliating investigations and medical examinations—as if being gay were a disease to be remedied—goes beyond a mere stain, and is, at its very mildest, a shameful and reprehensible chapter in our history. These are people who wanted to serve their country and did serve their country, yet all that their country served them was a P45, dismissing or discharging them not on the basis of their performance, but on the basis of who they were. Although after a dreadfully long 33 years the policy was eventually lifted, we know that, as with many abuses, our LGBT veterans—the victims of this policy—have suffered appalling consequences for the rest of their lives.

That is what makes this review and this debate so important. We must recognise that these are not dark tales of times gone by, and that this injustice is still having a real effect on people to this very day—people like my constituent Chris, who bravely gave evidence to Lord Etherton's review board about his own dismissal in 1984. He came to one of my first constituency surgeries and moved me almost to tears, and I was proud to march alongside him in this year's Remembrance Sunday parade. Chris served in Northern Ireland; he volunteered for the Falklands; he received an air officer commanding commendation; he gained promotion to corporal on his return to the UK; and, while originally enlisted for six years, he had aspirations to serve our country—to serve his country—for much longer.

However, once Chris's secret was out, and after six months of not knowing what was going to happen to him, during which he was placed in the psychiatric wing of a military hospital, medicated daily, considered a security threat and investigated by the special investigation branch, he was dishonourably discharged despite a glowing report of his service career. He was booted out and left to fend for himself with no support as he grappled with the rapid transition to civilian life, financial hardship, and suicidal thoughts.

In meetings and correspondence with me, Chris has talked of his pride in being a member of the armed forces and the love that he had for the Air Force. He has said that when his secret was out, it was not just his career that was dashed, but his life as well. That point is important: this injustice was not just a career setback, but something that ruined lives and took away time and opportunity that can never be given back. While we are thankfully a different country today—in no small part owing to the last Labour Government's lifting of the ban—it is right that we address the wrongs of the past, and I must therefore turn to the subject of compensation. No amount of money can undo the wrongs of the past, but I am delighted that the Government have announced a 50% increase in the total compensation fund from £50 million to £75 million, with those affected able to receive up to £70,000, and a flat rate of £50,000 for all those eligible for the LGBT dismissed or discharged payment.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Veterans who suffered from this abhorrent abuse, including a constituent of mine who is up in the Gallery today, suffered the most shocking experiences of brutal rape and assault, and bravely want their story to be told. Does the hon. Member agree that funds should be allocated among the victims on the basis of the severity of their cases, as a small recompense for the vast horrors that they have had to endure and, psychologically, continue to endure?

Tom Rutland: I agree with the hon. Member.

Referring to previous cases and the range of amounts awarded, the review states:

“An amount which falls below that range...risks prolonging a sense of injustice rather than achieving closure”.

I am glad that the Government are not taking that risk. I am also glad that Government recognise that some veterans impacted by the ban are seriously unwell. It is right that those individuals will be prioritised, and that money is being set aside to fund key charities to help LGBT veterans with their applications, which can be submitted from tomorrow.

However, this is not just about money but about pride in service. Given that many LGBT veterans had their ranks taken away and were dishonourably discharged, I wholeheartedly welcome today's announcement that ranks will be restored and discharge reasons amended so that they reflect and honour the service of veterans who were impacted.

Finally, I want to add a personal comment. As a citizen of this great country, I know that the freedoms and opportunities I enjoy have been secured by the bravery and sacrifice of our armed forces, and as a gay man, I know that the rights that I can almost take for granted were hard fought for, and hard won, by those who went before me, who spoke up against injustice and campaigned for change—often at great personal cost, and often with the knowledge that they might never know, experience or benefit from the change and the future that they spent their lives working towards. Today gives us a chance to thank both those groups, and to recognise that they are not distinct but overlapping, because there have always been people like Chris, gay and serving their country. Chris served his country with pride at a time when his country was not proud to take him for who he was. Today, he can hear his Member of Parliament, and so many others, say, “We are proud, we are thankful, and we are sorry.”

2.46 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): As has been said today, it is almost extraordinary now, in 2024, to think that for so long the UK armed forces upheld a ban on LGBT+ personnel. The ban allowed for the legal discharge of LGBT+ individuals from their duties, and in some cases it meant that people were criminally prosecuted. LGBT+ veterans were outed to their families and friends without their consent, forced to endure stigma and discrimination. They lost their jobs, and had their medals and their pensions taken from them. Some were criminally convicted simply for being themselves. This has made it nearly impossible for them to rebuild their lives, as they have faced significant barriers to finding employment and moving forward.

My constituent Stephen Purves, from Haywards Heath, is among the thousands who were so deeply wronged. Stephen was the last RAF officer to go to prison for

being gay. He served—indeed, endured—six months in a civilian prison, and he did so solely as a result of being himself. To add insult to injury, he was stripped of his pension. He was court-martialled and dismissed in disgrace from the RAF in 1985. He should have received a pension from the age of 38; he did not.

Financially, Stephen was left in ruins. He has had to work far harder to make ends meet ever since. That financial insecurity, coupled with the difficulty of finding employment with a criminal conviction, is just one of the reasons he was left mentally scarred. He tells me that those scars remain. He has been left to battle with the mental health repercussions of this scandal for decades. As well as the obvious and severe stresses and strains of the financial situation that he was left in, he has endured stigmatisation, isolation and social exclusion.

It is indefensible that those who served our country and put their lives on the line for our safety and freedom were treated in that way. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are committed to ensuring that LGBT+ veterans receive the justice that they deserve. That absolutely includes guaranteeing fair compensation for every affected veteran. I welcome the increased compensation announced today, but I am sorry to say that I do not think the maximum award of £70,000 is sufficient, given the other compensation schemes announced by the Government, including for the Post Office Horizon scandal. I do not think that that compensation is sufficient for someone like Steve, who lost his career and his liberty, who went bankrupt, and who suffers to this day. I urge the Government to go further.

2.49 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): In the 1980s, aged 18, my constituent Robert moved from Scotland to sunny Weston-super-Mare to pursue a bright career at RAF Locking, which was then a vital part of the RAF's technical training, radio and radar network. However, not long after moving to Weston, Robert was questioned by the special investigations branch about being a practising homosexual. Very soon after that, his career in the RAF was over, and the shame and embarrassment cast a long and powerful shadow over the rest of his life. Robert was unable to return to Scotland because of the hostility and rejection associated with being gay. After being treated so terribly by the state that he was working so hard to protect, it took Robert a long time to be able to live a happy, healthy and fulfilled life.

For so many gay people over many generations, moving away from the home and family was a way of finding acceptance, or at least anonymity, and an escape from judgment and shame. For Robert, like for so many others—myself included—Weston-super-Mare is a place of sanctuary and healing. Our town looks after people, and I am very proud of that.

Over the past decade, the RAF and our other armed forces have become international beacons of inclusion, demonstrating that who we are is no barrier to serving our country. Today's announcement is a profound statement of who we are as a country and, importantly, it reminds us that we are stronger and better defended because of that openness and candour.

There are some things, however, that only a Government can and should do. The independent review by Lord Etherton is a powerful move towards justice, and so

many people are grateful to him for his diligence and compassion. Today's announcement follows the Government's commitments to the victims of the contaminated blood and Post Office scandals. Those are profound acts by the state to apologise to and rebuild trust with those who have waited far too long for fair treatment.

I am grateful to the Defence Secretary, the Minister for Veterans and People, Fighting With Pride, and the previous Government for their work to right this wrong. I hope that the thousands of affected veterans, including my constituent Robert in Weston, will receive meaningful justice.

2.52 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Like the Front Benchers, I want to start with an apology. I am sorry that anyone had to go through this. As has been said, the compensation does not make up for the treatment that victims received or fix the situation. It still happened, and I have been pleased to hear, from everyone who has spoken so far, the recognition that it happened but should never have happened. I will talk a little about some of the speeches that have been made, but first I have a number of questions for the Minister about the compensation scheme.

I listened carefully when the Secretary of State talked about how the scheme will work. I understood from what he said—although I may be wrong, so it would be helpful if the Minister clarified—that there will be two pots. One pot will be for flat payments of £50,000 to people who were dismissed or discharged. The Secretary of State used the words “instructed to resign”. A little clarity on what that means would be helpful. If people were sat down and told, “You must resign,” does that count as an instruction, or would it be an instruction only if they were given a letter formally telling them to resign? Where is the bar by which the flat payment of £50,000 is judged?

The Secretary of State seemed to suggest that the other payment was for two different groups. It is for those who have suffered hardships in addition to the discharge—imprisonment or additional discrimination, for example—but I was not sure whether it is also open to those who were not discharged but did suffer discrimination as a result of their sexuality. Does it fulfil those two purposes of being both a top-up payment and a payment of recompense for those who experienced more minor suffering than a discharge? Some clarity would be helpful.

The scheme's two-year time period has been mentioned. Although I appreciate that people need to know the closing date, it would be helpful if the Government committed to undertaking some sort of review at, say, the one-year point to ensure that the scheme is operating as intended, that as many people as possible have applied and that the process is going smoothly. This would allow the Government to say, “We think two years is adequate, because we reckon that 90% of people have applied in the first year,” or, “We don't think two years is appropriate, and we therefore think the scheme should be extended to ensure that everyone who is entitled to this compensation can get it.”

Will people who are currently overseas be able to apply? The hon. Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward) talked about people losing their sense of self, and the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) said that some people had

[Kirsty Blackman]

to flee because they wanted to leave their trauma behind, and may now be overseas as a direct or indirect result of their treatment. Will they still be able to apply to the compensation scheme and to receive compensation, regardless of where they currently live?

Can the Minister assure us that the charitable support will have a geographic spread? For instance, if there are charities that work only in England, will other charities be funded to provide support to veterans in other parts of these islands? The citizens advice bureau in Aberdeen has something like a 14-week wait for people to get any advice. Although it is a national charity, it has different waiting times in different places. Will the Minister look into whether the charitable support has the geographic spread to ensure that everyone can get the help and support they need?

We have heard about people's sense of self, and about what they lost as a result of either being discharged or having their life made so difficult that they could no longer remain in the armed forces. The immensely powerful speech of the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Elaine Stewart) set out the trauma her constituent went through, and it echoed the evidence given to the review.

It is very difficult for us, sitting here, to listen to such accounts, never mind for all those people who had to go through those horrific experiences. People lost not only their career or their standing in the community; they lost a part of themselves when they were told, "You cannot be both a soldier and gay." These people had dreamed forever of joining the armed forces, and they served with incredible bravery and honour, only to be told, "We don't want you."

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is not just the loss of a job or a pension, but the loss of shared values? These people felt rejected, as they could no longer do things that other veterans are able to do together.

The hon. Lady talks about people who fled the country, but Karen in my Mid Dorset and North Poole constituency was betrayed by another LGBT service member who was seeking to protect themselves. Some personnel avoided their own discharge by betraying someone else. Does the hon. Lady have any thoughts on that?

Kirsty Blackman: It is not my place to comment on individuals who perpetrated such abuses, nor to judge whether these were systemic issues or whether personal gain was received. However, I understand that people want redress. The Minister has recognised that, above and beyond the pot of money specifically for those who were discharged, there is another pot for those who faced additional hardships.

One of my constituents has been in touch to say that he had intended to be in the armed forces for life. That was his plan and he had never wanted to do anything else; his aim was to be a member of the armed forces. When he was ejected, his hopes, dreams and sense of self were all gone from him, and recovering from that trauma is incredibly difficult. I appreciate the work that the Minister and the Secretary of State have done, as well as the work done by the previous Government, in

order to ensure the compensation scheme has come forward, and I appreciate that the amount of money in the pot has been increased.

I have already asked some specific questions, but on the family of veterans, it is incredibly important that there is follow-through. For example, previously, the medals sent to some LGBT veterans were posted in the normal post and fell through the letterbox on to the carpet, along with bills from BT and energy suppliers. I do not think that was appropriate or provided the same recognition that other people received when they got their medals. More can be done to ensure that being part of the family of veterans is not just warm words, but a reality. People should be provided with a welcome, as well as being told that they will be provided with a welcome to that family.

I thank the Minister and everyone who has spoken today. I thank all the organisations and individuals who have been fighting for this outcome. I also thank those who have not been brave enough to tell their stories, and who are going through such difficult times that they are not able to do so. Those who are in the Gallery today have been able to give voice on behalf of themselves, but also on behalf of their friends and colleagues who are not able to tell their stories to us today or to the review. I thank those who have told their stories for being the voice for the community.

I hope the Minister is able to answer some of my questions, in order to ensure the compensation scheme works as the Government intend and gives an amount of recompense for the extreme trauma and suffering that people have been through.

3.2 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement that, in response to the Etherton review into the treatment of LGBT veterans, additional amounts of compensation will be offered to all victims, and a second tier payment will be offered to those most severely affected. That is most welcome, but it is so very late and it will never be enough to compensate our LGBT veterans for the treatment they suffered while trying to serve our armed forces, and the abandonment they felt once they had left.

As Craig Jones wrote in his book, "Serving with Pride", which shares some of the tragic stories of LGBT lives blighted by this shameful period of military history:

"With quiet dignity, most have endured. These are veterans deserving of our compassion for the adversity they have faced and the courage they have shown all while waiting to be heard and acknowledged. After all they have been through, it is quite remarkable that for most, their loyalty to the armed forces has endured and still today many simply seek acceptance and recognition amongst their comrades."

Today, I would like to tell the story of a brave and committed soldier that I had the honour to meet. My constituent, a veteran from 50 years ago, carried the heavy burden of shame of being dismissed from the services for being who they are, rather than being thanked for all that they did. Gunner Ashton joined the Royal Artillery in 1969, became the best small arms shot and served in Germany, defending us from the cold war threat. He achieved top technical ratings as a surveyor, was tipped for promotion and spent four months in Northern Ireland at the border and by the Falls Road in

Belfast, where he was shot at, bombed and saw his comrades fall: such bravery and courage, such distinguished service and commitment, such capability and achievement. May I place on record the pride and recognition that Gunner Ashton so richly deserves?

Gunner Ashton, however, served three years before being medically discharged. Ex-Gunner Ashton disappeared back up north into obscurity, never knowing he was a victim of the gay ban, not knowing he was a veteran and, certainly, never having been thanked for his service. What a sad end to a promising career and a sad indictment of the armed forces' disgraceful treatment of our LGBT officers at that time.

I am glad to say that that is not the end of the story. Gunner Ashton was courageous enough to seek help to become Claire Ashton, the same kind, compassionate and capable person that she has always been. When I met her in our constituency, I was immediately impressed with her dignified approach, her thorough and detailed account, her excellent service record and her steely determination to seek recognition for the thousands of her comrades who had suffered this injustice and who deserve our recognition.

Finally, after 50 years, ex-Gunner Ashton heard the Prime Minister apologise to our LGBT officers last year and launch the reparations and compensation scheme. Finally, Claire received her veterans identity card and a small veterans badge. Finally, ex-Gunner Ashton was recognised as a veteran and for her remarkable contribution to the Artillery. Claire joined the ex-service organisation that supports LGBT personnel, Fighting With Pride, and was given the honour of carrying its standard at last year's Royal British Legion festival of remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall in front of the King and Queen, among 50 veterans from the organisation, standing shoulder to shoulder with thousands of our other veterans.

Claire's finest hour, however, was when, wearing her small veterans badge at the Cenotaph, a passer-by noticed the badge and said simply, "Thank you for your service." That was the first person to do so; it had taken 51 years. I would like to be the second person to thank her for her service and to ask that it be recorded in the Houses of Parliament.

Claire Ashton is here today, having travelled on the train at 5 am from Shrewsbury. She is in the Gallery, watching the debate, and I hope that she feels the respect and admiration of this House for her contribution to our armed forces. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, Hear!"] I also hope she feels our earnest endeavours to put right this terrible wrong.

I asked Claire Ashton if she had a message for the Minister and for this House. She asks that we understand that, in order to recruit and retain good recruits for our armed forces, we need to treat our veterans with the dignity and respect that they deserve. Serving personnel will ask, "What future do I have in our forces?" and new recruits will hesitate if they do not feel welcome. We have an opportunity to learn the lessons from the past and ensure that strong recruits and excellent officers are supported and nurtured to reach their full potential and thrive in our armed forces. It is a matter of fundamental welfare for serving personnel and veterans to feel safe and valued. Indeed, as Claire Ashton, who will have the last word, reminds us:

"That is all we want, to feel valued".

3.8 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): We have heard some very powerful stories today. It is not every day that my constituency surgeries lead me to well up—I am normally as hard as nails—but I recently had the pleasure of meeting Craig Jones MBE, one of the founders of Fighting With Pride. He talked so powerfully about his own and other veterans' stories of pain and injustice, but he also spoke of honour and pride. It was deeply moving to speak with him.

During our meeting, the word "honour" came up time after time, as Craig described his LGBTQ+ colleagues in the armed forces who suffered so much under the ban which, we must reflect today, was lifted only in 2000. In the period before that, thousands and thousands of LGBTQ+ service personnel were removed or forced from service and many, as we have heard, were physically or sexually abused. Craig told me that many of his colleagues felt "washed in shame" because of what happened to them.

In those days, simply admitting to being gay was dangerous and had far-reaching consequences, which we must compensate for today. Although homosexuality was decriminalised for civilians in 1967, it remained a criminal offence in the armed forces. These people faced imprisonment. We must compensate fully for that.

Craig described moving to Brighton, saying that our city was the only place in which he and his partner felt safe. On the day that the ban was lifted, he came out as gay and, after a few more years, he left the forces. He helped found Fighting With Pride, and took part in that excellent campaign that led to the Etherton review and the actions that we are pleased to welcome today.

But I do not think that this is finished. As other Members have said, the financial scheme is crucial; it must provide full compensation. It appears that Lord Etherton was unable to go higher than the recommendation in the review of a cap of £50 million, and was unable in his terms of reference to recommend a financial scheme that was unconstrained. This £75 million is a rise, but, as others have said, it is not high enough. Fighting With Pride has said that £150 million would be a more realistic estimate if it is to provide real justice to the people who might come forward.

In the interests of real justice, I do not believe that we can cap this number at all. As the Royal British Legion has said in response to the earlier proposed cap, the cap provides an incentive for the Ministry of Defence to limit the number of people applying for compensation, in opposition to the aim of achieving fair recompense. Moreover, Fighting With Pride today asked whether the flat rate of £50,000 would really be able to compensate for the pensions that would have been earned by all those people who were discharged early.

As Craig pointed out to me, this has been a "discreet" community. We still do not know how many people could come forward having been harmed by these unjust policies in ways not envisaged by the strict types of payment described in today's statement. For the wider impact payment, we are talking about harassment, invasive investigations and imprisonment. I would welcome some clarity from the Minister today as to whether this could go further. People may have resigned because they felt that they could not come out; because they were not able to live in the way that they would choose to live. They have still suffered harm. They have been unable to fulfil their full potential, which is genuine harm.

[Siân Berry]

We have spoken about shame and honour in the stories that we have told today. There could be people who wanted their colleagues to preserve their honour to help them not feel ashamed and who wanted to be discharged for stated other reasons, so that nothing in the written record would confirm that they had suffered from the harms for which the flat-rate payment is envisaged, but who have none the less suffered exactly the same harm. I would welcome some clarification on whether you might go wider, and be willing to be challenged—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Please say, “he”.

Siân Berry: Sorry. Would the Minister be willing to be challenged on those terms in the future?

This compensation must bring the full comfort and security in older age that is enshrined in the armed forces covenant. It must bring true justice for the community that was shamed so shamefully. These payments must be looked at again.

3.13 pm

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I start by thanking the Secretary of State and my hon. and gallant Friend the Minister for Veterans and People for their intense understanding of this issue and of the whole veterans’ community. This debate comes at a critical juncture in the story of these people—these people of service who have been let down by our nation. That is a great source of national shame, as other Members have said. Although progress has been made, we must ensure that these veterans, some of whom have suffered immensely at the hands of the state, are compensated adequately. I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State’s announcement today, especially around the financial arrangements. It is delivery as promised and it is a victory, which has been a long time coming for these people.

As a gay man in this place, I am all too aware that we stand on the shoulders of campaigners, activists and giants of the LGBT rights movement, who have come before us. For over three decades, individuals who served, or wanted to serve, this country were shamed, or risked being shamed, expelled, imprisoned, and put on a register of sex offenders in some cases. Their lives were destroyed for the sake of their sexuality.

Being LGBT is not a weakness; it is a strength. We train, fight and serve as hard as anyone else. Like carbon kept under the earth’s crust for a long time, diamonds emerge in our hearts because of those experiences. These are the people who have built our forces over the years. We owe them a great debt. I am glad that this discrimination, which was once accepted—indeed, institutionalised—is over. Our forces are better for it, and our country is stronger for it, but for so long the values that we hold dear of respect, duty, service and honour were not upheld for these people, who were let down, such as my constituent Steven, without whom—I have told this story before—I would not be raising this issue. This is a man who lobbied me from day one of my selection as the Labour candidate, and rightly continues to lobby me to this day. He was expelled on suspicion of his sexuality. His life was taken from pride in what he was doing to ruin.

In my recent Adjournment debate, we heard truly heartbreaking and harrowing stories of service, and betrayal of that service by those in power at the time. As I said in that debate, I pay tribute to Fighting With Pride, which has been at the forefront of this campaign, alongside other colleagues in the Chamber. Individuals such as Craig Jones, my friend Carl Austin-Behan, and the noble Lords in the Gallery, Lord Etherton and Lord Cashman, who have been a part of this over a long period, have done so much to raise awareness of the unique challenges faced by LGBT veterans, and veterans more broadly.

As the Minister knows, financial redress is key to justice for these veterans, but the capped £50 million allocated was plainly inadequate given the level of trauma and destruction that these people experienced, be it mental health crises, substance abuse, homelessness, destitution, disownment by families, being labelled sex offenders, being victims of suicide and more. The scary thing is that this is not ancient history. People have come to me with stories from the late ’90s, when I was a kid. It is not that long ago.

I am glad to hear today’s announcement, because frankly, true justice has always required a more substantial financial commitment that acknowledges the suffering and delivers fair and meaningful compensation. While I welcome the Government’s actions, particularly around the scheme itself and the two-pronged approach, I have some questions on the cap, especially for the second element of the scheme. I understand the flat-rate approach for the first tranche, but on the second tranche, people who have experienced complete horrors, of which we will probably hear more in the debate, I wonder whether a cap of £70,000, although that is a substantial amount of money, is enough redress.

The Secretary of State mentioned that a committee will assess case-by-case the experiences of such veterans. I wonder whether the experience of that committee might leave it better placed to decide the level of redress, perhaps within an overall cap. I understand that, particularly in the view of the Treasury, this is not always possible, but it is best to have the maximum amount of flexibility in dealing with specific cases, some of which are completely harrowing. Lord Etherton’s review offered a crucial road map, and the noble Lord has done veterans, and indeed our country, a great service in bringing us to this point. Completing the recommendations in full will ensure that veterans, regardless of their orientation, are treated with respect and fairness, and from the Government’s perspective, it will honour the contract that was started with these men and women so long ago—a contract that was broken on the Government’s side.

Lastly, I welcome the restoration of rank and the amendment of dismissal reasoning, and thank the Minister for listening all the way through this process. My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward) has long been a champion of this issue; I think he mentioned it to me on the first day we were here. I know it has been a long listening exercise for the Minister. There is still a little further to go to ensure that there is maximum flexibility for our veterans, but I know he is doing his best to champion the issue and right this wrong. Today can be considered a great victory for these fighters. I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for taking the time, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute.

3.19 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): As a retired RAF police officer, I was particularly moved by stories where my own branch seemed to have acted so zealously. Perhaps it is appropriate that I apologise on behalf of the RAF police. My hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) made the same request on behalf of the Royal Military Police.

I am glad that the debate is being held at length in the House after it was deprioritised by the previous Government. Perhaps it would have required Olympic-standard political gymnastics to show empathy with the victims of the LGBT ban, apologising to those victims as did Prime Minister Rishi Sunak while manufacturing—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I made the point earlier that we do not in this House refer to serving Members of the House by name. He remains the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton.

Cameron Thomas: Thank you for correcting me, Madam Deputy Speaker. The right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) did so while the mother of Brianna Ghey was on the estate. I appreciate that is a bit of a change in tone from the rest of the debate, but it is important that we recognise that the rhetoric we use in this House has a cultural impact across the rest of society.

The Government should be proud that they brought the debate before the House. They have my gratitude, and I know there are people present who were directly affected by the ban, including Lesley Davison, who travelled from South Devon to be in the Public Gallery. Our LGBT veterans should have been able to serve their honourable careers fully and retire simply as veterans, but they were unfairly discarded by the Ministry of Defence in line with the laws of the very country they served. The Ministry of Defence described this as a “moral stain” on the armed forces, but it is also a stain on the history of our country.

One haunting testimony comes from a constituent of north Shropshire. It is an account of how hundreds of gallant, proud and selfless service personnel were hunted by the military police, arrested, interrogated and often imprisoned for even an assumption of their sexuality. Take a moment, if you would not mind, Madam Deputy Speaker, to imagine the line of questioning of an interrogation into one’s sexuality. To anyone who was affected by the ban in any way, I believe you and I am sorry.

By the time I joined the Royal Air Force in 2000, the ban had been lifted, but the legacy of the ban and of the political culture at the time was a toxic mentality that remained in plain sight for several years. I recall my initial trade training at RAF Cosford. One particularly notorious training team threatened to call ahead to my future unit and have my head “caved in” once I arrived for merely daring to voice support for the LGBT community. I was 17. I am sure that such intolerance continues to persist in small pockets of narrow-mindedness that exist beneath the surface today, but I am proud that the RAF I left in 2023 is, indeed, a greatly transformed and more inclusive organisation.

I am now simply a veteran. During the general election campaign in June, I joined some local veterans for a communal breakfast in Tewkesbury. They were decent,

honest and selfless, and they met regularly and welcomed me as their own. But before I was introduced to the group at large, one person pulled me aside and whispered, “Don’t worry about the he/she. We just ignore it.” It turned out that “it” was transgender Royal Navy veteran Gina Shelton, who had served in the closet as a man despite internally identifying as a woman to avoid persecution by her own friends and colleagues. I spent a few minutes speaking with her. She was seated clearly separately from the rest of the main group, and I could not help but feel moved by her courage and dignity as she spoke matter-of-factly about her circumstances, but with an affection and understanding for those fellow veterans who even now disowned her. She took responsibility for the way she was now ostracised, which I admire but reject. I otherwise enjoyed the company of my fellow veterans. I should reiterate that these are decent, honest people, but meeting Gina reminded me that changing minds is the greatest challenge before us, and that challenge will endure long after legislation.

The Liberal Democrats have always stood with the LGBT+ community, and are proud to have brought the equal marriage Act into law while in government. I am proud that those treated unjustly by the LGBT ban have now been able to speak their truth. It is difficult to put a monetary figure on such an injustice, but having considered the Secretary of State’s announcement this afternoon, we still call on the Government to stand with the Royal British Legion and Fighting With Pride and uplift the fund to £150 million. Finally, let these veterans’ legacy not be one of tragedy. Let Members of this House learn the lesson that the previous Government never did: that the language we use in this place has real-world consequences.

3.26 pm

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): This is an important day for a whole generation of ex-service personnel in my constituency and across the UK who lost everything they knew because of a policy that was discriminatory and wrong. I pay tribute to the charity Fighting With Pride and the coalition that has led this campaign with the dignity of ex-service personnel, in the very best of that tradition. We speak a lot in this House about the tremendous debt and respect we owe to our armed forces. That is something we in Aldershot and Farnborough feel very deeply, as people from our community have served in every major conflict that our country has faced over the past 200 years, yet the stories we are hearing today remind us that that respect is about not just words but deeds. I thank Lord Etherton for his work and the Government for listening, responding and taking action.

I will use my time in today’s debate to draw the House’s attention to the sister ban of this policy, for which the Government are rightly compensating people—the ban on people living with HIV joining or serving in our military. That ban was not repealed in 2000; it was repealed in 2022, and even now, there are loopholes that are still being exploited. So regressive were the rules that people were banned from joining the armed forces even if they were HIV-negative but were taking the HIV prevention drug PrEP. Regrettably but not surprisingly, opportunities to revise these rules were missed in 2008, in 2016, and yet again in 2019. Even as the British Government accepted the “can’t pass it on” science about people living with HIV in relation to treatment in

[Alex Baker]

the years that followed, no change was forthcoming. Those who were already serving personnel were labelled as medically not deployable.

It took the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust and a remarkable Hampshire resident, Lieutenant Commander Oliver Brown MBE, to right this wrong. Oli was cycling through London when a brick hit his bike and he hit a wall. He was taken to a London hospital, and—as is finally becoming custom, due to the last Government and the £27 million announced by the Prime Minister last week—he was routinely tested for HIV. He discovered that he was positive. As his broken arm was being fixed, Oli had to come to terms with a stigmatised diagnosis and worry not about whether he would live or have his family's support but about whether he had a job or a place to live. When he told his employer, the Royal Navy, he was labelled and held back. Thankfully, he found similar guts and spirit to those of Craig and Fighting With Pride, and became a relentless campaigner on this issue.

In June 2022, the rules were finally swept away not just for the LGBT community, but for anyone living with HIV. Days later, the Civil Aviation Authority did the same, and removed all barriers to pilots living with HIV on medication. That is why everyone involved was so surprised that the Military Aviation Authority gave itself an extra two months to remove the ban, and the obligations imposed then have still not been fully fulfilled. People living with HIV are still not able to join the armed forces as air crew or controllers. It would be a great thing if, off the back of this debate, my hon. Friend the Minister committed to investigate this issue, and agreed to meet Oliver Brown, the Terrence Higgins Trust and the National AIDS Trust to find a path forward on this issue.

We need to turn our military culture from just an absence of bans to one that promotes HIV and sexual health testing, with people being encouraged to take charge of their sexual health. The military needs to be a place where HIV stigma has no home. Our amazing HIV charities are on hand to help, and the UK could be the first fast-track military in committing to the goal of zero HIV transmissions, zero preventable deaths and zero HIV stigma. To meet that global goal, we need our armed forces to do their bit. If we achieve it, it will be the first time we have stopped the onward transmission of any virus without a vaccine or a cure. We cannot fail. Today is a great day, but the fight for equality is a journey, not a destination.

3.31 pm

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am very pleased to be able to speak in this debate as one of the newly elected co-chairs of LGBT+ Labour, and it is a great honour to follow a number of hon. Members who have given very powerful testimonies from veterans. It is very difficult to follow that and to do justice to this issue. There is much interest in this debate and in the review of LGBT veterans. As he mentioned, my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) recently held an Adjournment debate on this topic.

He raised the issues that the ban had caused those who were dismissed, and we have heard about many of those issues in the words of the veterans themselves.

People were dismissed under the bans, and there were broken family relationships, poor mental health issues and a marginalisation driven by the shame of being thrown out of the military. In his debate, my hon. Friend rightly highlighted that this had an impact not only on LGBT people, but on those merely suspected of not being heterosexual. It also had an impact on all those serving given the climate of fear and discrimination that it drove within the military. He said in that debate that, as a young gay man, it seemed an alien world, but of course this is discrimination not from a century ago, but from our lifetime and within living memory.

Looking at the history of this campaign, which was the focus of much energy in the 1990s, when I was in the early days of my political campaigning, it is worth noting that there was an attempt 28 years ago to change the law so that lesbians and gay men could serve in the military. In the debate at that time, the then MP for Liverpool, Garston, Eddie Loyden, intervened on the Minister, who was defending the status quo. As Eddie explained, he was one of the few remaining Members in the House at that time who had served through the whole of the second world war. The question he put to the Minister, which I remember watching at the time, is worth repeating. Speaking of world war two, he said:

"I was in no fewer than seven troop ships carrying men and women to the four corners of the globe to fight on behalf of the nation. There were no questions about homosexuality then...If there was a war tomorrow, there would be no discrimination against homosexuals or lesbians. They would be dragged in just as they were in 1939."—[*Official Report*, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 507.]

Of course, there was plenty of discrimination pre-1967 and at the time of that debate, but Eddie was making the point that this policy was based not just on discrimination, but on hypocrisy. It was hypocrisy in that distinguished service was duly undertaken, and was often honoured and recognised with medals, only to be disregarded and thrown aside when the question of someone's sexuality was raised. Far too many people suffered from that policy, and the opportunity to end it earlier was lost as the Government of the day asserted that it would undermine military effectiveness if LGBT people were allowed to serve.

My West Ham predecessor in that debate, Tony Banks, was heard to shout "Rubbish!" at that assertion. He was of course right. Someone is a good soldier based on their skills; bravery and good service are not dependent on someone's sexuality. History has since proved that it was rubbish, as over the last 25 years, since the change in the law, the military has continued to operate with distinction and LGBT people have played their part with honour within it.

That attempt to alter the law failed, and it took until 2000 for the change to take place, which led to continued discrimination and suffering for serving personnel, as we have heard. Those targeted lost not only their job but their reputations and rank, and until the 1990s—a quarter of a century after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in civilian life—they faced criminal convictions and jail time. It is perhaps worth noting how much has changed since that debate of 1996. Then we had only one openly gay MP, Chris Smith, and the idea that Parliament would now have so many LGBT

MPs would have seemed impossible to believe. Most of the freedoms and privileges that the LGBT community now enjoy were yet to come. Indeed, many of them were beyond the possibility of even campaigning for.

This House has changed, the law has changed, and society has changed too. It has changed for the better, but the impact of the policy and the ban has a long tail, and veterans are still dealing with it today. That is why Lord Etherton's report is so important. This is a live issue that we must resolve, and I welcome the progress we have made as a society and the progress on delivering the recommendations. I very much welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State about the financial redress being made available to veterans. When I spoke recently to a veteran they raised the issue of financial redress, as the impact of dismissal from the military has had a big impact on many, some of whom are now of an age when the issue of support is pressing. It will come as welcome news that we are making further progress on that, and that applications will open immediately. We must ensure that all those eligible can easily apply.

It is also welcome that veterans will see the restoration of their rank, and their service record amended. I very much welcome the fact that pre-1967 veterans are also being considered. It is important to ensure that we deliver on all recommendations in the report, so that all those who have served and faced discrimination can now wear their medals and remember their service with honour and pride, and so that we can wipe away the hypocrisy that tried to tarnish their service to their country. It is important that we support veterans in that, but also that we work to create a culture of dignity and respect for those veterans, to value them as a society, and to respect their service to their country and expunge the legacy of discrimination.

As so many Members have already done, we should pay tribute the campaigners who have fought hard for this campaign, many of whom are in the Public Gallery. That includes those who stood up and led the legal campaigns of the 1990s, and in more recent times the campaigners from Fighting With Pride. We are here because of them, and this debate is built on their hard work. We have an opportunity finally to draw the legacy of that shameful policy to a close and place it fully into the dustbin of history. It is an opportunity we have to take. I am grateful that the Government are rising to that challenge, and we must ensure that we rise fully to the needs of that community.

3.38 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Today is a moment to acknowledge the historical injustice endured by LGBT veterans, and to reaffirm our collective responsibility as a House to right the wrongs of the past.

I will share a story of one of my constituents, Professor Andrew Hartle, a man whose life epitomises the resilience and achievements of LGBT veterans against the odds. Andrew joined the Royal Air Force in the 1980s, full of ambition and a desire to serve his country. His early years in uniform were marked by excellence. He rose swiftly through the ranks as a medical officer participating in search and rescue missions and serving in the first Gulf war. But while Andrew was fulfilling his duties he was living a double life, weighed down by a constant fear of being discovered. At a time when being openly

gay in the armed forces was not just taboo but illegal, Andrew faced an impossible conflict: to live authentically, or to preserve the career he loved.

In 1996, Andrew was outed in a tabloid newspaper with the horrifying headline, "RAF doc's gay fling with an AIDS victim". Andrew was suspended, subjected to demeaning accusations and eventually forced to resign. For seven agonising months, he was left in limbo, isolated from colleagues, forbidden to access his NHS place of work and ostracised by an institution he had dedicated his life to serving.

Andrew continued to face prejudice throughout his career. NHS administrators demanded he take an HIV test against his will. That was just one of many humiliating incidents that he experienced after leaving the military. Despite that discrimination, and the obstacles he faced, Andrew became the first openly gay consultant anaesthetist, working at St Mary's hospital, a world-class hospital serving many of my constituents in Kensington and Bayswater. He rebuilt his life and career, became a trailblazer in his field and has been a powerful advocate for justice.

However, for Andrew and for so many others, the scars inflicted by the gay ban remain. As Andrew reflected in his own words:

"Coming out as I did was not my plan...My mental health deteriorated, and I buried the impact of my outing and dismissal."

Andrew was one of the fortunate ones, however. He is here with us in the Gallery today, and he spoke so powerfully on the radio this morning. Many others were not as lucky, so I welcome the Government's announcement today that they will move from apology to action.

The apology given last year by the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), was long overdue and was right. He was right to describe the ban on LGBT people serving in the military as

"an appalling failure of the British state".—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 897.]

He was right to highlight the abuse, harassment and discrimination that many suffered, but words alone are not enough. This Government have been clear that they will tackle historic injustices head on, from Horizon to Grenfell, and from infected blood to the horrific legacy of the ban on and mistreatment of LGBT veterans. With today's announcement, we take a meaningful step forward to support the veterans who suffered at the hands of the British state.

I welcome the scheme's focus on simplicity and speed of payment, which are vital for veterans who have waited decades for justice. I also welcome the Secretary of State's clarification that those reparations will be ringfenced, ensuring that veterans will not lose access to tax or benefits as a result. This moment would not have been possible without the tireless advocacy of organisations such as Fighting With Pride, so I thank them for their dedication in supporting LGBT veterans and for their crucial role in securing today's announcement. I also thank Lord Etherton for his review.

Andrew's story reminds us of the immense personal cost of injustice. His courage, perseverance and achievements should inspire us all. Andrew has waited 27 years, but some have waited as long as 50. Tragically, many veterans have died without ever seeing justice. As we approach 12 January, the 25th anniversary of the

[Joe Powell]

lifting of the ban, we must also focus now on the task ahead of us: to locate and support all eligible veterans to come forward and to ensure no one is left behind. I hope that the Minister for Veterans and People can provide further detail on that strategy in his closing remarks. We must honour those who served in silence, who lived in fear, and who were ostracised simply for being themselves and loving who they loved. That is not merely an act of kindness, but a moral obligation, and I am proud that this Government are resolute in their determination to deliver it.

3.43 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am humbled by the testimonies that have been shared by my friends on both sides of the Chamber, but I was particularly moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley). The testimonies that have been shared show us how ashamed we should be that our country treated so many people so badly for so long. Make no mistake: we have had LGBT people in our armed services for as long as we have had armed services, and I am proud to call many of them my close friends. They have shared their harrowing stories with me, but what always shines through is their loyalty to their service and their country.

Today's debate makes me proud to be a Labour MP. I remember the Labour Government lifting the ban on LGBT soldiers in 2000. I celebrated that with my friends. Labour argued for the Etherton review, and I thank Lord Etherton for his work. Now, as a Labour MP, I welcome the recommendations. I will fight for every LGBT veteran to get the compensation that they deserve.

The historical treatment of our veterans was a moral stain on our nation. It was wrong on every single level. We will never know how many good men and women were too afraid ever to apply to serve their country, or too afraid ever to come out to this day. So many LGBT soldiers had their hopes and aspirations cut short despite their commitment to serve our country. They were left feeling ashamed, demoralised and humiliated when they should have been proud, like I am, to be a member of the LGBT community.

We cannot undo the damage of the past, but we can ensure that those who were affected receive what they are owed. I pay tribute to all the veterans with us today, and to Fighting With Pride, which has supported LGBT veterans for years and pushed Governments to do better. I also pay tribute to Kelly Holmes, whose recent personal account was difficult to hear but typical of so many women I have spoken to.

I encourage every LGBT veteran to apply to have their rank restored so that they can feel pride again in the service they gave to our country. It is time to renew the nation's contract with all those who have served, and delivering Lord Etherton's recommendations is just a small part of that. I hope that today is another historic landmark in the fight for equality for LGBT people in this country. I will support any veterans to get the compensation they deserve to restore their dignity and pride for their service for our country.

3.47 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I welcome Lord Etherton's review and thank all the organisations and campaign groups that contributed to it, including Fighting With Pride. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) rightly said, this is welcome, but it is so late. I also place on the record my thanks to my constituents in Suffolk Coastal who raised the issue with me directly and have worked for years to support their former military colleagues who have suffered at the hands of this abhorrent and humiliating practice. In particular, I thank Kalvyn Friend, who contributed to the review and has engaged with me directly on the issue. He and his colleagues Terry Skitmore and Simon Wallington were perceived as gay in the '90s and late-'80s and were treated appallingly as a result.

It is important that we acknowledge that there are many former armed service personnel who did not live to see this justice come about. Either they died natural deaths after the ban was removed or, devastatingly, they took their own lives. Many of those who are still living have attempted to die by suicide or have thought to do so. I have heard appalling stories from campaign groups and charities.

The Etherton review has exposed harrowing stories of members of the armed forces and how they were treated by the very institution they were prepared to give their life for. I also thank the Royal British Legion, which among other charities and campaign groups provided evidence to the review and has highlighted stories from former veterans—men and women—who faced at best humiliation and at worst degrading and appalling acts of intimidation, as well as needless discharge from the armed forces. In some cases, they faced imprisonment and no access to their military pensions, as we have heard.

I reiterate that the cultural and operational justifications for the ban, as described and endorsed by the Ministry of Defence at the time, have rightly been criticised in Lord Etherton's report as an

"incomprehensible policy of homophobic bigotry".

It is crucial that we learn from those past mistakes and that the principles of equality and respect that underpin our society are taken forward.

In 2002, I attended Welbeck military college. After I left, I joined the Territorial Army, serving in the Royal Logistics Corps. This was just a few short years after the ban was lifted, but the shadow of the policy was still evident. Serving personnel were terrified of being found out, still living their lives in the shadows. At college, I had teachers and physical training instructors who had lived with and lived through the ban, having been personally affected by the homophobic policies or having seen at first hand how friends and serving colleagues had been bullied out of the Army and lived their lives in the shadows. Unsurprisingly, many have suffered from mental health problems brought on by living and working in an institution that had previously tried to hunt them out for being gay or bisexual.

Even though the ban was lifted by the time I left Welbeck college and the TA, I saw how the culture lingered for LGBT colleagues. We have heard today that although the ban was lifted in 2000, the culture and the practice were still evident among serving personnel. When I was there, colleagues still felt that they had to

hide their sexual orientation and that it was still something to be ashamed of. They were not proud or open in the way that we are today and that we take for granted in society now.

The impact of this abhorrent practice cannot be overstated. The lifelong scar it has had on so many who gave so much to our nation is a stain on our military history and more widely on our society. The review rightly recommends that compensation would be an appropriate means of redress. I am delighted that we have increased the compensation from £50 million to £75 million. If that had been left unchanged, it might have equalled as little as £12,500 per claimant. I urge the Government to make sure that the payments are made quickly and without delay. It is important that we do what we can to make sure that the compensation is released quickly to those who deserve it.

I welcome this announcement, and once again I thank all those who contributed to the review and who took it forward. The work being done to implement the recommendations will go some way to recognising the past failures of the Ministry of Defence.

3.52 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a privilege to participate in this important debate and to hear many moving accounts from both sides of the House. My constituency plays a crucial role in our nation's defence, ranking seventh in the UK for the veteran population. Torpoint, a wonderful town that is home to HMS Raleigh, has the third highest number of veterans of any community in the UK, with over 14% having served our country.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for today's statement, and to Lord Etherton for his crucial work on this topic. I am also grateful to the Minister for Veterans and People for visiting Torpoint recently to meet veterans from across the constituency. The visit was an important demonstration of Labour's commitment to our armed forces and our veteran community.

Today, we reflect on a deeply regrettable chapter in our history. As we heard, prior to 2000, being a member of the LGBT+ community was considered incompatible with service in the armed forces. As a result, LGBT individuals—or those perceived to be—could be dismissed or forced to leave the military, robbing them of careers, livelihoods and dignity. I welcome the Government's announcement of support for our veterans. It is a historic step towards righting these wrongs. By increasing the funding—and, in fact, exceeding that recommended by the review—for the LGBT financial recognition scheme, the Government continue to show an unwavering commitment to supporting our veterans.

I acknowledge the brilliant work of Fighting With Pride to support the wellbeing of LGBT+ veterans, armed forces personnel and their families. Its efforts, alongside those of the Royal British Legion, Help for Heroes, Stonewall, SSAFA and many others, are invaluable. I have heard from constituents who have been personally affected by this injustice, and I am so grateful to them for their work and for sharing their stories with me.

I am immensely proud of our LGBT+ serving personnel and veterans from South East Cornwall and across the nation. Their resilience, despite the adversity they faced, is a testament to their strength and dedication to keeping

us safe. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, and I hope to hear more in due course about the progress being made on this vital topic.

3.54 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I am grateful for your forbearance, Madam Deputy Speaker. I very much welcome the announcement made by the Secretary of State today, although its arrival is almost as late as my own arrival in the Chamber this afternoon, for which I apologise.

The ban on LGBT people serving in the armed forces until 2000 was a failure of the state; the delay in announcing reparations is another failure, which is in danger of eroding the public's faith in politics to deliver for people. I see no point in blaming the previous Government. In fact, I commend the work of the previous Government and of Lord Etherton, and of our own Government in bringing forward this scheme so swiftly. However, just as we saw with the Hillsborough scandal, the infected blood scandal and the Post Office Horizon scandal, we must move more quickly to compensate people. I concur with the hon. Members for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who emphasised that the scheme must be delivered swiftly and in a measured way. A long delay simply prolongs the agony of the many veterans who have waited decades for an apology and for the formal financial reparations announced today.

I have a constituent, Janice MacIver, who served in the British Army and was caught up in this dark period of our history in the 1990s, some 30 years ago. From 1992 to 1994, Ms MacIver served with the Army Intelligence Corps in Hong Kong and England. There was nothing wrong with her work or her service to the country, but, on 30 June 1994, she was unceremoniously and dreadfully kicked out of the British Army and sent back from Hong Kong simply because of who she was.

Many veterans affected by this scandal have lost their homes, health and peace of mind because of the awful treatment meted out to them. Ms MacIver is a resilient individual, as islanders tend to be, and she managed to get herself back on her feet. She served her country in another way, as a police officer, with a career of public service spanning two decades. However, as we have heard today, some people never made it that far.

What was done to Janice MacIver happened 30 years ago, but she was one of the first over the threshold of my Stornoway constituency office when I was elected. What happened to her still stings, still hurts. She did get a letter of apology from the head of the Army, which she appreciates, and a new beret, and the Intelligence Corps are to welcome her back to base in a ceremony next month. It is fantastic that Janice's sister is flying from Australia to be with her and support her at that event.

The new levels of compensation are very welcome, but for Janice and many other veterans, it is not just about the money; it is about having proper acknowledgment and acceptance that what was done to her—the way she was treated by her country after serving her country—was wrong. This announcement, I hope, will go some way to repairing the damage done. I hope that with this, that sad episode will be done and dusted, but it ought to be recorded and acknowledged in Army records and museums. It belongs in the past.

[Torcuil Crichton]

What happened to Janice and to thousands of other veterans was wrong, which is so evident. It is widely acknowledged, and it is a shame it has taken so many years to put it right. However, I am glad of today's announcement, and hope that LGBT service personnel and veterans can now say, finally, that they have served with pride.

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

3.58 pm

James Cartlidge: With the leave of the House, I am winding up this debate as well as opening it, as you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker. There are only two of us, and there is a Bill Committee sitting at the same time—there are some things we cannot physically get around in that situation. I am very grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for letting me wind up. It enables me to pay tribute to some incredible speeches today, all of them moving, in which Members have shared the many traumatic cases of their constituents. They underline exactly why the Government have made this announcement today, based on the review that we launched in government.

Some specific themes were raised. The hon. Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward) spoke of time running out. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Elaine Stewart) also spoke about the issue of time and the urgency of getting this resolved. My constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter), spoke of how she wanted to see payments getting out quickly and without delay. I am sure we all agree and echo that sentiment. I am sure the Minister will provide clarity where he can, in particular on the second payment, the LGBT impact payment, which will presumably have a longer process given the presence of the panel. Perhaps he could give some indication of the timings he expects in that regard.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) reminded me that we should thank our serving LGBT personnel and not just talk about veterans. Of course, they serve in a very different military and a very different military culture. We wish them well and thank them for their public service.

There were many moving cases mentioned. What struck me in particular was the reminder of the impact—literally, the impact—on those people concerned. The hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) spoke about the case of a constituent who was imprisoned. In the case mentioned by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tom Rutland), they were put in a psychiatric ward because of being LGBT. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) spoke about his constituent attempting suicide and being sexually assaulted. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock said that we denied people their freedom while they were defending ours. I paraphrase, but I thought that was an excellent statement.

There were other cases which we might say had some kind of happy ending, or at least they went on to do other things which we should honour. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) spoke about the very moving case of someone who I understand is in the

Gallery. Gunner Ashton obviously had a very difficult experience, but then went on to carry the banner of the Royal British Legion at the Royal Albert Hall remembrance evening. I was at the most recent one and it is an incredible occasion, so I pay tribute to her.

The hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) spoke about a constituent who became a very senior clinician. We heard from the hon. Gentleman for the Western Isles, if he does not mind me calling it that—the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—who spoke about his constituent who obviously suffered a great trauma but became a police officer. He called it the resilience of islanders. I think we have seen that resilience in other cases spoken of today.

The hon. Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) said that she believed there had been LGBT soldiers ever since we have had an army. Again, I paraphrase, but she is probably absolutely right—although, of course, Lord Etherton has not quite gone back that far in his review. Echoing that theme, the hon. Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser), in a very enjoyable speech, made the point that so many would have served in world war two. We should remember that and pay tribute to them, because that sacrifice gave us our freedom which means we are here today. He also made a very good point, which I think I made in my opening speech. When we talk about military skill and the bravery of people who serve in our armed forces with distinction, those features are irrelevant to background and sexuality. That is a very good point indeed.

The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas), who I believe is a former RAF policeman, made the point that the RAF has changed significantly. It is important that he mentioned that point. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker), along with the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater, reminded us of the importance of the HIV issue and the additional associated stigma in that regard. She made the laudable point of calling for zero HIV stigma in the armed forces today. I wonder whether the Minister would want to comment on that.

Finally, the hon. Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) had an Adjournment debate recently on this subject, so he exemplifies the great persistence we have seen from a number of colleagues in this House on this subject. A few are not here at the moment, which may be because of a slightly premature end, but hopefully they will see in *Hansard* that I have paid tribute to their speeches. There were lots of excellent contributions.

I will conclude by saying this: as the Secretary of State said in his opening speech, in addition to implementing the recommendations of Lord Etherton's review, we must ensure we thoroughly learn the lessons of this deeply sorry and regrettable episode in our defence history. They are two separate things and it is crucial we do both. Terrible things were wholly unjustifiably inflicted on brave and committed service personnel with lifelong repercussions for those affected, as we have heard from cases up and down the country. It is incumbent on all of us to reflect on this having happened in our country. All those who put themselves forward for service must be treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

We should all share in the mission to correct this historic wrong, because we all know that every person affected will have shared equally the same values of freedom, patriotism and public service as anyone else in

the armed forces. Today we salute them, and, as far as we are able, we take further significant steps to restore full and formal recognition of the role of LGBT veterans serving our country.

4.5 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns):

What a debate we have had today. We have heard some exceptionally harrowing and, indeed, inconceivable stories of events that have taken place in our lifetime. On that note, and on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, I wish to apologise to all those affected by the ban. The way in which the MOD mistreated LGBT personnel between 1967 and 2000 is a flaming injustice that has burned for more than five decades. It is an injustice that was acknowledged by Lord Etherton's excellent report last year, and, as I said during our debate six weeks ago, it is an injustice that put the MOD on the wrong side of history. It is an injustice that the last Government worked to heal, with the support of Members in all parts of the House, and for that we thank them. When the scheme opens tomorrow at 09:00 hours and we finally begin the important process of offering financial recognition of the pain caused, we will turn a page and start a new chapter in defence history.

This Government have taken the decision to increase the amount that can be disbursed by the scheme by 50% more than the plans that we inherited. Not only will those dismissed or discharged from service receive a payment; those who were impacted more broadly by the ban will do so too. However, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that no amount of money can undo the hurt and pain caused, and no process can genuinely quantify the impact on earnings. This is a financial acknowledgment of wrongdoing and regret by the state, and while I know that it will not fully satisfy all, I hope that it will help to bring affirmation, and some closure, to those affected. The scheme will also address two more of Lord Etherton's 49 recommendations—including rank restoration and rewriting those records—leaving just seven to be completed, which remains a major priority. I thank all Members on both sides of the House for their comments and the harrowing stories that they related, and I will now try to address some of their specific questions.

Let me say first to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward) that we are working exceptionally hard with Fighting With Pride and 10 other charities to ensure that we advertise this scheme as broadly as possible across the community. Indeed, this debate itself is one way to get that message out. We have 24 months of the recognition scheme, primarily because of the prerogative powers but also following the recommendations of Lord Etherton's report. We have allocated £90,000 to help charities to assist the veterans with their applications, because we acknowledge that some of the processes may not be as simple as others. We are also asking for a reverse burden of proof on the access of the £25 million financial total. Predicting the number of cases that will come forward will be exceptionally difficult: experiences will differ, time served will differ, and therefore the amount of recognition will differ as well.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), facing the Treasury is perhaps much safer than facing the enemy. Nevertheless, I thank those in the Treasury, and the broader team in the

Ministry of Defence, for working so hard—championed by the Secretary of State for Defence—to deliver the extra £25 million, a 58% increase on what we had previously. Speed of delivery is essential, and we have gone for both speed and breadth: the speed to deliver the scheme as fast as feasibly possible, and the breadth to ensure that compensation is delivered to all those affected by the ban, both dismissed and discharged. Those who may have been impacted by the ban, but not necessarily recorded—this was mentioned by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman)—will also be able to apply for these resources.

We appreciate the comments of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge), as well as his work prior to our coming into government. I hope that LGBT veterans now feel, more than ever before, part of the veterans family, thanks primarily to the restorative measures in Lord Etherton's report, which have gone so far to delivering that. We have now implemented 42 of those 49 recommendations, and I think we will close them out by 2027. Responsibility for some of them does not sit with the Government, but we are working hard with the Office for Veterans' Affairs and other Government Departments to close them out as quickly as possible.

I will cover two of the points raised by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven now, but will address others later. Overseas applicants can apply; the scheme is open to everyone. We will have a look at the geographical spread of charitable support. Although we do not have a huge amount of control over it, we will ensure that it is balanced and will work with the Office for Veterans' Affairs to deliver it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) mentioned the important subject of HIV. I can confirm that we are on the case. Although there is no blanket ban on HIV-positive personnel flying in the armed forces, the Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that our policies that impact on people with HIV are regularly reviewed. I and the Minister for the Armed Forces in particular are closely considering HIV policies relating to aircrew, and we will get back to my hon. Friend in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan), and the hon. Members for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), for Aberdeen North and for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) mentioned a concern about the cap. The financial recognition scheme is a response to a gross injustice—we acknowledge that. It was designed to be a tangible acknowledgment of wrongdoing and regret, and was never intended to compensate for loss of earnings, but I accept that there will always be people who feel, for good reason, that we have not gone far enough.

Ben Maguire: A North Cornwall constituent of mine was attending the debate from the Public Gallery but has had to leave because of the outrage that he feels. Does the Minister agree that greater financial compensation should be given to veterans such as my constituent, who suffered such enormous harm, including gang rape and severe physical assault that resulted in lifetime disabilities?

Al Carns: I thank the hon. Member for that question. We have tried to balance demands for individual circumstances to be fully recognised on a case-by-case

[*Al Carns*]

basis with the demand for speedy resolution. We have arrived at amounts that reflect the practice of relevant employment tribunals, and payments made for harm and suffering in the service complaints process, which also align with similarly sized payments awarded by the scheme in Canada. Although Government schemes of this type will always cause debate—I acknowledge that—we have done our best to be fair and balanced, using figures based on relevant precedents and a process that will reflect individual circumstances within a framework designed to avoid delay and ensure fairness across that cohort. It is probably worthwhile to dig into that in a little more detail to provide the House with answers.

The LGBT dismissed or discharged payment for veterans who were dismissed or discharged based solely on their sexual orientation or gender identity under the ban will be a flat rate of £50,000. The LGBT impact payment is open to all those who experienced any pain and suffering directly related to the ban, including bullying and harassment, invasive investigation and, of course, imprisonment. Those who were dismissed and discharged can also apply for that payment. The LGBT impact payments will be assessed by an independent panel against three tariffs—£1,000 to £5,000, £5,000 to £10,000 and £10,000 to £20,000—up to a maximum of £20,000, to ensure that awards are proportionate to the level of impact.

We heard several questions, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley), about why the measures have taken so long. Today has been more than 50 years in the making. I totally agree that veterans have waited far too long for this recognition of historical injustice. However, since coming into government, we have moved exceptionally fast. This Government have a bias for action. We came into Government in July, listened to Fighting With Pride and the LGBT veterans, informed and updated the House and colleagues last month, and designed a broad and rapid payments scheme, and at 0900 tomorrow, that scheme will open and deliver.

We also had some questions about the impact of loss of earnings, particularly to do with pensions. It is worth noting that this is not a compensation scheme and has not been designed as such. With such a variety of experiences and personal circumstances within the affected community, and with limited evidence available, it is difficult to estimate how long each veteran would have served if not for the ban and what rank they might have reached.

Finally, on the question about Lord Etherton's recommendations: two are for the Ministry of Defence to implement and five are for the national health service to address. My team is in touch with the Department of Health and Social Care as we move that forward.

As various Members mentioned, it is worth noting the broader non-financial restorative measures that are taking place. There are 719 applications already, which is fantastic. In practice, this means everything from apology letters sent directly to individuals from the

chiefs of the Army, the Royal Navy and the Air Force, through to medals and berets, ensuring that these veterans feel included as part of the veterans community.

When I joined the Royal Marines in 1999, this abhorrent ban on homosexuality in the armed forces was still in place. Today, a quarter of a century later, we turn a page on that shameful chapter in our national story. The financial recognition scheme is an acknowledgment by the state that it was wrong. While I accept that many veterans will continue to feel that it does not go far enough, the scheme is another vindication of the harm and pain they have suffered, and vindication for all those who stood against the ban.

I urge everyone affected by these past failings to access the financial recognition scheme and other restorative measures by visiting the LGBT veterans support page on the gov.uk website. On this page, they will find a simple guide explaining how to apply for financial recognition payments, which includes details of the scheme, eligibility and the supporting documents required. There are simple screenshots of what to expect when applying, and the application form has been streamlined to make the process straightforward and user-friendly to ensure that veterans can apply with as much ease as possible.

I thank Lord Etherton for his outstanding work on this report. I also thank the LGBT community and the charities that supported it, particularly Fighting With Pride, for their courage and continued efforts to bring this to a resolution. They have engaged comprehensively throughout the programme, with both the MOD team and me.

I have an old saying from combat: "Courage is a decision, not a reaction." Few have been so courageous as those watching this debate today. To stand up, to struggle to your feet when everyone is trying to push you down, and to shout when everyone is trying to silence you—that is an active decision, and perhaps the most courageous decision of all. They should stand proud from here on out.

The debate today and the speed at which we have worked—the fact that from tomorrow at 0900 the scheme will open—is a credit to all those who have worked on the team. It also reaffirms that this Government are a Government of action. Indeed, we have a bias for action, and the Defence Secretary and I will continue to drive this forward until every recommendation of Lord Etherton's review is implemented to right the wrongs of the past.

To the individuals affected—Victoria, Craig, Danny, Claire, Andrew and Janice, to name but a few—we apologise. We hope that this will go some way through the healing process. In line with Claire Ashton and my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury, we want to ensure that every veteran who has helped to keep Britain secure receives the respect and support they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Lord Etherton's independent review into the treatment of LGBT veterans.

SEND Provision: Autism and ADHD

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

4.18 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to address this critical issue that affects so many families and carers, not just in my constituency but across the country. I rise to speak up for all those who feel they are not being heard and to speak about the crisis in the provision of special educational needs and disability support, particularly for children and young people with autism spectrum disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. This crisis is failing children and young people, their families and carers, the professionals who support them, and society as a whole.

Before I proceed, I thank all the courageous parents and carers who have taken the time to tell me their stories. Some of them have come to Westminster today to be with us in the Gallery. I pay special tribute to the staff from schools in my constituency, including Bassingbourn, Melbourn and Hauxton primary schools, who have taken the time to attend this critically important debate and are with us in the Gallery.

I was privileged to meet staff at Bassingbourn primary school, where I witnessed at first hand the inspiring work undertaken by dedicated and caring professionals, who are creating safe spaces, such as the hub. I saw for myself the calm and trusting relationships built with students, and heard about the difference that the hub makes for students. Rather than spiralling into disruptive behaviour or not even being able to make it through the door to registration some days, students are now seeking out the hub as a space to ready themselves for registration or to take time out before going back to class.

The headteacher, staff and the SEND co-ordinators go above and beyond, often making miracles happen on very limited budgets. However, let me share the words of one dedicated professional from my constituency, so that the House can hear what the current crisis is leading to. She says:

“On a daily basis I am setting up, delivering and helping other Teaching Assistants to deliver bespoke curriculums for children with SEND as they are mostly educated outside the classes of their peers. We do not have a special unit for them, we are just accommodating them as best we can in quieter areas of the school, including corridors, because they are not able to work in the noise and business of a primary classroom. The needs of these children vary though they all need 1:1 TAs to help them and others stay safe, regulated and learning throughout the day. At present we have two non-verbal children with an Autism diagnosis who, years ago, you would not have expected to see in a mainstream school. Up until this week I have believed that I was doing the right thing trying to make sure they are happy and secure and genuinely learning and making progress with us.”

That professional is now questioning the very fundamentals of her profession as a result of the heartbreaking experience of those children when they are facing key transitions: starting school, primary to secondary, getting to 18, 18 to 25 and afterwards. One of the children she had been working with was excluded a few days after starting secondary school because their behaviour was not manageable. In her words:

“It broke my heart to hear from her Mum what she had gone through in such a short time in mainstream Secondary and I knew at once that she must have been so frightened to have

behaved as she did. The child was subsequently at home for most of the remaining school year receiving education from a tutor paid for by the Local Authority—after her parents fought hard and demanded it—and then was finally given a place at their local special school in the summer. What I now understand is that the broken system means that a child has to fail in a very distressing way before they are given the provision they need. I could not sit by and see another child I have known for many years go down the same path with all the knowledge of how damaging the experience will be for them without saying something about it!”

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The account the hon. Lady is giving is incredibly powerful and I am really grateful that she has chosen to share it with the House. As somebody who was teaching maths at a secondary school until a few months before the general election, I can state that the situation she describes, while certainly not unusual, is not universal to all schools. I am pleased to report that despite the stresses that were put on schools by the previous Government, we teachers did all we could in secondary education settings to ensure there was an inclusive education for those with SEND. Does she agree that with the change of Government, we have seen a change in direction and intention, and hopefully we will see the wins for SEND students that they so desperately deserve?

Pippa Heylings: Absolutely; I am here to pay tribute, as is everybody, to what teachers are doing, both with regard to the failure of the previous Government and with the current situation. Let us get to what is happening with the current Government.

Every child deserves access to education to get the best start in life and build a strong foundation that can provide valuable skills that allow them to thrive. That is not the case for all children across the country and particularly not for those with autism spectrum disorder and ADHD. Every professional I have spoken to agrees that early diagnosis and support are essential.

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): In respect of early diagnosis and onward support, in my constituency of Congleton we have two specific problems. First, although some children receive a diagnosis under the right to choose pathway on the NHS, others, often from more deprived backgrounds, face considerably longer waits than they would under that pathway. The impact of that on those children concerns me very much. Secondly, Cheshire East council sometimes goes for periods of time when it closes the education, health and care plan application pathway to new entrants because it is so overwhelmed by the number of applications it already has. Both those are serious issues for children in my constituency, and I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire for securing this debate and giving me the opportunity to air them. Does she agree that it is a huge improvement to have a Government who are integrating SEND support and that there is so much more that we are all looking to do?

Pippa Heylings: I will come on to what I think is a postcode lottery. We see regional disparities in the care and provision given, so I thank the hon. Member for raising that point.

For many, the wait to get assessments for education, health and care plans can be months, if not years. Lord Darzi's investigation of the NHS in England notes,

[Pippa Heylings]

“Waiting lists for community services and mental health have surged.”

The report also mentions how

“Demand for assessments for ADHD and Autism have grown exponentially in recent years”,

with children disproportionately represented among them.

Recent research found that 200,000 children in England are struggling to get an education, health and care plan. That is 200,000 families left in uncertainty, desperate for help and struggling without the support they need.

Cambridgeshire currently has 8,033 students with EHCPs—a 51% increase in the last five years—and of those, 2,593 plans primarily address autism spectrum disorder. Indeed, I was told by the chief executive of Cambridgeshire county council that there has been an increase of 270% in the number of children presenting with autism. Requests for education, health and care needs assessments have risen faster than the national average. Why? We think that is driven by greater awareness of SEND and the statutory responsibilities of local authorities, the impact of the covid pandemic and the overall increase in mental health issues for children, even at a very young age. Those numbers help to underline the scale of the issue, but we should not get drawn purely into statistics and figures, because behind every number and every percentage there is a child, a family or a sibling being failed every single day.

I come to the issue of disparity that the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) mentioned. Families who can afford to seek private neurodevelopmental assessments tend to receive help much faster than those who are reliant on public services. For the rest, it is a postcode lottery. NHS England data reveals stark regional disparities in waiting times for diagnosis. For example, the north-west region has the longest average wait of three years and four months, from referral to diagnosis. We therefore have a health inequality element to this too, as certain groups of children are less likely to have their needs identified or met, punished just because of where they live.

For some children, mainstream schools are simply not suitable, and parents and carers bear the brunt of that reality, managing reduced timetables, enduring repeated exclusions and watching their children receive only a few hours of education each day.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for bringing this important debate to the House. Following on from her comments about mainstream education, one of my first jobs after leaving university was as a teaching assistant. I also spent a year in a special needs school. Does she agree that the issues we are seeing are partly the result of the lack of recognition and appreciation over the last 14 years for support staff in mainstream schools and of the role that they play in ensuring that every child has a decent education?

Pippa Heylings: I could not concur more. Over the past decade or more, we saw chronic under-investment from the Conservative Government, despite the needs having been recognised in statute, and that has left us in this pressure point situation. We are now seeing the results of that. I have also been told that this is a time bomb, because we will see the impacts in the future in

the quality of life, in opportunities, in the NHS and in social services—in all services really—if we do not deal with this situation.

I have also been told about the situation for siblings. When a child is not given the support that they need in school, young carer siblings are often drawn out of their class and asked to be with their sibling during their lunch break or lessons. There is an impact on all those affected.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): On that point about young carers, does my hon. Friend agree that, at the moment, schools struggle to recognise how many young carers are on their rolls? Does she think that the Department for Education would be wise to look at better ways of measuring the number of young carers and giving schools the toolkits to identify them?

Pippa Heylings: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The Carers Trust has provided us with these stories and pointed out that we really need to collect this evidence. It would be easy to point the finger at local councils and say that this is their failure, but, as we have said, they are stretched to their limits by a chronic lack of funding. We have heard that £40, the cross-party local authority campaign group, has estimated that an additional £4.6 billion of annual SEND revenue is required to meet the current need, yet most of our county councils face a black hole in their budgets. One issue is the training and retention of educational psychologists, because they and council workers are overwhelmed. Turnover rates are high and burnout is common, which leads to an exacerbation of those waiting lists.

Mrs Russell: I thank the hon. Member for allowing me to intervene again; I appreciate it. Cheshire has some of the lowest per-pupil funding in the country. There is a direct link between schools that receive relatively low levels of funding and councils that have relatively high levels of SEND diagnoses, because there is not the same support in mainstream classrooms as when there are higher staffing ratios, which we find in areas that have better funding. We need to look at equalising that funding as best we can in the current environment to improve support at an earlier stage, as the hon. Lady was mentioning.

Pippa Heylings: I agree with the hon. Member. My constituency of South Cambridgeshire also has among the lowest per-pupil funding, which exacerbates the fact that, even though we have EHCPs, most of them are not funded to the amount that is required for each of those students. That compounds the situation that our amazing schools are trying to deal with.

Let me return to educational psychologists. Cambridgeshire county council has 17.5 budgeted educational psychologist roles, but 6.4 remain vacant due to a national shortage and the fact that psychologists can get better pay in other jobs and other places. We are seeing an inability to fill those roles and to support psychologists.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for a national body for SEND to end the postcode lottery faced by families of children with the highest needs. That would include looking at immediate Government action to prioritise early diagnosis and support for children with SEND, and to increase funding for diagnostic services.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): One concern is that many children end up being out of education because they are not getting the support that they need in school. Does she agree that it is an outrage that, in that situation, some parents face prosecution? Does she also agree that we need to provide support for children to receive an education, whether in school or through alternative provision, and that we should record that in a better way? At the moment we have authorised and unauthorised absences. We do not record the fact that some children are missing school because their parents do not believe that they are receiving the support that they need.

Pippa Heylings: I thank my hon. Friend for raising one of the complex issues around this provision. While we support the current Government's additional allocation of funding to this critical area, we really want them to look at the fact that it is not just about mainstream provision; it is also about specialist provision. As she says, we must look at all types of provision, because this is complex. Even if support is given in mainstream schools, it is often on very reduced timetables, which means that parents and carers are unable to work and be productive for society, because they are either covering the spaces in that provision, unauthorised or otherwise, in other settings, or covering for the times when the school cannot provide timetabled support.

I return to what the Liberal Democrats think we should have: a national SEND body, an urgent increase in diagnostic services, action to address the chronic lack of educational psychologists, targeted resources for local authorities to improve their capacity, support for our schools and for more special school places, and interim support measures for children awaiting diagnosis so that they do not fall through the cracks. The Lib Dems have always said that we need mental health professionals in every school. It is great to hear the Government talk about mental health professionals in secondary schools. We have heard about the need in primary schools, so let us get in there early too.

A capacity for early diagnosis and management means, as somebody said to me, in the words of Desmond Tutu, that we can stop pulling people out of the river, and instead stop them falling in the river in the first place. Once again, I pay tribute to all the amazing parents and carers who have spoken to me, and the amazing teachers, headteachers and SEND co-ordinators who are working in this area.

4.36 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) ended with the words of Desmond Tutu, and I could not agree more. I congratulate her on securing this debate on an incredibly important subject, and I congratulate hon. Members on their valuable contributions to it. I know that, as a former teacher, she is really aware of the critical role that education plays in breaking down barriers to opportunity, and how vital it is that we get our education and health services right to support the most vulnerable in our society. She described incredibly eloquently and powerfully the difference that good, inclusive education provision can make, and the significant challenges in providing it. She also mentioned the challenges that many children face at transition points, which can undermine some of the incredible work that teachers

are performing up and down the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Swards) rightly pointed out.

Like others present, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire will have been inundated with letters and emails from concerned families in her constituency. I am sure she has been helping them to navigate the incredibly challenging special educational needs and disabilities system. So many of us are faced with this issue, which is why we need to reform the system. It is a priority for the Government. We want all children, regardless of where they are in the country, to receive the right support to succeed in their education and lead happy, healthy and productive lives. In far too many cases, we have simply lost the confidence of families that children with special educational needs and disabilities will be supported, because they are being failed by every measure.

Despite high needs funding for children and young people with very complex special educational needs and disabilities rising to higher and higher levels, the system is simply not delivering the outcomes that those children deserve, so we desperately need to reform the system. Our message to families is that we are committed to improving the SEND system and regaining their confidence.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I completely agree with the Minister's comments. Part of ensuring that we provide the correct support to children is ensuring that the education, health and care plan assessment process is effective. I was told by a charity worker in my constituency of Dewsbury and Batley that 95% of appeals in Kirklees against a conclusion that SEND support is not needed are successful. Does she agree that this is a terrible waste of council resources, and that EHCP assessments must be done properly and got right the first time, so that children can be given support as soon as possible?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely recognise the challenge the hon. Gentleman has outlined, but it very much speaks to the point I was making, which is that we have published independently commissioned insights that suggest that if the education system as a whole was extensively improved, and if we had much better early intervention, which the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire rightly referred to, and better resourcing within mainstream schools, that could lead to tens of thousands more children and young people having their needs met without an education, health and care plan. Their needs would be met within a mainstream system and with their peers, without needing a specialist placement. Clearly, we need specialist places for children with the most complex needs, but to ensure we have those places, we need to improve inclusivity and expertise within mainstream schools, while ensuring that those special schools and places can cater to children with the most complex needs.

I come back to the hon. Lady's point about transition points for young people and how important it is for the whole system to be reformed. It is not good enough to reform just part of it, and for that great work to then be undone when a child or young person moves on to a new educational setting that does not provide the right support and environment for them. My point is that this situation is huge and complex. There is not a magic

[*Catherine McKinnell*]

wand, and there is no overnight quick fix, but we are determined to change it, and we cannot do it alone. We need to work in partnership to achieve this.

Alison Bennett: I thank the Minister for her response. So much could be said about special educational needs across the country and in my constituency of Mid Sussex. The Minister mentioned how we all as Members of this place are undoubtedly trying our best to help families navigate the special educational needs system. I am sorry to say that when families come to me and I ask, “How can I help you?”, they say, “We don’t think you can help us. We just want you to witness and listen to what we are saying,” because the system is so broken. I met the family of Annabel in Mid Sussex. She has been out of school for several years, has been sectioned and has had multiple suicide attempts because her autism was not being managed in the schooling system. Her family just wanted me to bear witness to them, and I am so sorry that there is not more that we as parliamentarians can do.

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady has borne witness today to that family and young person facing that challenge. It is vital that we work together with parents, schools, councils, the health sector and expert staff, who we know go above and beyond to support children within education settings to achieve the changes that are clearly desperately needed.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire specifically focused the debate on support for autistic children and young people and those with ADHD. She will know from the work she has undertaken that we are seeing significant increases in the numbers of children and young people identified as autistic or with ADHD, and that is something we share in common with other countries around the world. We know families are facing significant challenges and that support needs to be in place, as she outlined, to ensure that those children can thrive in school.

We absolutely recognise the long waiting times across the NHS for autism and ADHD assessments, and we are working to address them. As the hon. Lady identified, we need to ensure that mainstream schools and colleges can identify those needs and put support in place early, because the earlier a child gets the support and right environment in which to learn, the more chance that they will thrive and that some of the challenges they face will be mitigated.

Ensuring that we have knowledgeable professionals in our schools and colleges is a key part of this. All teachers are teachers of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, but we need to make sure those teachers have the skills and support to help all pupils succeed. As such, we are implementing a range of teacher training reforms that begin with initial teacher training and continue through early career teaching to middle and senior leadership.

We have a universal SEND services contract, which provides SEND-specific courses and professional development for school and college staff. Through that contract, the Autism Education Trust offers a range of

training and support for staff on how to support autistic children and young people. The contract began in May 2022, and over 200,000 professionals have received training from the Autism Education Trust and training partners. On 1 September 2024, this Government introduced a new mandatory leadership-level national professional qualification for SENCOs. We are making the changes, but it will take time for them to work through.

Our partnerships for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools programme is also running in around 10% of schools, which is approximately 1,600 mainstream primary school settings. It is deploying specialists from both the health and education workforces and building better teaching and staff capacity to identify the needs of neurodivergent children. It provides opportunities to enhance support and improve outcomes for all children, taking a whole-school approach. It is a cross-Government programme backed by £13 million of investment, and it is a collaboration between the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and NHS England.

Additionally, we have just established a neurodivergence task and finish group, bringing together a group of experts from various backgrounds to help us understand how to improve inclusivity in mainstream schools in a way that works for neurodivergent children and young people. We know that listening to children and young people and their families and understanding their experiences is a really important part of this work. That group met for the first time this week, and I look forward to seeing their recommendations on the best way that we can support these children’s needs. This is happening alongside our expert advisory group on inclusion and the work being done by Dame Christine Lenehan, our new strategic adviser on SEND. We are looking at all of these issues strategically across Government, as we urgently need to turn this situation around.

I could go into the details of high needs funding, but I am very conscious of time. I appreciate the concerns that have been raised about the national funding formula. We prioritised speed over change this year—we needed to get the formula processed and out to schools and educational institutions—but we will obviously keep it under review to make sure the money is being spent in the most effective way to deliver the best outcomes for children. We have also allocated £740 million for high needs capital funding to support mainstream schools to adapt, if needed, to create more inclusive mainstream settings.

I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire again for bringing this matter forward. Ensuring that effective support is in place for young people is absolutely a priority of this Government. We know the hardship that far too many families have faced, and my final word of thanks goes to all those working in the interests of our children in our health, education and care systems. We will deliver the best for our children and young people, and I am confident that together we can achieve that.

Question put and agreed to.

4.48 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 12 December 2024

[SIR MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Disability History Month

1.30 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Disability History Month.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Mark, and I am grateful to the members of the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this important and timely debate.

As a disabled woman and mother to a disabled daughter, I feel real personal pride in leading this debate, and I am grateful to other hon. Members who have turned up to take part. It is an opportunity to reflect on the important place that disability and disabled people have in our history, to raise awareness of the ongoing challenges that people living with a disability face, and to look forward to continuing to build a truly inclusive society.

Disability History Month is a chance to celebrate our achievements to make the UK more inclusive to disabled people. A huge amount has already been achieved since the end of world war two, when over 300,000 servicemen and women came home disabled. That homecoming exposed huge numbers of people in Britain to the realities of life with a disability, acting as a catalyst for an important change in attitudes towards disabled people. The country saw changes to the law to improve disabled people's standards of living and work. The Disabled Persons (Employment) Act 1944 promised sheltered employment, reserved occupations and employment quotas for disabled people. Initiatives to restore the fitness and morale of disabled servicemen and women spread to the rest of the disabled population. The NHS extended rehabilitation services to workers disabled by industrial accidents, for example.

Many disability rights charities formed in the 1940s and 1950s, and in 1951 a new social movement was started by a silent reproach march of 800 disabled ex-servicemen walking to Downing Street. The civil rights movement in America inspired disabled groups to take direct action against discrimination, poor access and inequality. A social, rather than medical, model of disability emerged.

In the years since, we have seen increased understanding of disabled people's experiences: the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970—the first in the world to recognise and give rights to disabled people—created support services and specialist educational facilities for disabled people, and introduced the blue badge scheme; 1995 saw the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act, which made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in employment, the provision of goods or services, education, and transport; and the Equality Act 2010, passed under the last Labour Government, made disability a protected characteristic in law, strengthening the measures in the 1995 Act, and safeguarding disabled people from direct and indirect discrimination.

Disabled campaigners who refused to accept a status quo where their experiences and lives were valued less than others in society were at the heart of those changes, as they are at the heart of calls for change today. I want to mention just one of these campaigners. Ruth Bashall, who passed away earlier this year, co-founded the Campaign for Accessible Transport in 1989, taking part in direct action protests that saw wheelchair users block central London streets. Ruth also set up Stay Safe East, a user-led organisation dedicated to tackling abuse against disabled people from diverse communities. Today the group provides advice and advocacy for victims of violence and harassment while working to improve the knowledge and practices of the police, health professionals and others as they interact with disabled people.

If we are to honour that work, we must listen to organisations like Stay Safe East when they tell us what changes are needed to ensure that disabled people can access the opportunities for self-empowerment and self-agency that we all want. We must also listen to the new generation of activists, including the young people I met last week at an event in Parliament organised by Scope, who were sharing the challenges they have faced. Storytellers like them will be a key part of the journey to equality—because it is a journey, and it is one that we are still on.

On average, one in three disabled people say that the UK is a worse place to live now than it was a decade ago. Discrimination and stigma have not gone away, with three out of four disabled people having experienced negative attitudes or behaviour in the past five years. Disabled children are too frequently deprived of the life chances that they deserve, with a special educational needs and disabilities system that is broken after 14 years of neglect.

The theme of this year's Disability History Month is livelihood and employment, an area that sadly illustrates those ongoing barriers well. The disability employment gap has sat stubbornly at around 30% for over a decade, and behind every statistic is an individual denied the independence and security that comes with a job. According to research by Scope, more than a million disabled people want to work, but poor employer attitudes, insufficient employment support programmes and a lack of flexibility and adjustments at work make it impossible. Two thirds of disabled people said that the most common issue when applying for jobs was a fear of disclosing disability. Disabled people who are supported into work are more likely to find themselves in lower-paid roles or on a zero-hours contract.

The disability pay gap stands at around 17%, which equates to a disabled person working on average unpaid for 54 days a year. This exclusion and discrimination in employment has devastating knock-on effects for a disabled person's livelihood and wellbeing. We know the benefits that good employment brings—better incomes, financial stability, security and a greater sense of purpose—whereas disabled people who are out of employment suffer from high levels of anxiety and lower rates of personal wellbeing. The bottom line is the financial impact, as disabled households need on average an additional £1,010 a month to have the same standard of living as non-disabled households.

All that is against the backdrop of the number of vacancies in the UK, which stands at around 831,000. By failing to recruit disabled people and support disabled employees to stay in their jobs, employers are missing

[Jen Craft]

out on a wealth of talent and the benefits of a diverse workforce. I will look at some of the causes of that gap, because this is an untenable situation.

In 2023, the all-party group on eye health and visual impairment commissioned YouGov to carry out polling to look at employer attitudes towards partially sighted or blind people. The polling found that 48% of employers said that they did not have accessible recruitment processes and, more shockingly, around a quarter said that they would not be willing to make workplace adjustments to employ someone who was blind or partially sighted. One of the recommendations that the APPG published as part of its report following the poll was that the Government should review the Equality Act to ensure that it is fit for the modern labour market and that employers comply with their existing obligations under the Act. I would welcome the Minister's views on how he can work to make that happen, taking into account the views and voices of disabled people.

With proper support, disabled people can thrive in the workplace. Organisations across the country demonstrate that, doing fantastic work to support disabled people to fulfil their career ambitions and potential. Last week, I met Charlie, who has experienced sight loss since birth and found employment through Scope's support to work service. He spoke about how the employment adviser encouraged him to talk about his disability as a positive factor at interview, building his confidence to apply for jobs. He has now been in work for five years.

The WorkFit scheme run by the Down's Syndrome Association promotes the skills and abilities of people who have Down's syndrome, focusing on the positive contribution that they can make in the workplace. It is guided by the belief that in the right job and with the right support, everyone is able to work. By engaging directly with employers and candidates to provide training and advice, the scheme has supported 1,000 candidates into employment with more than 750 employers. The scheme has created lasting change, with nine out of 10 people in paid work through WorkFit retaining their job.

In my constituency, Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions is an excellent example of good practice in helping disabled people to enter and stay in the workplace. It is particularly successful because it embodies the maxim, "Nothing about us without us"; it is run, led and designed by disabled people themselves. That maxim must guide Government policy on disability.

For too long, disabled people have been sidelined in the policymaking process. They have been denied a voice while successive policy agendas on areas such as employment, education and transport have ignored their needs and left them to suffer the consequences as a result. I am encouraged by the steps that this Labour Government are taking to put disabled voices at the heart of decision making. I know that the Minister is deeply engaged with these issues, and I thank him for his commitment.

The creation of a disability lead in every Department is a very welcome step. This recognises the need to look at the experiences of disabled people through a cross-Government approach to truly understand the full societal impact of living with a disability. Can the Minister confirm whether the Government will continue engaging and working alongside disabled individuals, campaigners

and charities as they seek to drive reform? And is he able to give further details on the roles and responsibilities of the departmental disability leads?

I also welcome the Government's White Paper, "Getting Britain Working", and particularly the pledge to put disabled people at the heart of design and delivery. I look forward to the review of the role of employers in promoting health and inclusive workplaces, to support the recruitment and retention of those with a disability.

There is an important recognition in the White Paper that the current system focuses on assessing capacity to work, rather than helping people to adapt to their health condition. The White Paper also acknowledges that too many people who would like to work are held back by the fear of losing social security payments, if they end up needing them again in the future. I hope the Minister will assure me today that that will not be forgotten. Disabled people need to know that support will be there when they need it, and that if, for whatever reason, having tried employment they find that a particular workplace does not work out, they will not lose their financial benefits as a result.

Will the Minister reassure me that the Green Paper, due to be published next spring, will not see a return to punitive measures or an assessment system so restrictive that it is, in fact, punitive? To truly deliver the huge shift necessary to see more disabled people in secure employment, we must look at these issues in the round. That starts with fixing the broken SEND system for our children, and it will take a sustained, long-term focus on the experiences of disabled children and their families to deliver an education system that meets the needs of every child. The extra £740 million of investment to increase places for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools is a significant step, because in education, employment and across Government, policy that gets it right for disabled people gets it right for everyone.

Progress has been made, and we should celebrate that and reflect with gratitude on the work of disabled campaigners who have brought us so far. However, there is still so much to be done, not only in the realms of employment and livelihood, but in accessible transport, accessible public, social and sports spaces, and ensuring that there is no place in society that disabled people are not able to rightly play their part. I have one final question to the Minister: when he chairs the meetings of the Government's disability leads, will he work to ensure that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Transport, the Department for Business and Trade, and the Office for Equality and Opportunity are all working together to speed up progress in order to make the UK a truly inclusive place for the millions of disabled people who live here?

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I remind Members that they need to bob, as some of you are, if they wish to be called in the debate.

1.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for setting the scene so well on a subject that we all engage with every day in our constituencies. I believe, as I think we all do, that we should encourage those who wish to work, and might not have had the opportunity, to do so. This debate is an opportunity to highlight this issue, raise awareness and

encourage my constituents back home. I always try to give a Northern Ireland perspective to debates relating to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This is that sort of debate and hopefully the Minister will answer some of our questions.

The most recent census was in 2021—indeed, this is the season to talk about the census after all. It showed that one person in four in Northern Ireland—24.3%, or some 463,000 people—had a limiting long-term health problem or disability. Forty per cent of those, or some 185,300 people, were aged 65 or over. Statistics and figures sometimes go over our heads, but if we think of those 185,300 people, that is also 185,300 families, and that impact on a population of 1.9 million in Northern Ireland is great.

It was also interesting to note that the number of people with a limiting long-term health problem or disability increased from the 2011 census to the 2021 census. Unfortunately, this shows a worrying trend. The 23.6% increase from 374,600 people in 2011 to 463,000 people in 2021 is notable and the response to it must be, too. I will ask a question to the Minister that I always ask: has he had an opportunity yet—he is in a new role as Minister—to discuss these matters with the appropriate Minister back home in the Northern Ireland Assembly? We need to ensure that we co-operate better and that our policies, strategy and response are co-ordinated right across the whole United Kingdom.

Ards and North Down borough council in my local area recently had a motion to ensure that signage was visible in council facilities to remind people that not every disability is visible. I have seen on the tube whenever I travel here that, as well as seats for disabled people, there is always a wee poster that says, “Not every disability is visible”. In this age when everybody is hustling and bustling and rushing, it is interesting to see how many times people will give up their seat maybe unknowingly to someone who has a disability. Their pride sometimes prevents them from taking the seat, but the fact is that people are kind. In this fast world we live in, it is always good to remind ourselves that people do reach out and help. It is important that we do so.

I thank my local council for its motion and for ensuring that awareness is raised. I believe that has, in its own small way, had a real impact and changed the conversation around disability. The hon. Member for Thurrock is right that we need a change in the conversation. We want people to think and talk about this issue, so she deserves a lot of credit for bringing this matter forward. We must try to teach people to understand that while a person may seem healthy at first glance, they may also be someone who needs a little more help or assistance. Anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder crops up across my constituency all the time. Understanding that will help us to understand why the numbers are not what we expect. We need to ensure that every disability is acknowledged, and we must do all we can to ensure that every disabled person is heard.

This debate was in my mind during a debate we had the other day that was not specifically about this issue. We need to think about our veterans, some of whom have lost limbs, whether legs or arms, or have had terrific internal injuries. Through the Invictus games and the Paralympics, those with disabilities have been able to shine, and that should inspire us all. It should probably also humble us when we think of what those people can

do with their disability. For me and for others in the House, the Invictus games and the Paralympics have become something we want to see even more, with great respect to those who are able-bodied. It is really important that we see the achievements they can reach.

I believe this is the main drive behind Disability History Month. We see where we started off, by removing the workhouses and those institutions. As the hon. Member for Thurrock said, we saw soldiers returning from war who could do more with more help. We acknowledged that there was a functioning place in society for these individuals, and the real discovery was that our society is the better for inclusivity.

I want to mention one last point about children. I have six grandchildren. Three of them have speech issues and require therapy. One of them is non-verbal, which is another disability in our children. The hon. Member for Thurrock referred to children, and it is important that we have the institutions in place, although this is a debate about disabilities, not SEND education, so I will focus on disabilities. As I say, one of my grandchildren is non-verbal, but he and children like him still have a smile and an interest in what happens around them. Education is very important to help those children to achieve their goals in life.

I have seen at first hand how many steps can be taken forward under the expert help and support that is available. The question for us in this place is this: is there enough help and support available for the massive spectrum of disability? My wife is obviously a very wise lady and a very sensible lady, given that she married me; she has been even more sensible to stay with me. She refers to disability as “difability”—a different kind of ability.

We can do more to support parents and help them to unlock their children’s potential; to ensure that mainstream schools have the capacity and finance to be a safe and engaging place to learn, with no child left behind; to help people into the workforce by supporting them and helping workplaces to afford the changes they need to make to become “difability” friendly; and to ensure that families can afford what they need and can grow. Lastly, we can do more with our ageing population, to ensure that they have the enhanced support and care required to remain at home for as long as they wish.

1.51 pm

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this debate, during which we can reflect on the treatment of disabled people in the past and on how we can learn from the experiences of our constituents to shape a better future.

As we focus on this year’s theme of disability, livelihood and employment, the optimists among us like to think that the arc of history tends towards progress. We have heard about the important 1944 and 1970 Acts, and the fact that 2010 was a landmark year in disability history, with the introduction of the Equality Act. Prohibiting discrimination against disabled people, the Equality Act is still one of the most progressive and long-standing legacies of the previous Labour Government.

Unfortunately, in 2024, after 14 years of Conservative Government, it feels like we are going backwards. In March this year, the UN’s Committee on the Rights of Persons

[Sarah Coombes]

with Disabilities found that we have a system that “devalues” disabled people and that which results in “hate speech and hostility”

towards them. A fragmented and inaccessible system that undermines human dignity is not one that this Labour Government stand for.

Today the disability employment gap—the difference in the employment rates for disabled people and non-disabled people—stands at around 25 percentage points in West Bromwich. That is slightly less than the national average, but it is still far too large, which is why I am pleased that the Government are addressing this disparity and listening to disabled people regarding how to do that.

It is clear that the employment support system for disabled people is not working properly, which is why the Government’s recent White Paper has a focus on enabling disabled people to find long-term work and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said, well-paid work that they can thrive in. I am glad that the Government are investing £115 million next year to deliver Connect to Work, a new supported employment programme to match disabled people with job vacancies. It is hoped that from 2026 onwards the programme will support nearly 100,000 people a year. I can think of many very qualified disabled people in my constituency who do not have the jobs that they deserve and would do well in.

In the Budget, the Government also addressed an issue that affects many disabled people: the carer’s allowance. The previous cap was trapping people in poverty and penalising them like criminals for earning just a few pounds over the threshold. We have raised the earning limit on carer’s allowance, meaning that it is easier for people who are caring for loved ones, many of whom are disabled, to go out and work. We should be clear, though, about the scale of the challenge that many disabled people come up against when looking for work, or just going about their daily lives, whether it is the social barriers presented by other people’s perceptions of their disability or the physical barriers presented by public transport, as my hon. Friend mentioned.

Disabled people are more likely to rely on buses to get around, but unfortunately our bus system is just not good enough. The new Government are doing something about that, and I hope the Minister will say more about that in his response to the debate. Unfortunately, the 45 bus service from West Brom to Walsall, which I campaigned to save, is still so unreliable that it often leaves passengers stranded or forces them to abandon their journeys; the loss of the 46 bus means that elderly and disabled people on Old Walsall Road now have to navigate an enormous hill; and the fact that there are no direct buses to the train station from Oakham means that many residents find it hard to work further afield, go shopping in the city centre or take part in sport.

I will touch on sport, as other Members have, because it is worth mentioning areas where progress has been made. Of course, we have a long way to go to make sure that all sport is accessible, but I will pay tribute to a few people in my area. In West Brom, we are proud that our local football club is famous up and down the land, but there is one part of the club that is not so widely known. West Bromwich Albion are the reigning champions of at least one league—the national league premiership for powerchair football. Their goalkeeper and player-manager

Chris Gordon, who has spinal muscular atrophy, has a career and livelihood that is centred on sport—not despite his disability but because of it.

Another local champion of sporting opportunities for people with disabilities and learning disabilities was Norma Hyde from neighbouring Halesowen. In 1983 she set up Special Olympics Sandwell, for which this year she was rightly recognised in the King’s birthday honours list.

Finally, Blind Dave Heeley—as he calls himself—is a local legend in West Brom. Having lost his sight at a young age, he committed himself to fundraising through sport. He recently cycled 1,000 km along the western front in Europe, and once did seven marathons in seven days on seven continents, becoming the first and only blind person in the world to achieve this. In the process, he raised millions of pounds.

Of course, not every disabled person needs to be inspiring, run marathons or be at the top of the league to deserve fulfilling employment, a decent livelihood and access to transport. As parliamentarians, we must put the views and voices of disabled people at the heart of what we do and work towards a future that is truly inclusive for everyone.

1.56 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark, and to contribute to this important debate, which I thank the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing. She made many important points, some of which I will also mention.

As has already been said, the theme of this year’s UK Disability History Month is disability, livelihood and employment. My interest in this issue has its foundations in losing 70% of my hearing from bacterial meningitis when I was aged 19. Ironically, being the Member of Parliament for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton is the first job in which I feel my disability has been a positive advantage, giving me a platform from which to advocate for others. My niece was born with spinal muscular atrophy, giving me a window into the experience of more acute disability in the workplace and the challenges she faces on a daily basis.

In 1995 it was a Conservative Government, under John Major, who delivered the first UK legislation to protect disabled people from various forms of discrimination. In the last 30 years, new protections have improved the work situation of disabled people. A good example is the Access to Work programme, which, if implemented and understood properly by business, can remove some of the barriers that employers may perceive in taking on a disabled employee.

Many disabled people are eager to work and contribute, but face significant barriers in understanding which opportunities are truly accessible to them. While there is a lot of emphasis on getting disabled people into further education, that same support is not prevalent beyond university. Many disabled people want to work, contribute to society, pay taxes and have a work routine that makes them feel valued. Time should be taken to understand not only what is possible but what an individual aspires to achieve.

Managing a disability can feel like a full-time job in itself. To enable disabled people to contribute to our society through work, we need systems that offer flexibility, and that safeguard benefits and allow individuals to

take on work without jeopardising their health or their financial stability. A manager saying, “Tell me what you need and I will do it” is a great start, but the reality is that in a new job there are so many unknowns. For those with additional access needs, what is needed can be hard to define at the outset, without prior knowledge of exactly what the job entails. People’s needs can vary widely, depending on the disability.

There is an opportunity to create transformational change quickly. If we increase the prevalence of access co-ordinators, they can provide an interface between businesses, line managers and disabled employees and jobseekers. Their role is to implement best practice from other organisations and identify the help that is available. By supporting a disabled employee’s career progression—which can be even more challenging with geographic and access constraints—they can help to deliver the autonomy and flexibility that works for both employer and employee, ultimately ensuring that disabled employees have access to a career, not just a job.

2 pm

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Mark. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this debate. Derby has the largest number of deaf people outside of London, which I am sure is in no small part because we are privileged to have the Royal School for the Deaf Derby. This specialist school was founded in 1894 by Dr William Roe, after he witnessed a young deaf man being bullied and called “Dumb Jack”. Dr Roe was struck by the social and educational exclusion of deaf people, and this Disability History Month I pay tribute to him and the school that he created.

There is no doubt that attitudes across society towards people who are deaf or have hearing loss have come a long way. The country was mesmerised when Rose Ayling-Ellis waltzed her way to lifting the glitterball trophy on “Strictly Come Dancing”, providing an overdue weekly prime-time lesson on deaf awareness and deaf culture for the nation. Films such as “The Silent Child” and “CODA” have not just showcased the rich talent that exists within the deaf community, but used stories and humour to give wider society an insight into the deaf existence and the barriers that people face on a daily basis.

The media representation of the deaf community has certainly, and rightfully, grown in recent years, whether through deaf participation in “Love Island”, “Bake Off”, or “Married at First Sight”, or simple acts of inclusion in everyday interactions, but people who are deaf or have hearing loss are still marginalised in society, and there is still so much to do to provide the community with the life chances they deserve.

Children and young people from across our country attend the Royal School for the Deaf Derby, which offers both day and residential specialist education. Last week, the Ofsted inspection on its residential provision was published, grading it as outstanding in all areas; I invite the Minister, if I may, to join me in congratulating the school. The school is also the largest employer in the midlands for deaf BSL users, who are incredible role models for their pupils, and provides training and development to partner agencies in Derbyshire and Derby. One example mentioned in the Ofsted report was a firefighter that the

school had trained, who was able to use sign language in an emergency, providing support and reassurance to an individual involved in a road traffic collision.

I have seen art by the school’s pupils that was shown an exhibition alongside work by renowned deaf photographer Stephen Iliffe at the Artcore gallery in Derby, celebrating the achievements of the deaf community, highlighting the diverse experiences in careers of deaf people, and demonstrating that, with the right support, there are no limits to what they can accomplish.

However, we know that our wider education system across the country far too frequently fails our children and young people. The attainment gap facing deaf pupils is equivalent to 12 months of learning by the end of primary school, and, at GCSE, deaf students perform more than a whole grade worse than their non-deaf peers in both English and maths. People who are deaf or have hearing loss are also penalised in the labour market. Less than four in 10 working-age people who use BSL as their first language are in employment. A third of that group are classified as long-term economically inactive—a total waste of their talents and ability. That point was made powerfully by my hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock and for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes).

Sadly, there are also far too many examples where the NHS is not doing enough to provide appropriate access. Two in three people who use BSL as their first language have no accessible method of contacting their GP, and four in five patients who are deaf or have hearing loss reported having an appointment at which their communication needs were unmet. Deaf people also suffer worse outcomes for physical and mental health than their peers. These are public policy failures, and as MPs and decision makers in Westminster, we need to take action to fix them.

There are many brilliant charities providing evidence and expertise to feed into that work. We recently had four of them—the British Deaf Association, the National Deaf Children’s Society, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People and SignHealth—in Parliament, at an event that I hosted and at which we were honoured to have the Minister attend and speak. Charities can act as a bridge to their communities, helping to facilitate policy-makers to learn directly from the lived experience of the communities themselves.

The work that we need to do in Westminster to support the deaf community cuts across Government, and we need action from all Government Departments—Health, Education, Transport, the Home Office, Business and Trade, Work and Pensions and others. I thank the Minister for and congratulate him on the positive step forward that we have seen with the appointment of lead Ministers in each Department to champion disability inclusion and accessibility. In his cross-Government role, I am sure that he will passionately drive the policies that we need to see in the lives of deaf and disabled people, so that they can thrive and we can all benefit from the full use of their talents and skills.

2.7 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing the debate and leading it with such a wealth of knowledge and experience? I think we all benefited greatly from her presentation. This is a slightly unusual debate, because it is the first one that I can

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

recall in recent times when the splendid hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was the first Back Bencher to be called; that is a little bit of an in-joke, but most people familiar with his wonderful but very frequent contributions will understand what I mean.

I was encouraged to take part in this debate by the fine example of the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who chairs the APPG on eye health and visual impairment. I know she is very disappointed that she cannot be here today, but I understand that there is a visitation in her constituency of the sort that no MP can refuse to attend. I should like to record my gratitude to her pleasant and dedicated team for supplying me with some very helpful information, which I now intend to deploy. According to the charity Scope, there are well over 16,000 people living with a disability in my constituency of New Forest East, and I should like to say a few words to honour their efforts to work and live well despite the challenges that they face.

Disability History Month is now an annual event celebrating the history, contributions and struggles of disabled people. A motion that marked the first Disability History Month was tabled in the Commons in November 2010, signed by 79 hon. and right hon. Members, including the former Father of the House, Sir Peter Bottomley, and my late, great friend, Sir David Amess. Among other things, the motion called upon schools, colleges, universities, local authorities, employers, the public and the media to recognise and celebrate UK Disability History Month, and encouraged them to campaign to improve the then—and still, sadly—unequal position of disabled people in society by working towards greater equality and inclusion.

That cause has certainly been taken up by a good number of people and organisations. I am particularly lucky to have in my constituency the Minstead Trust, which works to support people with learning disabilities. It is no exaggeration to say that it is a jewel in the crown of the New Forest. I was very interested in some earlier comments by hon. Members about the importance of the work ethic for disabled people, because the Minstead Trust has acquired the wonderful Hanger Farm Arts Centre, which is a terrific facility with a tremendous programme of visiting artists and performers. It also gives work experience opportunities to the people who benefit directly from the trust, and is an outlet for some of the goods that they manufacture under the auspices of the trust. It is a terrific facility for the community as well, so there are big wins all around from that wonderful project—long may it continue.

The Minstead Trust also encourages workplaces to be inclusive in their recruitment practices, so that they can enjoy the benefits that people with learning disabilities can bring to the businesses that take them on. That is important because, as we have heard, this year's UK Disability History Month theme is indeed livelihood and employment. We know that there are all types of benefits to working, including social benefits. Doing something that one enjoys can quell loneliness, create important social bonds and give one a sense of purpose. The benefits of including disabled people in our workplaces really are enormous.

There are many other realms, however, where inclusion could be better. The former Minister of State for the Department for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the

Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), understood this. She led the disability champions work across Government, where each Department of State had one Minister who was a disability champion, with a personal commitment to championing accessibility and opportunity for disabled people within their Department's policies. The ministerial disability champions met regularly to discuss plans, such as the disability action plan, as well as the impact of the high cost of living on disabled people. I am certainly pleased that the new Government are continuing in the same vein with their disability leads in each Department.

The same former Minister also recognised that some disabled people have significant extra costs relating to expensive equipment, home adaptations and so forth that they need in order to get by. The previous Conservative Government provided a substantial cost of living support package. Nevertheless, according to the charity Scope, the disability price tag—the extra money needed by a disabled household to have the same standard of living as a non-disabled household—in my constituency is well over £900.

We all know that it is not just extra financial costs that disabled people face. Almost three quarters of disabled people in my constituency are estimated to have experienced negative attitudes. Although a great many people in local schools, health providers, businesses and community centres are knowledgeable and respectful of the challenges facing the disabled community, it is also true that when we look at the national picture, outdated attitudes towards disabled people sometimes spill over into harassment and abuse. Disabled people are more likely to be the victims of crime and are twice as likely to experience harassment than non-disabled people. Disabled women are more than three times as likely to experience domestic abuse. I am sure that all hon. and right hon. Members are united on the need to end that, and I look forward to seeing what the Minister will do to work with his colleagues to ensure that the police and other services take a comprehensive and informed view when tackling abuse against disabled people.

It is not a simple subject. Victims of disability hate crime, discrimination, or sexual violence can have their experiences compounded by the double or triple discrimination that they face as women, as people of colour or for some other identifying factor, but there are charities led by disabled people who can provide expert advice and information about how better to support disabled people who are at risk of harm. I hope the Minister will say something about how his Government will work with such specialist charities.

I would like to pay personal tribute to those Members of Parliament who are living with disabilities. It was significant to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) explain the extra burden, in addition to the normal burdens of being an assiduous Member of Parliament, her hearing loss has caused. I said at the beginning that I was encouraged to take part in this debate by the hon. Member for Battersea, who I regard as a personal friend. I find the way that she copes with her eye disability absolutely inspiring.

I speak from a little personal knowledge, because when I was an undergraduate I lost 18 months after a severe allergic reaction to some eyedrops, which prevented my being able to read. When one is a student at university that is a bit of a problem—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. We are running over and need to get other speakers in.

Sir Julian Lewis: Sorry. I remember once, before I knew it would come right—as it finally did—walking past the Palace of Westminster and thinking ruefully, “To think I thought I would ever get to be a Member of Parliament!” I got over that problem, and I did get to be a Member of Parliament. I take off my hat to those MPs with far worse disabilities—permanent disabilities—who nevertheless have joined this place and contribute so much to its proceedings.

2.17 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. As many people know, I am an ear, nose, and throat surgeon, with a special interest in hearing loss and ear diseases. That has been my life’s work, so I declare a big interest in this subject.

Deafness and hearing loss are invisible disabilities, but they are common—very common. They affect 70% of people over the age of 70, and 40% of people over the age of 40. Hearing aids are free on the NHS, but millions of people who could benefit from them do not have one, and many people who do have one simply do not use it—perhaps up to 5 million people. Perhaps a million of our fellow citizens cannot hear conversational speech, with many unable to contact their GP or use health services. Many deaf people do not work because the adjustments that could and should be made for them are not made. Deaf awareness among employers is insufficient.

I will talk a little about earwax. Occluding earwax, which causes hearing loss and is also caused by hearing aid moulds, is a huge issue for deaf people. The services in this country to remove it are very patchy. Before I became an MP, I was the chair of a deaf association in East Anglia, a charity that helped thousands of deaf people and had contracts from the NHS to provide ear care and hearing aids. I believe that charity is a model of community-based, not-for-profit NHS ear care to the population that could be widely copied. The charity has mobile services for rural locations and can provide ear care in residential settings with one-stop provision of wax removal, audiology and hearing aids, keeping people communicating, connected and able to work.

I also commend the work of many excellent larger charities set up to help people with hearing loss, some of which were here in Parliament this week. The RNID estimates that the cost of hearing loss to the economy is £30 billion a year due to loss of earnings, reduced quality of life and increased social care costs. The solution to much of the problem is obvious: hearing aids must be just about the most useful disability aid ever invented. Let us do what we can in this Parliament to support our NHS audiology and hearing aid services. After all, most of us will need them one day.

Let us not ignore deafness when we talk about disability. I read about a young person with hearing loss who said:

“One of the worst things is when people say something I miss...they say ‘oh it doesn’t matter’. It probably didn’t matter to them at the time, but it makes me feel I don’t matter.”

I think that matters to all of us.

2.21 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing the debate. Her speech covered a lot of ground, and she paid warm tribute to campaigners in her constituency and beyond. She told the story, with great eloquence, of the journey that is still in progress on disability rights. I remember her speaking with passion about the subject in her maiden speech, too.

The hon. Lady also spoke of the need to promote equality of access, and cited examples of how positive change in the workplace can be achieved through the right supportive schemes. She and other Members also mentioned the importance of the links with education and transport, reminding us that this issue cuts across all aspects of government and society. She was right to call on the Government to focus on support and positive action rather than sanctions and punishment.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the importance of supporting and encouraging people into work and gave the Northern Ireland context. He rightly reminded us that not all disabilities are visible. The hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) spoke of the importance of support for carers and of high-quality transport to enable people to access society equally.

The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) was right to cite the then Conservative Government’s contribution in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Hopefully we can all work together across the House to continue to reduce, and ultimately end, discrimination against disabled people, including in the workplace.

We must do far more to tackle barriers to work, including by providing more support for employers to change the way they view disability. In the Liberal Democrats’ manifesto, we committed to make the benefits system work better for disabled people by giving them, and organisations that represent them, a stronger voice in the design of benefit policies and processes. We would like work capability assessments to be brought in-house and personal independence payment assessments to be reformed to make the process more transparent and stop unnecessary reassessments and the use of informal assessments. We would also like to empower more people to enter the job market, including parents, carers and disabled people themselves, by making more use of technology and new ways of working.

We welcome the Government’s long-term ambition to achieve an 80% employment rate, and a number of measures in their “Get Britain Working” White Paper published last month. Under the Conservative Government, the UK was the only economy to see its employment rate fall over the past five years, and they undermined apprenticeships, left mental health services not fit for purpose and ran our NHS into the ground.

We welcome the Government’s proposed steps to improve access to skills, training and education and to reduce shockingly high mental health care waiting lists. However, we call on them to go further. We would like to see regular mental health check-ups made available and new mental health hubs in all communities. We would like to see more done on providing better flexible working, given that 52% of carers who apply for it have their application refused. The Government should guarantee that apprentices are paid at least the national minimum wage by scrapping the lower apprentice rate. I also note that disability charities such as Disability Rights UK

[Olly Glover]

have some concern about the balance between positive, supportive measures, and potential sanctions and punishment, in forthcoming legislation.

We have heard from many hon. Members about the importance of local charities and about particular constituency circumstances. More than 12,000 households in my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage include at least one disabled person, which represents nearly 28% of all households in the constituency. Thankfully, local authorities and charities work together to help provide assistance. Oxfordshire county council runs a community support service—hosted in the towns of Wantage and Wallingford—with activities and services to help people stay healthy, independent and engaged. As the years have moved on, the service in Wantage has adapted to meet the changing social care needs of the area. Wantage market garden was created in the green space behind the service and is now looked after by the community action group Sustainable Wantage, in partnership with care provider Style Acre and the county council. Services like these are vital for the inclusion and support of disabled people.

We know that on average, disabled people take far fewer trips per year than non-disabled people, which is why, in addition to improving bus and rail services, community transport services such as Vale Community Impact, Cholsey Volunteers, Didcot Volunteer Drivers and Wallingford Volunteer Drivers, are such an important lifeline. I am proud that Oxfordshire county council has awarded over £100,000 of grants to those organisations. Most railway stations in my constituency have seen accessibility improvements in recent times, but Cholsey is the busiest that currently lacks them. I call on Network Rail, Great Western Railway and the Government to support an accessibility scheme at that station.

We have heard from the hon. Members for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) about the importance of helping and supporting people with hearing loss. At the risk of oversharing, I am also afflicted by occasional earwax problems, so can certainly recognise that point. Perhaps I shall turn to the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket for advice on how to deal with that vexing problem.

In conclusion, we must do more to support those with additional needs. I hear regularly from my constituents that accessing the support they need through personal independence applications is challenging to say the least. We must support employers to make reasonable adjustments for employees through schemes like Access to Work and, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, support children with special educational needs so that they can thrive in their education. We must also provide more funding for CAMHS, the child and adolescent mental health services. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

2.28 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this debate during Disability History Month. As someone with a disability herself, she will likely

know that everyday life can be so much harder for those with a disability than for those of us fortunate to be able to take our health more or less for granted.

Before I was elected to Parliament, I had an inspirational colleague who had suffered a spinal injury that left her unable to walk. Our jobs were demanding—a 70-hour week was not uncommon—and somehow my colleague managed to do the work, and do it brilliantly, despite all the extra challenges of life in a wheelchair, including the difficulty of getting to and from work and navigating inaccessible buildings, and all the extra effort it takes to do the everyday things that so many of us do without thinking, like getting dressed or taking a shower. Working alongside her made me realise the importance of the things that we have done to help disabled people over the years, like making buildings and transport more accessible.

I also saw the consequences of people failing to give any thought to those needs: for example, by using disabled toilets as storage cupboards, or leaving them locked so that people have to go on a mission to find the key—a mission that is doubly hard for someone in a wheelchair. My colleague's disability was obvious, but we should be sure to remember people whose disabilities are hidden and not to underestimate the difficulty that such disabilities can add to life. For instance, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) said with great insight that in this job it is the first time her hearing loss has felt like an advantage as she uses her platform as an MP to advocate for others. She argued powerfully for disabled people to be able to access not just a job but a career.

Alongside talking about the challenges, this Disability History Month is a chance to reflect on pivotal moments of progress for disabled people and to celebrate the individual heroes who picked up the cause and made the running—metaphorically and sometimes in practice. If we cast our minds back, for instance, to summer 2012, right here in London the international bar was raised and a new standard was set for what disabled people could imagine achieving.

More than 4,000 para-athletes from 164 countries competed with everything they had in front of a physical audience of 2.7 million people. It was watched on 3.8 billion television screens around the world, with record-breaking audiences, including a record number of young people growing up with a disability who were waking up each day and thinking, “If I put my mind to it, that could be me.” We in this country made a leap forward at that moment, and as we did so, we led the world. The message is repeated at every Paralympic games: never underestimate what someone with a disability can do.

That brings me to disability employment. The Government should recognise the challenges that disabled people face, but must not dissuade anyone of their ability to overcome them. On the contrary, the Government must lean into the barriers to employment and help to knock them aside. On that my party has a strong track record. As a new Back Bencher, I remember being encouraged by a passionate disabilities Minister at the time, Justin Tomlinson, to get involved in our Disability Confident programme to get employers across the country to think differently about disabilities.

In 2017 we set a target to get a million more disabled people into work by 2027, and we met that target five years early; there are now 5.5 million disabled people

in work. We took practical steps to achieve that, including working with employers, as I mentioned; funding Access to Work, which helped more than 67,000 people in 2023-24; launching universal support to give personalised support to long-term sick and disabled people to find and stay in work; and providing supported internships for people with special educational needs. Those are just a few examples.

I am a firm believer that work is the best way to improve our standard of living, as well as giving us the satisfaction of a job well done—a view that I am sure is shared by many, if not all, hon. Members present, and also argued for compellingly by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) in his extremely well-informed speech. The question is not whether someone can work, but what work they can do and how. If a person with disabilities needs help to work, where does that help come from? Often it comes from family, community, charities—as hon. Members have referred to today, which often have deep expertise—volunteers who give their time and compassion, and, as I have set out, the Government.

The Government's resources must be targeted. Since the pandemic, we all know that the number of people who are economically inactive due to ill health has surged, reaching 2.8 million people. Apart from the cost, that is a waste of talent and potential. That is why, when the Conservatives were in government, we embarked on reforms to help people to stay in work or get back to work—reforms to fit notes, the launch of WorkWell, the launch of universal support, and our work with employers. We reformed welfare to make sure that financial incentives did not get in the way of work.

I welcome the Government taking forward many of those reforms, but I believe they have made a grave error in kicking the can down the road on the accompanying benefit reforms. Every day that someone who could work is getting money from benefits instead is money that could help a disabled person to live their life to the full.

As I conclude I will return to history, given the topic of the debate. The Disabled Persons (Employment) Act 1944, which was introduced in response to the second world war, as the hon. Member for Thurrock said, laid the path for disability legislation and protections for the next 80 years. We live in a different era, but our welfare system is built on the vision of our predecessors who were determined to make sure that soldiers who were wounded defending our freedom would be supported on their return home. When the Conservatives were in government, we put our shoulder to the wheel to make our welfare system fit for the 21st century. We made progress, but there is much more to do. Every hon. Member who has spoken today has made important suggestions.

This Disability History Month is a chance to send an emphatic message of encouragement to people with disabilities across the whole United Kingdom. We know how hard every day can be, but let there be no limits to what they can achieve.

2.35 pm

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on initiating this

debate and on her speech. We have been reminded that Disability History Month was inaugurated by an early-day motion in this House in 2010, of which our former colleague, Dame Anne Begg, herself a wheelchair user, was the lead signatory. This is an opportunity for us to reflect on the progress made and the challenges we still face, and listen to the voices rightly calling for a more inclusive society. We want to celebrate the achievements of disabled people throughout history. We recognise the barriers that they have overcome, including those that persist.

I agree with the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) that the examples of those with a disability who have served in this House, past and present, are inspiring. I did not know that he had a period at university without sight. I am familiar with some of his university activities, but not with that one, so it was very interesting to hear that.

Understanding history helps us to learn and grow as a society. In this month, in honouring the pioneers of disability rights and listening to the experiences of disabled people, we commit to working together for a more inclusive future. I will set out the Government's actions for delivering access and inclusion to all disabled people through our missions and our plans for a decade of national renewal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock highlighted the stubborn disability employment gap, which, as she said, has been stuck at 30 percentage points across the country for the past 30 years. I was pleased to hear that in West Bromwich it is slightly less, but it is still much too high, so we need to make progress on it. We want to provide better support to enable disabled people who are able and want to work to move into and progress in employment.

I am grateful for what hon. Members have said about our "Get Britain Working" White Paper, published a couple of weeks ago, which announced some important reforms. We are changing the outcomes against which we measure success. We are focusing not just on getting somebody into a job, but on achieving higher engagement with everyone, on the employment being sustained and on whether it leads to pay progression.

We will overhaul jobcentres and deliver a new youth guarantee to ensure that nobody is left on the scrapheap when they are young. We want local Get Britain Working plans to be drawn up in every area in England, bringing together jobcentres, colleges, skills providers, the NHS, employers and local charities to tackle economic inactivity. Importantly, the White Paper announced a disability employment panel, with which we will work to ensure the voices of disabled people are at the heart of the reforms we introduce.

I was very interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock about WorkFit, which she has mentioned to me previously. I am keen to find out more about it. It was also good to hear from the right hon. Member for New Forest East about the Minstead Trust and Hanger Farm. We need such models to address the chronically low rate of employment among people with learning disabilities.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) rightly spoke about public transport and access to work. I have spoken to a number of disabled people about the barriers to employment, and public transport accessibility is right at the top of many

[Sir Stephen Timms]

of their lists. I am pleased that the Bus Services Bill will include measures to improve the accessibility of bus and coach stops and introduce powers to create statutory guidance on inclusive design. I am also pleased that the Department for Transport is working closely with disability advocacy groups, including the Department's own Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, but we certainly need to make a lot of progress in that area.

We fully recognise that some people, through ill health or disability, are not working. We are determined to ensure that they also have the support that they need. We know that many of those who are out of work through ill health or disability would love to be in a job, but at the moment, they face insuperable barriers that prevent them from working. Those barriers include features of the benefits system.

At the moment, the standard rate in the benefits system is at its lowest level, in real terms, in 40 years, which makes it hard for people who receive it to support their families. If they can convince my Department that they are too sick to work, they receive additional cash but no help at all to return to work. That means that the benefits system is driving people with health problems into inactivity.

We are committed to reforming the system so that health and disability benefits support disabled people into work and to live independently. Alongside "Get Britain Working", we will be setting out reform proposals in the spring in a Green Paper, to be followed by a full 12-week consultation. That is because we want to think about it properly and take account of everybody's views so we can get it right.

In introducing the debate, as well as mentioning the disability employment gap, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock also rightly mentioned the disability pay gap, and we are working on that as well. We are developing the equality (race and disability) Bill to deliver our manifesto commitment on disability pay gap reporting for larger employers, and to place on the statute book the full right to equal pay for disabled people. That work needs to be informed by the views of disabled people and of the employers that will implement the new requirements. We will launch a public consultation early in the new year, when we will want to hear from disabled people, their representative organisations and employers to help to shape the legislation.

Since July, I have been meeting regularly with a range of disability groups and organisations, and I have thoroughly enjoyed doing so. In the past week, I have met the Disabled People's Organisations Forum England, which is made up of more than 40 organisations led by disabled people. I have also met the Disability Charities Consortium, comprising nine of the largest disability charities. The first of those meetings was online; the second one was face to face. Also online, I have met our regional stakeholder network, which is made up of representatives from nine networks across the UK of members of the public who are committed to using their own experience to improve the lives of other disabled people locally. I also work with the Government's disability and access ambassadors, who are senior business leaders from 12 sectors, from advertising to universities. They provide personal leadership to help deliver good-quality services for disabled people, and to encourage improvements to accessibility.

Hearing impairment has been a significant feature in the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) on the event she hosted in the Attlee Suite. Was that yesterday?

Catherine Atkinson: *indicated assent.*

Sir Stephen Timms: It was a very good event. I made some rather poor efforts to address the group in British Sign Language—my first attempt. I know that she will be pleased—I am sure the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) will be as well—to know that we are committed to supporting the British Sign Language advisory board, which was set up in the wake of Rosie Cooper's British Sign Language Act 2022. It is the UK Government's first dual-language board focusing on key issues that affect deaf people. We are committed to promoting and supporting British Sign Language and we will shortly be publishing the 2023-24 British Sign Language annual report.

I am pleased to join my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North in congratulating the Royal School for the Deaf Derby on the accolades that it has received from Ofsted, and I very much agree with the important points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) about the importance of what is being provided to ensure that people's hearing is well looked after and supported.

I need to work closely with ministerial colleagues and with other Departments right across Government to ensure that disabled people get the support they need to overcome the daily barriers that they face. The commitment that I am setting out today on behalf of the Government needs to be a whole of Government endeavour, so I was very pleased about and grateful for what Members said in the debate about my announcement last week of a lead Minister for disability in every Department to represent the interests of disabled people and to champion disability inclusion and accessibility in their Department. I will chair regular meetings with the members of that group and encourage them to engage directly with disabled people and their representative organisations as they work on their departmental priorities. I am looking forward to the group's first meeting next week, and I can give my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock the assurance that she is looking for about our shared aims and what that group will be working towards.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): It is fantastic to hear about all that the Government are doing on disability. My right hon. Friend the Minister will know that many disabled people rely on family and friends to provide care and support to enable them to have a full life—to participate in work, school and other things that they enjoy—so will he reassure me and others that, in taking a cross-departmental approach to disability, he will be considering the important role of family carers?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her point and can certainly give her the assurance that she seeks. As she knows, in the Budget we made an important improvement to the arrangements for carer's allowance through the commitment that the earnings threshold for carer's allowance will be increased to 16 hours a week at the national living wage rate. That will be a permanent link with the national living wage and, we hope, will overcome the problem that a lot of carers have run into over the last few years, whereby

they get a bit of a pay rise that tips them above the threshold and therefore inadvertently receive an overpayment of carer's allowance. We hope that the change will help, and we know that the increase itself will bring about 60,000 more family carers into eligibility for carer's allowance.

As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said in the Budget, we will also be looking at the possibility of a new taper arrangement for carer's allowance, in order to move away from the current cliff edge, which has always been there. That will require quite substantial IT development; it will not be ready overnight, but I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) will agree that it is quite a promising idea to improve support for unpaid carers in the future.

My focus is primarily on domestic disability policy, but I also oversee UK implementation of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and represent domestic disability-related policy on international platforms, so in October I attended the first ever G7 Ministerial disability inclusion summit, which was hosted by the Italian presidency and held just outside Assisi, where I and my G7 counterparts and Ministers from several other countries all signed up to the Solfagnano charter. That sets out a collective agreement to advance work in eight key areas, among which is:

"Inclusion as a priority issue in the political agenda of all countries".

It is a useful document, focusing specifically on disability inclusion all the way through. We have also worked to extend the UN convention to a number of UK overseas territories. We recently extended the treaty to Bermuda—the first British overseas territory to which it has been extended. I can confirm that we are committed to protecting and promoting the rights of disabled people around the world as well as in the UK.

A great perk of my job was to attend the Paralympic games in Paris in August. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) was right to draw attention to the huge improvement that was the London 2012 Paralympic games, which took the Paralympics movement to a new level. I visited the athletes' village in August, and it was most interesting to see how it had been laid out to be accessible to everybody. There were ramps everywhere and electrical devices at the bottom of every slope that people could clip on to their wheelchair to help them up it. It is worth making the point that in those games, we came second in the medals table, ahead of the United States and all the other European countries and behind only China. The games attracted unprecedented support and audiences, with the venues full of enthusiastic—and, I must say, highly partisan—French audiences. It was good to hear everybody highlighting the importance of UK leadership in not just starting the games at Stoke Mandeville, but hosting the groundbreaking 2012 games. The unique contribution of Channel 4 in 2012, and ever since, has clearly been deeply appreciated around the world in the Paralympics movement.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich was absolutely right to draw attention to the importance of disabled people being able to be physically active. There is a problem in the benefits system, because too often people fear that being physically active could lead to them losing their benefits. We need to address that challenge of reforming the system in our Green Paper, when it is published in the spring.

Disability History Month reminds us that progress is a shared endeavour. Working together across Government, across the House and with the wider community, we can build a society in which everyone can participate fully and equally. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly raised the question of the extent to which I am working with Ministers in Northern Ireland, in Scotland and in Wales. I met Minister Lyons from Northern Ireland when he came to London, and the Minister for Transformation, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), also met him on his recent visit to Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Strangford is right to underline the importance of us working together across the United Kingdom on these priorities.

Let us honour the courage and contributions of disabled people, past and present, by reaffirming our commitment to not just a month of reflection, but a permanent springboard for lasting change and a more inclusive future.

2.53 pm

Jen Craft: I thank the hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) who was instrumental in securing the debate, and her and her team for their help in the preparation of my speech.

I will reflect on some of the issues that have been raised by Members across the House. I thank the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) for her words about this being the first job where she feels her disability is a bonus; they ring true for a lot of us in this place. That is certainly something that we should take away as disabled Members—what it means to people outside to see us in this place and the message that we can send.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said that when he lost his sight, he could not imagine being in this place. I would say to anyone watching, "You can. We are here. We are very proud to be here, and you are welcome in this House." There is long way to go for it to be fully accessible, but there are disabled MPs—more of us than people know—and we are growing in number.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for raising the issues that deaf people have with access to employment. To first language British Sign Language speakers, I would say that one of the access needs of this House is that [*In British Sign Language: There is no BSL on Floor of House.*] That will mean something to people who see it at home. I will apologise for doing that afterwards, rather than ask permission, Sir Mark.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for raising wider issues around transport access, which often forms barriers to employment, and also for highlighting that disabled people do not need to be inspirational to deserve the rights and access that everyone enjoys.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his moving reflections on his grandchild with additional needs. Quite often, as the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), mentioned, it is when people

[Jen Craft]

come into close contact with a disabled person that they find their own attitudes adjusting and realise that there is something about the art of the possible. We can all reflect on whether we are doing enough to adjust our own attitudes towards disability and what is possible.

I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for raising the issue of discrimination in the workplace and what that looks like. My own experience of employment has been mixed. To experience discrimination based on who you are in a workplace situation is quite a shocking thing. It takes a while to come back from it and to realise that the whole multifaceted thing that makes up “you” has an awful lot to offer. That is something to reflect on.

Finally, I thank the Minister for his thoughts. As I said at the start of the debate, it is incredibly encouraging to see a commitment to put disabled voices at the heart of decision making. I hope he will take that away as the Government develop their approach towards disabled people, not just on the issue of employment but across Government, and make sure that the disabled voice is right at the heart of every policy area that may have an impact on the lives of disabled people—and I would say that that is every policy area. I thank him for his reflection on his experience at the Paris Paralympics. A lot of people who have been in a space that is specifically made for disabled people find themselves thinking, “Why can’t everything be like this? How much better would the world be if access was built right into the system?” The only way to get that is by including disabled people in the design process and in decision making right from the start.

To conclude, I very much would like to be stood here next year in Disability History Month, reflecting on a year of progress. Instead of discussing some of the things we have today, I would like to be looking at how far we have come over the previous 12 months. For a long while, disabled people have been very good at adapting the way we act and at bending to society’s norms. I would throw a challenge out there: maybe it is about time that society bent to us a little bit as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

This this House has considered Disability History Month.

Floating Offshore Wind: Celtic Sea

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered floating offshore wind in the Celtic Sea.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. We are here today to talk about floating offshore wind, particularly in the Celtic sea. It is the next frontier in the UK’s clean energy transition, and is positioned to unlock up to 4 GW of power by 2035—enough to power 4 million homes. There are huge opportunities for Cornwall, the south-west of England and Wales, because the Celtic sea is all around us.

The ambition is to put floating offshore wind in the south-west, where it would complement other offshore arrays. The opportunities that arise from it for Cornwall and the region—for our supply chain, which is poised to expand, for our economy and for our people, who will benefit from skilled, good jobs—are vast. However, to be quite brutal, an ambition is pretty much all that it is so far.

The first question is, why floating offshore wind? Eighty per cent of the world’s potential offshore wind resources are in deeper waters. The Climate Change Committee estimates that the UK needs 100 GW of offshore wind by 2050, which is feasible only through the development of FLOW. FLOW is new technology, and the UK could be at the forefront of developing it for a global market, rather than relying on overseas supply chains and losing out on new investment in UK industries. The potential for jobs is vast.

Why the Celtic sea? Offshore wind has a successful history off the east coast of the UK. However, the wind blows both ways. By developing FLOW in the Celtic sea, we can maximise the energy generated and mitigate the intermittency. Previously, that was not possible due to the depth of the seabed, but new floating technology has opened up the region to development, and this could be a huge opportunity if it is done well. The current Government target is for 5 GW to be produced by FLOW by 2030. It is estimated that a 4.5 GW programme in the Celtic sea, as modelled by the Crown Estate, would lead to £1.4 billion in gross value added and 5,300 jobs in the development of port infrastructure and critical component supply across the region.

However, there are barriers. As I have said, FLOW has not got to the stage that we hoped it would be at by now. One of the barriers is the contracts for difference programme. After the failure of allocation round 5 to secure any FLOW projects at all under the last Government, the most recent funding round, under the new Government, resulted in the Green Volt project in the North sea securing CfD funding in AR 6. However, the budget for that pot was still too low for more than one of the three bidding projects to be successful. To reach the Government’s decarbonisation goals, contracts for difference will need to support multiple FLOW projects in each allocation round and the vital test and demonstration models—the stepping stone models—in the Celtic sea.

Projects in the North sea have received significantly more investment to date, and have more developed supply chains and port capabilities, enabling them to deploy FLOW at lower costs. There is no offshore oil or gas legacy in the Celtic sea; it is a greenfield site and lacks the infrastructure that it will need to scale up. It needs targeted support to reach equity with the North sea. Having had only one successful floating offshore project in previous CfD rounds across the Celtic sea has knocked investors' confidence, so although this is a fantastic opportunity, there is a risk that investors' interest in the region could be lost if we do not progress quickly.

To support the development of floating offshore wind, we need upgraded ports, which requires significant capital investment. However, uncertainty about the development of FLOW has led to investors holding off from developing those ports until contracts for difference have been awarded. That has led to a mismatch of timelines, as ports need investment about five years before the project is built out. The floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme has provided financial support for Port Talbot, although I understand that it has not yet been deployed. However, other ports in the region are needed to deploy floating offshore wind.

A multi-port strategy needs to be pursued in the Celtic sea to make the most of all the existing ports and specialisms. We have a port in Falmouth, which is mainly why I am here, but there are others in Appledore, Plymouth and Milford Haven, so many ports and port clusters could be got up to speed to help develop floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea. Unfortunately, France is ahead of us; it has committed €900 million to the port of Brest, so we need to catch up. The Government's £1.8 billion for ports in the national wealth fund could really help to provide the leading investment and certainty required to kick-start the port investment, if it is done quickly and in a strategic way.

The focus of developers in the Celtic sea is currently on the stepping stone, or test and demonstration, projects, which have an important role in giving confidence to the industry and reducing the costs and risk of future commercial-scale projects. There are currently two stepping stone projects in the Celtic sea that could be eligible to bid into the next contracts for difference auction round: Erebus and White Cross. However, both projects face challenges with planning issues, bottlenecks onshore in Devon, and investment.

Hexicon's TwinHub project is the first and only FLOW project in the Celtic sea to win a contract for difference so far in allocation round 4. It consists of two turbines in Cornwall council's Wave Hub. However, it now faces the same rising costs as the rest of the renewable energy sector, as well as the challenge of developing a supply chain in a region that has not yet had the opportunity to do so. The contract for difference price has become less viable over time. As a more expensive, smaller test model, it was never going to be commercially viable in that way, but as a stepping stone project, it is crucial to the development of FLOW and associated supply chains in the Celtic sea.

There are options available, such as making a deal with the end user for the energy or allowing TwinHub to rebid for a lower CfD price. A proactive and creative solution needs to be found to make those test and demonstration projects viable, and to scale them up in

the long run. A consistent pipeline of leasing rounds in CfDs is key to scaling up skills and supply chains ahead of commercial projects coming forward for development. They would encourage developers to commit to the region, lay down roots, and plan ahead and invest.

Annual option fees also have an impact on developers' ability to use local supply chains that need more time to establish. That increases costs and pushes projects towards using overseas supply chains, removing the benefits for local communities and investments into the region. More could be done by the Crown Estate to support local supply chains, and once the Crown Estate Bill has become law and investment funds are set up between developers and the Crown Estate, that could change. Falmouth port is prepared to match Government funding to get up to speed to support the TwinHub project. There is a risk that the economic benefits of the project may go overseas without additional funding to help develop the supporting onshore industry.

The development of FLOW in the Celtic sea will need huge amounts of mooring line, electric cables and anchors, which the region is currently not ready to supply. A unifying strategy is needed to encourage the necessary investment to develop those capabilities, along with others across the region. The floating offshore wind taskforce has identified realisable UK value in key components for floating wind, such as installation, mooring and anchors, concrete platforms, steel platforms, operation, maintenance and development services, ports and logistics, and array cables.

At present, the national grid is a large barrier for projects. The TwinHub project has been struggling to get the full grid capacity that it needs until 2037. We need a far-sighted and co-ordinated approach from the National Energy System Operator, which has been newly nationalised. NESO is beginning a holistic network design with the Crown Estate, but that needs to happen quickly and to be scaled up. The Celtic sea is a nationally, and potentially globally, important infrastructure project, and as such, it requires a specific strategic focus from central Government.

Having a GB Energy strategy on Celtic sea FLOW, with hopefully a presence in the region—maybe in Cornwall—would support co-ordination of infrastructure, industry and workforce. However, a complex set of stakeholders is involved, including government at all levels: national, devolved, Welsh nation, and different levels of south-west councils, as well as The Great South West, which is a pan-regional economic partnership. There is also Celtic Sea Power, and the newly set up Cornwall FLOW Commission, which has already done some of the work required to co-ordinate the supply chain and work out how to produce a skilled workforce—this needs a concentrated focus. There is currently no joined-up spatial strategy for the Celtic sea. Consultation on that strategy for the ocean, with fishers, conservationists and scientists, needs to be done very soon.

Having a unified strategy would enable phased development and, crucially, would support the prioritisation of investment in infrastructure and the local supply chain. It would also help streamline planning. Current planning and consent is too slow. A project currently takes an average of 15 years to move from leasing to operation. To reach the Government's net zero goals, we need to speed up the process. For example, the White

[Jayne Kirkham]

Cross test and demonstration project in north Devon has been struggling to get planning consent for more than 18 months.

What do we need? What are the key asks to get this going? A one-size-fits-all approach for the UK has not produced the necessary investment to get floating offshore wind off the ground in the Celtic sea. By putting it in direct competition with the North sea, the Celtic sea is likely to continue to lose out and the UK will lose the opportunity to harness all the benefits FLOW can bring. AR7 could, and should, ringfence funding for floating offshore wind, along either geographical or technological lines. Geographical ringfencing would remove direct competition with the North sea. Technological ringfencing would improve the competitive position of the test and demo stepping stone projects, which are so crucial to getting commercial sites up and running and which play a critical role in maintaining investor confidence in the region.

To overcome the challenges of developing onshore supply chain capabilities to deploy FLOW in the Celtic sea, the Government could support collaborative and strategic investment in ports, rather than putting them in competition with one another as FLOWMIS did. A specific targeted wealth fund could be created to invest in infrastructure, supply chain and to lever in private investment, with particular focus on ports. In the short term, we can have logistics hubs and technologies to include temporary portside space like Tugdock in the south-west. But long term, we need to invest not only in our ports and infrastructure, but in our rail, road and digital.

A co-ordinated approach to how the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, the Crown Estate, GB Energy and the national wealth fund exercise their procurement and auction processes, and the use of World Trade Organisation and trade and co-operation agreement exceptions for reasons of national energy security and net zero targets, could give freedom to add clauses into contracts and leases to encourage local supply chain building and workforce training investment by developers. Some developers have expressed interest in doing that and are even setting up headquarters to co-ordinate it. The Crown Estate's option fees and the rules around how they are used could be reconsidered, so that they could be deployed as a catalyst for greater investment in that regional supply chain. DESNZ and the Crown Estate could put supply chain social value and biodiversity net gain incentives directly into those local delivery mechanisms.

We have world-class further education colleges in Cornwall that are ready to step up and provide the specialisms and scale of the workforce we need, but we need direction, funding and a long-term career pathway. We have discussed previously a FLOWmark programme to build up those skills specifically for this industry in our region.

In summary, we need a unified national strategy for floating offshore wind and a regional masterplan for FLOW in the Celtic sea. Without the strategy, we risk losing out on the benefits of this nationally important infrastructure project, including its export potential. We risk the goal of reaching clean energy by 2030. There is a huge future in the Celtic sea, and we need to reach out and grasp it.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): We have plenty of time for this debate. I remind Members to bob in their places if they intend to speak, so I have some idea of who will contribute.

3.13 pm

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) for expressing so eloquently the challenges we face in the Celtic sea. I would point to the work that we have been doing in our all-party group for the Celtic sea to look at this issue from a regional perspective. The opportunities are so vast that this is not a situation where competing interests are trying to divvy things up, so to speak. There is sufficient food at the table for all.

We have exceptional natural resources: high average wind speeds of eight metres per second and water depths of 50 metres. These unique conditions provide the framework for us to achieve the election manifesto commitments that we, as a party, have put at the front and centre of our agenda: clean energy and economic growth.

In my constituency, in Pembrokeshire, one in four children is living in poverty, and these serious systemic issues stretch back over multiple generations. The oil and gas industry radically transformed my constituency, but over time we have gone from having four oil refineries to having just one. We have transferred into natural gas—we have liquefied natural gas—but the challenge, as a result of that decline, is to work out what the alternative is for people in my constituency. How can we ensure that the brightest and the best can remain in the county, succeed in the jobs of the future and see that just transition happen?

The opportunity is there; floating offshore wind is our opportunity—if it is not, then what is? It is our opportunity to bring back prosperity and opportunity and to give people in my constituency hope. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth set out the challenges we face, and it is incumbent on us—not only as individual Members of Parliament but as a party of social justice and change—to rise to meet those challenges.

We have been partnering with the Crown Estate and looking at supply chains. We have to tackle the issue of ports. We have to look at CfD and, fundamentally, at the picture on skills. At the end of 2023, there was a total of about 230 MW net of installed floating offshore wind. There was 101 MW in Norway, 78 MW in the UK, 25 MW in Portugal, 23 MW in China, 5 MW in Japan, and 2 MW in both France and Spain. It is unusual, and incredibly exciting, that the UK can play its part in leading on a technology. Not only are we at the forefront of this transition and of combating the global challenge of climate change, but we are looking to play our part in the reindustrialisation process.

Let me turn to the Crown Estate. There have been issues, which my hon. Friend has alluded to, including annual option fees. The annual option fees placed on the leasing round will have a devastating effect on the commercial viability of developers in facilitating the conditions to take forward that reindustrialisation package, provide the new jobs and do that domestic manufacturing, such as the fabrication—anchors and cabling.

The Crown Estate produced a report saying that the first 5.5 GW would involve 5,000 jobs and require 260 turbines, 1,000 anchors and 900 km of cables. But where are those things going to be produced? Will it be in Spain or South Korea? No. I want them done in Pembrokeshire—I want to produce anchors and cabling in Pembrokeshire. I want a future for Port Talbot in providing steel for that fabrication and those substructures. The prize is there—we just have to seize it.

It simply is not good enough for the Crown Estate to sit and think about maximising its own revenue generation from the seabed. It is the Crown Estate's time to step up. We as a Government have united with it—in terms of the legislation currently going through the House, and in allowing it to have greater borrowing power—but the time for action is now. The Crown Estate cannot sit behind WTO rules and use them as an excuse for inaction; it must seize the day and take control, and in doing so create the right conditions within the leasing round and create the pipeline that we need. Without that pipeline, there can be no security for the developers or the local supply chain. We need to have a clear route as to how we can realise the 25 GW that has been set out. This whole project cannot be about maximising the 12% for the Crown Estate—that is greed. This must go beyond basic greed—one of the seven deadly sins. The Crown Estate cannot be obsessed with maximising its revenue for the sake of greed. This is a project for the benefit of the Celtic sea and the country, and we undertake it because it is so vital.

With the supply chain, there are plenty of opportunities in terms of the numbers, as I have set out. There is exponential growth, from 4.5% to 12% to 25%, which must be set out clearly. As those numbers increase, so will the demand in the supply chain. However, the challenge for local developers, particularly those I have spoken to in my Pembrokeshire constituency, is that there is no certainty of revenue. They cannot plan those contracts, because they are not in place, and they are not in place because there is a lack of strategic planning and the conditions have not been set up. If a developer came in, bid for a seabed lease and got it, they would be hit with annual option fees, and they have had to pay through the nose to get the lease. Why would they pay a 20% uplift on an anchor in Milford Haven when they could go and get it from overseas in whichever country they chose that has the lowest common denominator on price? There is an up-front capital cost here, but the prize is in the long-term realisation of the benefit: cheaper bills, reindustrialisation and the UK once again leading as an industrial, manufacturing force. That is no small prize.

I repeat the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth about the challenges facing Port Talbot in getting the money out the door from FLOWMIS, but we have equal challenges in the port of Milford Haven. We need to have confidence, and that confidence comes from Government and from setting those conditions. I have been incredibly encouraged by the words of my hon. Friend the Minister, which is absolutely fantastic, and by the national wealth fund. We now have these mechanisms from our Labour Government in place to create the foundation and confidence for the private sector to invest in ports, and that is where it will all stem from.

This is about the ports and the supply chain, but it is also about the skills. In my constituency, we have the great Pembrokeshire college, which has been doing fantastic work with the private sector to improve the facilities available to students. We recently unveiled a new facility with Shell, which has invested £1 million in Pembrokeshire college. These partnerships between the public and private sectors to upskill people and address the skills gap are so fundamental, but we must have that co-ordinated strategy. Without that, things fall apart because of how complex and difficult this issue is.

We are coming from a situation where we did not have an industrial strategy and where, under the previous Government, the market would decide. We would create the conditions, then we would go to the lowest common denominator on price, and it could be anyone's business. That is not the way that we approach things. We have a strong lead from this Government. We create the conditions in respect of public investment, allowing and facilitating private investment. That is the way we try to have reindustrialisation and address regional inequality.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth made a critical point about contracts for difference, which fall squarely in DESNZ. The issue we have had with these stepping-stone projects is that floating offshore wind is an inherently nascent industry, and it is not well suited to that competitive framework, which is driven by the lowest cost per MWh. Fixed wind did not have to contend with that when it began as an industry and a technology, so we are forcing floating offshore wind to play in an inherently competitive market to which it is totally ill suited.

On the topic of grid, capacity is a real difficulty and will be a real challenge. We have a grid connection in Pembroke coming out of RWE at the Pembroke Net Zero Centre. If we can get that pipeline, the power coming off these turbines will be phenomenal and could meet half the UK's power needs. We have to meet that challenge, so I am glad the Labour Government are taking the bull by the horns, if that is the right expression, by attempting to change the national grid.

The key is merit: we have to prioritise these projects. It comes back to the fundamental question of delivery; the project is complex, and the crux of all of this—the crux of the Government, if I may be so bold—is delivery. It is an honour to be part of this debate, which is about pushing this agenda forward.

3.25 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) on securing this debate on floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) for his passionate words.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth identified the opportunity and the challenge at hand, and I am pleased to complement the framework that she set out. I will emphasise the cross-cutting issue of skills, and the importance, right across Cornwall, of developing Falmouth port. The development of floating offshore wind technology in the Celtic sea represents not just a renewable energy opportunity, but a chance to transform Cornwall's economy and establish the UK as a global leader in clean energy.

[Perran Moon]

In terms of the share of renewables in our total energy mix, fixed offshore wind, supported by contracts for difference, which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire mentioned, has been and will continue to be crucial, as the recent NESO report pointed out. The UK has been able to capture jobs in the development, operation and maintenance phases of the fixed offshore wind supply chain, but not in the capital phase, such as manufacturing and installation. Most of the parts the UK uses are deployed from mainland European ports, using imported components. Despite the successful roll-out of fixed offshore turbines, we can learn from these issues, as floating offshore wind represents the next generation of technology out in the Celtic sea.

In 2023, Tim Pick from the Clean Power 2030 Advisory Commission published an independent report on offshore wind, in which he highlighted the case of Kincardine floating offshore wind farm. I am taking the debate from the Celtic sea up to Scotland because the report describes how the foundations for new floating offshore wind structures were made in Spain, at great expense, taken to Rotterdam for assembly, using locally sourced components to keep down costs, and finally towed to Scotland and installed. That is indicative of the offshore supply chain, and it means that fixed offshore wind has not captured as many jobs in the UK as it could do.

The Celtic sea floating offshore wind sector has the potential to create about 5,300 jobs across Cornwall, the south-west of England and, yes, Pembrokeshire in south Wales. There remains a real risk that we will not grasp the potential by building up the local workforce. We need to demonstrate that young people and skilled workers do not need to migrate from Cornwall for well-paid employment opportunities in the green economy.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire said, floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea is a relatively nascent industry, which means that its skills and workforce need to be supported, planned and nurtured. If we do not do this, the industry will not be able to recruit the staff needed for these vocational and technical skills.

A reactive, short-term approach to upskilling will be inadequate. We need to look at a long-term strategic approach to workforce development, one that focuses on clear, sustainable career pathways, such as floating platforms assembly, welding and marine licence development. Those are just a few examples of the strong pipeline of talent needed for the floating offshore wind sector and the skills required to populate the vacancies in the supply chain. I am pleased it was announced this week that the Blue Abyss facility near Newquay has received match funding from the Crown Estate's supply chain accelerator fund.

To make this vision a reality, collaboration is key. We need a collective effort to build workforce capacity in preparation for the opportunity presented by this new sector. Every stakeholder has a role to play, from individual learners engaged in skills training to schools, further education colleges, higher education institutions, independent training providers and the private sector and future employers.

There are several examples in Cornwall, most notably the University of Exeter's Penryn campus, which hosts the largest number of top 10 climate change scientists in

the world and produces world-leading courses. There are apprenticeships at Truro and Penwith college and vocational opportunities at Falmouth marine school and Cornwall college in Camborne and Redruth, which is barely one mile away from South Crofty tin mine, which would be a major beneficiary of a development of Falmouth port.

We know there are structural imbalances when it comes to qualifications. According to Skills England, 38% of people in Cornwall have level 4 qualifications or above, compared with 61% in London. The new growth and skills levy, which will enable employers to access a broader range of high-quality training offers, will be fundamental if applied to this sector. Skills England will act as a vital bridge between industrial strategy, training providers and businesses.

I turn briefly to Falmouth port and the infrastructure in relation to the Celtic sea. As my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth said, we must regenerate Falmouth port to enable the roll-out of floating offshore wind. We must ensure that it becomes a key hub for operations and maintenance. To have the best opportunity to achieve economic growth and increase productivity, we need to build up our supply chain. As turbines increase in size with the proliferation of floating offshore wind, there is a need for larger-scale and better-equipped port facilities in general. That should be partnered with local manufacturing.

Floating offshore wind sub-structures alone can measure up to 80 metres across and weigh thousands of tonnes, with the turbines themselves expected to reach as high as 300 metres. Ports need adequate quays, crane capacity and lay-down space to accommodate these vast engineering structures, so where better to develop than the third-deepest natural harbour in the world at Falmouth?

To echo comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, we need the Crown Estate to lease more projects in the Celtic sea and we need to ringfence the funding for the Celtic sea at the next auction round. We must work towards building up the capacity at Falmouth port. If we are to realise a just transition, we must ensure that it delivers as much opportunity for UK businesses and communities as possible. Successive Governments have failed to deliver the benefits to communities. The Cornish Celtic tiger can drive the world-leading deployment of floating offshore wind at commercial scale and sow the seed for a cluster of expertise and experience right across the sector.

3.34 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon), who spoke so lucidly about the challenges we face in building a home-grown supply chain and heeding the lessons of history. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) on securing it.

Floating offshore wind represents a truly transformative opportunity for Cornwall and the broader UK—an opportunity to bring jobs to our region while turbocharging the UK's energy transition. Cornwall's deep maritime heritage and strategic location uniquely positions us to be at the forefront of the floating offshore wind industry.

The Celtic sea's vast potential for renewable energy production can meet the challenges of deeper water, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) rightly suggested, and those challenges cannot easily be met by our traditional fixed offshore wind industry.

With 4.5 GW of flow capacity envisaged for the region, we can power millions of homes with clean energy while creating around 5,300 jobs and delivering £1.5 billion of gross value added to the local economy, with around a third of that expected to arise in Cornwall, which can play its role in championing the southern side of the Celtic sea.

In Cornwall the opportunity is not abstract: it is very much tangible. With the natural advantages of Falmouth harbour, which we have heard so much about, with its deep-water access and existing maritime infrastructure, Falmouth is truly a flagship location for our floating offshore wind Celtic sea cluster. Its impact will extend far beyond the Truro and Falmouth constituency because, for constituencies like mine—St Austell and Newquay—the ripple effects of job creation, skills development and supply chain growth can be significant.

From the industrial engineering of components to logistical support, floating offshore wind can energise industries that in many cases already exist across the spine of Cornwall. To make the vision a reality we need political leadership and co-ordination. Central Government must work hand in hand, ideally with a devolved Government in Cornwall, with floating offshore wind at the heart of their industrial strategy. They must work with the Crown Estate and developers and educational institutions to address the barriers that hold back the industry. Only through a unified strategic focus can floating offshore wind reach its potential.

Floating offshore wind requires a new generation of skilled workers in maritime engineering, fabrication and supply chain logistics. That is why I will soon meet the Skills Minister to urge Skills England to adopt a long-term perspective on the industry and its development locally. Institutions like Falmouth marine school, as we have heard, and certainly Cornwall college, which is also based in my constituency, are already laying the groundwork, but they need substantial and sustained investment to scale up the training programmes. We must ensure that young people in Cornwall have access to the skills and qualifications necessary to thrive in the sector and share in the great prosperity it can bring to our part of the world.

The scale of investment required is truly substantial. As we have heard, ports like Falmouth need to upgrade to become hubs for assembly operations and maintenance. I am working closely with the national wealth fund to ensure that Cornwall features prominently in its pipeline of prospective investments. We also need the tailored mechanisms we have heard about, such as contracts for difference that account for the higher costs and early-stage challenges of projects in this part of Britain. Without those, developers may turn elsewhere, and Cornwall in particular risks missing out on this once-in-a-generation opportunity.

For Cornwall to realise the full benefits of floating offshore wind, our public infrastructure must be developed alongside it and be up to the task. Improved road, rail and grid connections are essential. We need a freight line down to the Falmouth docks, we need the spine of

Cornwall's infrastructure network to be strong, and we need to ensure that Tamar crossings do not financially disadvantage local residents or businesses or the logistics supply chain associated with the industry. We must ensure the seamless movement of goods and people.

The Crown Estate has a pivotal role in championing the floating offshore wind industry and showcasing Cornwall's strengths and potential. I welcome its recent decision to award match funding to Blue Abyss, which is in my constituency and is a world-class facility poised to become the centre of innovation for offshore wind energy and maritime technology. It is a really strong signal from the Crown Estate, but there is much more to be done. We need to continue to prioritise local supply chain development and work actively with local stakeholders to ensure that Cornwall's potential is fully recognised and utilised.

The development of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea is more than just an energy initiative. It is an economic and social catalyst with the power to revitalise our communities, tackle regional inequalities and cement Britain's position as a global leader in renewable energy. For Cornwall, it is an opportunity for us to build our maritime heritage and to shape a sustainable future. To achieve this, we need a clear strategy that brings together Government, industry and educational institutions. We need a spatial strategy that works hand in glove with the fishing industry to make sure this is a success for every part of our community, and we need the investment in skills, infrastructure and local supply chains to get this off the ground and to ensure that local people feel the prosperity.

We need to act urgently to secure contracts, funding, investment and confidence to unlock the full potential of FLOW and Cornwall's role in it. I urge the Government to seize this moment and commit to the co-ordinated action we need to deliver on the promise of floating offshore wind. Together, we can harness the power of the Celtic sea to light our homes, power our industries and create a legacy of sustainable prosperity for Cornwall and beyond.

3.41 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) for securing this important debate and for championing our fantastic Duchy of Cornwall as a green investment hub.

Offshore wind in the Celtic sea represents a huge opportunity to support the UK's energy transition. The Liberal Democrats welcome with open arms any Government plans to invest in the sector. Not only will the turbines in the Celtic sea bring renewable energy to more than 4 million homes, but they will help to limit our dependence on fossil fuels, create jobs right across the south-west and stimulate much-needed economic growth in our coastal areas. These areas, and the offshore wind sector as a whole, were completely abandoned by the previous Conservative Government, and I am glad to see such an important industry finally getting the recognition it deserves.

The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth rightly talked about the need for the Government to reach carbon reduction goals; obviously, the project in the Celtic sea

[Ben Maguire]

is vital to that objective. She also emphasised the five-year minimum lead time for investment, which highlights the urgency of this issue.

The hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) talked about keeping young people in his constituency in highly skilled jobs. That has been highlighted by other Cornish Members and, as a Member representing a Cornish constituency, I think that is so crucial. This project is such an enormous opportunity to do just that. The hon. Gentleman also alluded to the Crown Estate's stifling competition, which I will come to later.

The hon. Member for Camborne, Redruth and Hayle (Perran Moon) rightly pointed out that in projects of this nature the majority of turbine parts are imported from Europe. We clearly need to see a much greater volume of manufacturing here in the UK.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) talked about Cornwall's deep maritime heritage. Like other Cornish Members, he championed the deep-water port of Falmouth. He also alluded to the need for a devolved Government in Cornwall to fully unleash the duchy's green energy revolution. He also talked about transport infrastructure investment, citing it as an essential precursor to this revolution.

It would be remiss of me not to point out that when the Liberal Democrats ran the Department for Energy and Climate Change, we quadrupled the amount of energy generated from renewables. We recognise that the offshore wind industry can, and will, play a vital role in reducing our carbon emissions and hitting net zero targets, not to mention the benefits of increasing our energy security in this country, thus reducing our dependence on fossil fuels from Putin and other foreign despots.

Offshore wind in the Celtic sea in particular has the vast potential of becoming a powerhouse in renewable energy generation and will help to propel this country to the place of a world leader in the industry. However, we believe that much greater investment is needed in skills and training to prepare local supply chains and enable these communities to play a key role in the global build-out of floating offshore wind.

Some concerns have also been raised with me about the role of the Crown Estate, which have also been referred to by other hon. Members. The Crown Estate appears to have determined cheaper and lower-risk deep fixed foundation designs, and has been excluded from the licence bids. That, of course, narrows the pool of bidders quite significantly, whereas the key objective should be delivery. The priority should be to issue licences that can be brought into production as soon as possible to drive down the UK's carbon emissions. Therefore, issuing licences that require projects 30 times the size of the UK's largest operational project feels like a risky leap, and could struggle to attract investment, as well as competition between bidders. It is also important to consult and work alongside groups such as the Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation when considering a project at that scale, being careful not to impinge on the livelihoods of Cornish fishermen. Those groups are not inherently anti-offshore wind, but they urge, in their words, "sense and balance" when planning offshore developments.

As Liberal Democrats, we always emphasise the need for public engagement to ensure that communities are involved and engaged throughout the process.

3.46 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham). This is an important subject, successfully championed by the last Conservative Government, and I am glad of the chance to discuss it today. The hon. Lady's passion and ambition for her seat, and for all of Cornwall, are clear and do her great credit. These are complex issues involving major projects, long supply chains, and many public and private sector groups, which she has clearly taken a lot of time to understand. I am sure the Minister will be grateful for her suggestions. Her points, especially on the need for co-ordination between public and private investment, and bringing in planning and skills, are well made.

The hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) outlined the size of the opportunity. Floating offshore wind is a substantial potential prize, not just for the climate but for Britain's reindustrialisation. I am sure his all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea much appreciates his contribution—as is the case, I am sure, for the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth. I look forward to seeing those anchors from Pembrokeshire and they are lucky to have him to champion them.

The hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) is another committed advocate for the great county of Cornwall and the fantastic economic potential of south-west England and, of course, south Wales. He is right that workforce development must be strategic, coherent and long term, and I was fascinated to hear of the outstanding university and college courses available, including in his own constituency—a "Cornish Celtic tiger" indeed.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) also discussed skills, and I hope his upcoming meeting with the Skills Minister is as fruitful as he hopes it will be. His constituents, I am sure, will be very pleased to hear of all he is doing to stand up for the infrastructure his area needs, as well as for the exciting supply chain and marine technology leadership that he describes.

I was a little surprised to hear the view of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) that the area was neglected by the last Government. Successive Conservative Governments took renewable electricity generation from just 7% in 2010 to over half by the second quarter of this year. We made the UK the global leader in offshore wind, with more capacity installed than any other country, powering more than 7.5 million homes.

The last Conservative Government committed a £1 billion investment to green industries through the green industries growth accelerator, aimed at advancing technologies such as offshore wind. The investment aimed to leverage up to £90 billion over a decade. Will the Minister please update us on how much of that has been spent since the Labour Government took office, and how much is being directed to floating offshore wind?

This debate is, of course, about the Celtic sea, but I am conscious that in the North sea, the Chinese company Ming Yang Wind Power Group is poised to construct hundreds of floating wind turbines, if that is approved by the SNP. Ming Yang benefits from massive state subsidies in China. Will the Minister please assure us that, be it in the North sea, the Celtic sea or anywhere else, he will not allow any wind turbines to be built and controlled by hostile states, undermining both market fairness and our national security, in any of Britain's waters?

The previous Government set up the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme, investing £160 million in two ports. One of these was Port Talbot, which is well placed to serve Celtic sea floating offshore wind. The investment was welcomed for supporting job creation in south Wales and the wider UK supply chain. The Crown Estate later set out its plans for a new generation of floating wind farms in the Celtic sea, with the potential to power a further 4 million homes. Will the Minister please assure us that this exciting project, and the investment secured under the last Government, will not get lost in the cost and bureaucracy of setting up GB Energy? Will he outline the impact on energy bills of the higher strike price put into auction round 5 by this Government and recommit to the Government's manifesto promise to lower energy bills by £300? This Government inherited global leadership in offshore wind, which is something I am sure we can all be proud of. The Celtic sea presents a fantastic opportunity to build on that record.

3.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) on securing this debate and for all the work she does in championing her area, and the Celtic sea more broadly. We have had a number of conversations and debates on energy-related policy and she is a real champion for her constituency.

I thank all hon. Members this afternoon for their passionate contributions to the debate. I do not know what the collective noun is for a group of Cornish Celtic tigers and one Welsh one, but they made fantastic contributions and I think that gives us a sense of how seriously new MPs are taking the future of their constituencies. We should be proud of that.

The key issues that have been raised today, of the grid, supply chains, skills, planning, and getting the balance right so that we bring communities along with us in much of this—the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) put that well—are important. It was nice to hear the hon. Gentleman speak about the coalition Government, as we do not hear enough about them these days. I encourage him to say much more about them in future debates, but I suspect that he will not.

Let me first speak about the context of the debate and I will then answer some of the specific questions. I think the “why” of our being in this race and transition is important. Why are we pushing to deliver clean power by 2030? The truth is that it is an imperative if we are going to meet our long-term goal of a net zero economy and deliver economic growth and energy security. They are intrinsically linked.

A number of hon. Members have raised the point about the potential of jobs in industry in communities that have, in many cases, been forgotten for a long time. The rates of poverty and underemployment in those communities underlines how important it is that we bring about new opportunities. I think the point about legacy raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell). This is not just a transition for the sake of a transition; the aim is to deliver good, well-paid jobs for future generations and to make it a prosperous transition for many communities.

We are in no way missing the scale of the challenge. Delivering clean power by 2030 will require us to rip up the rule book on how Governments deliver big projects and to take a radically different approach to how we deliver change at pace. It means working in lockstep with communities and with the private sector to rapidly address the barriers that hold us back, which have all been raised today, so that we can deliver unprecedented levels of new clean energy infrastructure.

The Government received the National Energy System Operator's advice on achieving a clean power system by 2030. It shows that this is not only achievable, but can create a cheaper, more secure system. The advice will inform the Government's clean power 2030 action plan, which will be published imminently and will set out our route to decarbonising the electricity grid with the aims of protecting billpayers from volatile gas prices, strengthening Britain's energy security and accelerating us towards net zero.

I hope all hon. Members will agree that we are on the cusp of a once-in-a-generation transformation of our energy system, led by a Government that is determined not to be a passenger on the big questions of the day, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) put it, to drive forward radical change. The infrastructure that we deploy now and in the years ahead will set in train decades of energy security, stability, and prosperity for every part of the UK. Key to that will be the role played by offshore wind and, in particular, floating offshore wind. I will focus on that in the rest of my remarks.

Offshore wind will play a crucial role in our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower and deliver clean power by 2030. At 14.8 GW of generation, we have the highest deployment in Europe and the second highest in the world. As my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth said so eloquently, the UK is a global leader. These days there are not many things in which we can still have a claim to be that, but this is one that we must ensure we maintain.

The new technology unlocks deeper areas of the seabed that can benefit from stronger and more consistent winds, helping us to secure our energy supply and to deliver on our statutory decarbonisation obligations. Our floating offshore capacity is second only to Norway. At around 25 GW, we have the largest pipeline of floating offshore projects anywhere in the world. Of course, in the Celtic sea, there is enormous potential for floating offshore wind, and we are determined to take advantage of the opportunities that that represents. Earlier this year, the floating offshore wind taskforce estimated that floating offshore wind could contribute £47 billion in GVA to the UK economy by 2050 and support up to 97,000 jobs across the country, so we are

[*Michael Shanks*]

hard at work, right across Government and in the private sector, to make sure that we realise the vast potential of this opportunity.

The test and demonstration projects, which a number of hon. Members have rightly raised, total 432 MW of capacity in development in the Celtic sea. They are crucial not just for the capacity that they generate, but for helping us to understand the supply chains and the development and for building the skills in the future. We want to see many of these projects succeed, and Government are doing everything we can to support the projects.

Under the offshore wind leasing round that the Crown Estate recently launched, a further 4.5 GW of floating wind capacity in the region will have an impact of up to 5,300 new jobs and a £1.4 billion boost to the economy. We are determined that by working together with the Crown Estate on an innovative approach to this leasing round, we can ensure that there is new industry that provides social and economic opportunities for communities right across the country. It is important for us to say that this is this Government's absolutely key priority, that we are not agnostic on the industrial future of this country and that we want to see the good, well-paid jobs here as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth rightly highlighted the example of Kincardine, and there are other projects where all the parts were manufactured abroad and towed into our waters simply to start generating. That is the part of this that we do not want to see again. We want to see the good, well-paid jobs here.

That is why the Crown Estate has launched a £50 million supply chain accelerator to fund and accelerate supply chain projects. The 13 successful organisations are set to receive funding in the initial round. Just yesterday we were able to announce more details on these. It is the case that £5 million of funding was awarded to kick-start a range of projects across Great Britain, contributing to a combined development investment of more than £9 million, with £400 million of capital investment. As has been mentioned, the partnership that Great British Energy, the first publicly owned energy company in 70 years, has with the Crown Estate is about trying to drive forward even more of those opportunities right across the country.

The issue of ports has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members. They clearly will play a vital role in the deployment and maintenance of offshore wind infrastructure. Up to £4 billion of investment is required by 2040 to support the roll-out of floating offshore wind. That is why the FLOWMIS scheme, which is providing grant funding to support the development of port infrastructure, is so important.

The shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), rightly referenced the importance of Port Talbot and the port of Cromarty Firth in the FLOWMIS scheme. We are moving forward due diligence on that as quickly as possible. It is one of a number of in-progress decisions that we inherited from the previous Government, on which we are moving as quickly as possible to actually deliver, so that the funding can be put to good use as quickly as possible. It goes hand in hand with the creation of the national wealth fund, which will invest at least £5.8 billion of

capital in the five sectors announced in our manifesto, including port infrastructure. That comes alongside some of the work already being done by the NWF in Ardersier port, the port of Tyne and Teesworks. To understand the barriers to port infrastructure, we are working closely with the ports task and finish group, led by RenewableUK, to ensure that we are building on the work that has already been done.

On the wider point of working together, which my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth raised earlier, DESNZ has a standing invitation to the Cornwall FLOW Commission, which Cornwall council is involved in. Officials regularly engage with all councils, including Cornwall council, on this and many other issues, and we are very happy to do more.

Let me turn, finally, to the point about industry. In the spring, we will publish the Government's industrial strategy, which is our commitment to ensuring that good, well-paid and trade-unionised jobs come to these shores to deliver the energy transition as well as to a number of other sectors. Most recently, we announced the clean industry bonus as part of the CfD scheme, which rewards fixed and floating offshore wind developers that choose to invest in the UK's poorest communities or in cleaner manufacturing facilities. A portion of that budget is ringfenced for floating offshore wind components.

On the broader points that hon. Members raised about the next contracts for difference rounds, we will say more about auction round 7 in due course. Clearly, it is important to recognise how much the industry has moved since the abject failure under the previous Government in auction round 5, in which much of the sector was flat on its back. We have moved as quickly as possible on AR6 to get projects over the line. We want to see more of these projects succeed, and we will have more to say imminently on AR7. There will also be a consultation on that process.

I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth for bringing forward this debate, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and their real commitment to this issue. This is a Government who are determined to ensure that we realise our potential in communities right across this country and drive towards clean power by 2030. That is not as an end in itself, but because it will make energy in Britain cleaner, cheaper and more secure for our entire nation, reinvigorate long-neglected supply chains in clean energy and engineering, and return a sense of pride and prosperity to all parts of this country.

The road ahead will be challenging—no one comes into government just to tackle the easy stuff—but we are determined that together we will ensure that we achieve the most difficult task of all: by 2030, we will have a secure, cleaner energy system. The prize at the end is worth all that effort, and there is no point being in government if we are not going to tackle some of the long-term, difficult challenges. I once again thank hon. Members for participating in this debate and encourage them to keep up the challenge to Government as we ensure that we realise every single opportunity available to us in this most important sector.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): We have 27 minutes remaining, but this is not an invitation to make a 27-minute speech. The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) should take a few minutes to emphasise the key points that she wants to take away from the debate.

4.2 pm

Jayne Kirkham: Thank you, Mr Efford; I certainly will not take 27 minutes. I thank the Minister and everybody who has come to this debate. I can tell by the passion how much we want this for the region, as has been set out by so many Members. We have some really deprived, post-industrial areas where we are, and, particularly in Cornwall, they have been post-industrial for a lot longer than other places. We could be a renewable gold mine. If we look at critical minerals, there is so much potential in Cornwall. It has become so desperately important that we start to realise some of those benefits, and there is enough for the whole of the region, for the south-west and for Wales. It is really important to note that this is a huge project.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) and I have taken over the APPG for the Celtic sea from the previous Member for North Devon and my predecessor in Truro and Falmouth, who did a lot of good work on it. It is brilliant to be able to take that work forward as fast as we can. The social value of this will be huge. I will emphasise again and again how important it is that we get there with the jobs and the supply chain and in bringing in some of that fabrication, if we can, such as the manufacturing, the operations and the maintenance, so that we do not have to tow things across the sea.

The clean industry bonus that the Minister spoke about is brilliant, but I want to emphasise how important the contracts for difference will be. They can be used and ringfenced to try to push forward some of the test and demo models; we will have the capacity to do that, if they are used properly to take forward the stepping stone projects. I was really pleased to hear what he said about ports. Our ports are ready to build, for so many reasons; floating offshore wind is one of them, but there are many others. The port task and finish group will be so important, as will having national and regional strategies for how our ports will work together.

On the supply chain and the workforce, I want to emphasise again the possibility of using contract clauses in the auction rounds. We are able to do that, despite

World Trade Organisation rules, and perhaps we should think again about the option fees and how they could be ploughed back into areas to build the supply chain and stimulate local operations, assembly and fabrication.

I am very pleased to hear about the discussions with NESO and GB Energy, because the grid has been holding back so many projects across the country. It seems that those projects have been put in chronological order, rather than order of merit or importance. It is good that NESO is looking again at that. A completion date of 2037 for one of the projects was just crazy—we cannot be doing that. It has to change.

To finish—I certainly have not gone on for 27 minutes—I will say that we really need a unified strategy. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) was right about bringing people with us, including our fishers and environmentalists. There is huge space in the ocean for all of this to be done successfully, but it really needs championing and leading.

I accept the point about how politically dispersed we are in the south-west compared with regions such as Scotland, which has a national Government who can work with the UK Government. We do not have that in the south-west; we have councils and we have Wales, which is a devolved nation. It is harder to put everything together in one place, and various organisations, such as Celtic Sea Power and the new Cornwall FLOW Commission, are starting to do that, but leadership will be so crucial as we move forward. Finding out where that will come from—whether it is national leadership or regional leadership—will be a very important function of what we do going forward.

I thank you for your time, Mr Efford, and I thank all hon. Members for participating in today's debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered floating offshore wind in the Celtic Sea.

4.7 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 12 December 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020: Review

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The smooth functioning of the United Kingdom's internal market is vital to achieving economic growth. People and businesses depend on being able to buy and sell goods, provide services, and work across the four nations of the United Kingdom.

The Government are committed to working closely with the devolved Governments to deliver effective outcomes for people across the UK. To ensure the efficiency of the UK's internal market, the Government consider common frameworks to be the key for supporting collaborative policymaking processes in the areas they cover, managing policy divergence between the UK's nations where it occurs, and maximising the benefits of taking different, innovative approaches in different parts of the UK. We are therefore committed to finishing the common frameworks programme as soon as possible.

The UK Internal Market Act's market access principles for goods and services, and system for the recognition of professional qualifications across the UK, can also play an important role in protecting jobs and livelihoods and promoting growth across the whole UK. Where they apply, they allow businesses, consumers and professionals to comply with the regulations in the part of the UK they are based in, to sell goods and provide services across the whole UK.

However, we recognise that the operation of the UK Internal Market Act can be improved, including more certainty and clarity when considering proposals which remove areas of regulation from the scope of the market access principles. We believe that the UK Internal Market Act should complement common frameworks and support collaborative policymaking.

To improve the management of the UK internal market, the Government will deliver an initial package of measures to demonstrate a more pragmatic approach. This includes a recommitment to the principles for common frameworks agreed at the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) in October 2017 between the previous Government and devolved Governments. This recommitment includes:

Developing closer working relationships and increased transparency between the Government and the devolved Governments on UK internal market matters that impact significantly on devolved responsibilities within common frameworks;

Acknowledging the benefits of policy innovation and shared learning on policy development and implementation, while enabling the smooth functioning of the UK internal market;

Aiming to finalise the common frameworks programme by Easter 2025 ensuring the necessary structures exist for joined up intergovernmental discussions around regulatory divergence and implications for the performance of the UK internal market; and

Agreeing an exclusion from the UK Internal Market Act's market access principles regarding the sale of rodent glue traps, in response to the Scottish Government's previous proposal, as this Government recognise this proposal has a minimal economic impact on trade within the UK.

The Government then intend to launch the statutory review of the UK Internal Market Act in January 2025, seeking the views of a wide range of public stakeholders, with the aim of completing the review by summer 2025. This is earlier than the statutory deadline of December 2025, as we recognise the importance of formally considering the role of the UK Internal Market Act in the effective operation of the UK internal market.

As a statutory minimum, this review must cover use of the powers in part 1 (goods) and part 2 (services), including the powers to add, delete or amend exclusions from the scope of the Act, and the arrangements relating to the use of the Office of the Internal Market to perform the functions in part 4 of the Act, covering independent advice and monitoring of the UKIM.

However, the Government recognise the importance of fully considering the operation of the Act beyond the narrow statutory requirements. Therefore, the Government will broaden the scope of the review to include the practical operation of parts 1, 2 and 3 of the Act, including inviting views on the process for considering exclusions from the Act, and the role and functions carried out by the Office for the Internal Market as set out in part 4. We will directly engage the devolved Governments in conducting the review.

[HCWS299]

TREASURY

LGBT Financial Recognition Scheme Payments: Income Tax Exemption

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): Today, the Government have confirmed ex gratia payments made under the LGBT financial recognition scheme will be exempt from income tax. The scheme is designed to offer financial recognition to those who served under, and suffered from, the ban on LGBT personnel serving in HM armed forces between 1967 and 2000.

This decision to grant an income tax exemption ensures that applicants receive the full payment amount, marking an important step toward addressing the historic wrongs faced by LGBT personnel and veterans in the past.

The Government will legislate via secondary legislation to formalise this tax exemption in due course.

[HCWS305]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Covid-19 Day of Reflection 2025

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I am today announcing that a UK-wide day of reflection will take place on Sunday 9 March 2025. I am pleased that one of the key recommendations of the independent UK Commission on Covid Commemoration, chaired by right hon. Baroness Morgan of Cotes, will be honoured next year, as it was in March 2024. By continuing

to hold a day of reflection, in line with previous years, we hope to offer communities across the country the opportunity to join together in commemoration of those who lost their lives.

The UK Commission for Covid Commemoration was established to find appropriate ways to remember those who have lost their lives, and to consider how this period of our history could be marked. It held an extensive consultation with those most impacted by the covid-19 pandemic, including representatives from bereaved family organisations and published a final report with 10 recommendations. Its first recommendation is that “a UK-wide day of reflection should be established and held annually”.

While the Government, since taking up office earlier this year, give careful consideration to the Commission’s full report, I am pleased that we are supporting communities in marking the impacts, losses and suffering of the pandemic in ways that are meaningful to them.

Sunday 9 March 2025 is an opportunity for communities across the UK to come together in a day of reflection for the covid-19 pandemic. People and communities will have the opportunity to join together in reflection and commemoration for those who lost their lives and for everyone impacted by the pandemic. On the day itself and in the week before, the public will be able to mark the day in ways that feel most appropriate and fitting to them, both in person and online.

2025 will mark the fifth year anniversary since the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic and represents a significant milestone as we continue to remember all those affected.

The day of reflection is an opportunity for people to:

- Remember and commemorate those who lost their lives since the pandemic began;

- Reflect on the sacrifices made by many and the impact the pandemic had on the nation and our daily lives;

- Pay tribute and honour the work of health and social care staff, frontline workers, researchers and all those who volunteered and showed acts of kindness during this unprecedented time.

I hope that Members of the House find ways to support their communities in marking this occasion, and are able themselves to join in, and reflect on this part of our shared national history.

[HCWS301]

DEFENCE

LGBT Veterans: Etherton Review

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): This Government acknowledge the historic policy prohibiting homosexuality in the armed forces was regrettable, wrong and completely unacceptable. Following the publication of Lord Etherton’s review into the experience of LGBT veterans between 1967 and 2000, the intent behind all 49 recommendations were accepted by the previous Government and now backed by this Government. In the coming days, 42 of these 49 recommendations will have been delivered and the commitment remains to implement the remaining recommendations.

Recommendations 28 and 29 of Lord Etherton’s review referred to a financial award, an important tangible recognition to those affected under the ban between 1967 and 2000 and a way to show this Government’s

commitment to accountability and rectification of systemic inequalities. That is why I am pleased today to announce that the LGBT financial recognition scheme will launch on 13 December, one year after the recommendation was formally accepted by the previous Government, with a budget of £75 million, 50% higher than the cap recommended in the Etherton report. The scheme intends to provide recognition to those impacted by the ban, and to express Defence’s regret of the policy it upheld between 1967 and 2000, not to compensate for loss of earnings.

The financial recognition scheme will include two types of payments, the first for those who were dismissed or discharged and the second for those who were impacted in other ways. This will acknowledge the suffering caused by the historic policy with payment levels being proportionate to the experiences of individuals.

The “LGBT dismissed or discharged payment” will be available to veterans who were dismissed or administratively discharged, including officers who were instructed to resign, based solely on their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity under the ban. Eligible applicants for this payment will receive a flat rate of £50,000 and may be eligible to apply for a further LGBT impact payment.

The “LGBT impact payment” will be available to those who experienced pain and suffering which was directly related to the ban, including harassment, invasive investigations and imprisonment. There will be 3 tariff levels with payments varying from £1,000 to £20,000 and this payment will be decided by an independent panel, separate from and independent of the Ministry of Defence.

The scheme will remain open for two years and all payments will be exempt from income tax and will not affect any means-tested benefits that an applicant receives. The Government recognise that some veterans impacted by the ban are seriously unwell, and the applications of terminally ill veterans will be prioritised.

Whilst the financial recognition scheme cannot undo the damage of the historic policy, it represents a meaningful effort to honour those impacted and provide a sense of closure.

In addition to the financial recognition scheme, I would like to also announce today, the implementation of two further restorative measures. Firstly, veterans who were administratively discharged during the ban, based solely on their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, will now be able to apply to have this discharge qualified to set right their records, removing any blame or dishonour from those who served. Secondly, veterans who were reduced in rank as part of their dismissal or discharge can apply to have their rank restored, intending to recognise the achievements made during their service.

Finally, whilst not within the scope of Lord Etherton’s review which looked into experiences under the ban between 1967-2000, when HM armed forces policy differed from criminal law, this Government acknowledge that LGBT veterans serving before 1967 may have had similar experiences. That is why today, I would like to extend four non-financial restorative measures to this cohort. These veterans can now apply to have administrative discharges qualified, reduced rank restored and certificates of service re-issued, and former officers may apply to have their service details published in the *Gazette*, as part of the official record.

[HCWS306]

Operation Stifftail

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): Operation Stifftail, the UK's deployment of the Sky Sabre ground-based air defence capability in Rzeszów, south-east Poland, has now concluded. Originally deployed in April 2022 and extended on four occasions at the request of the Polish Government, this has been a hugely successful operation that has significantly benefited the UK-Poland relationship, contributed to supporting Ukraine, bolstered NATO's eastern flank, and furthered interoperability between our two armed forces.

Working as part of the Polish-led, multinational, integrated and multi-layered air defence network, the UK troops on Op Stifftail have demonstrated exceptional hard work, determination, and professionalism. The capability supported Poland's wider air defence, contributing to Ukraine's continued fight against Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion by protecting the logistics enabling node at Rzeszów, which facilitated the movement of most western military equipment donations to Ukraine and ensured the safe onward travel of Ukrainian recruits to undertake basic training in the UK. The equipment will now be reconstituted to the UK so that it can be made available for further use in 2025.

Op Stifftail has provided a consistent backdrop in a long line of UK-Polish military co-operation over the last three years. Alongside this operation, we have deployed a squadron of Royal Engineers to respond to the migrant crisis on the Belarusian border, a squadron of Challenger 2 tanks to support Poland's donation of T72 tanks to Ukraine, and several RAF Typhoons to bolster the protection of Poland's airspace.

The UK will continue to stand with Poland and our other allies on NATO's eastern flank. The UK leads NATO's Forward Land Forces in Estonia and contributes a persistent presence to the US-led FLETC effort in northern Poland. In the spring, we will deploy UK Typhoon fighter aircraft to Poland for the protection of Poland's airspace through NATO's enhanced air policing. We will also be sending a military engineering liaison officer to work closely with the Polish army to continue bolstering the security of Poland's eastern border with Belarus and Russia.

As well as delivering against their primary operational tasks, each of these deployments provide unique conditions for our armed forces to develop relationships, better understand our respective operating procedures, and ultimately form a bond of trust that ensures that when the time comes, we can deliver a gold standard of integration and interoperability and prove that we are stronger together and more than the sum of our parts.

[HCWS304]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Clinical Trials Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): My noble friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Baroness Merron, has made the following written statement:

I am pleased to announce that the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) (Amendment) Regulations 2024 have been laid before Parliament today. When approved by Parliament, this

legislation will represent the most significant reform of UK clinical trials regulation in over 20 years, addressing the sector's need for a more efficient and adaptable regulatory framework, while safeguarding the wellbeing of trial participants. It will establish a proportionate, streamlined, flexible and effective clinical research environment, placing patients at the heart of the process and strengthening the UK's position as a global leader for innovative clinical trials.

Clinical trials are essential for the safe development of medicinal products, allowing innovators to rigorously evaluate their products in healthy volunteers and patients. Through this, clinical trials provide a route for bringing pioneering new treatments directly to patients, serving as a crucial step in healthcare innovation. This legislation will play a vital role in transforming the environment for running clinical trials in the UK.

Modernising the regulatory framework will strengthen the UK's standing as a prime destination for conducting groundbreaking, safe clinical trials. This supports the recommendations of the Lord O'Shaughnessy review, making the UK more attractive for commercial clinical trials and increasing opportunities for UK patients to have early access to innovative treatments that could improve or even save lives. These reforms will also help the NHS conduct trials more efficiently, fostering research that improves methods for preventing, diagnosing, and treating a wide range of conditions. Ultimately, this will expand patient access to new therapies and reinforce the NHS's reputation as a world-leading platform for health and life sciences research.

The revised legislation aims to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on trial sponsors while keeping participant safety at the forefront. By removing overly prescriptive elements, the legislation will introduce greater flexibility and risk-proportionality, reflecting the evolving nature of clinical trial design and the innovative treatments they investigate.

These reforms will:

Create a proportionate and flexible regulatory environment—the new legislation will empower researchers to take more risk appropriate approaches to trials, meaning the regulatory requirements will be more flexible to match the risk that a trial presents.

Cement the UK as a leading destination for international trials—the new legislation will introduce more streamlined and efficient application processes, making it easier to apply for trials in the UK but without compromising on safety standards. A combined regulatory and research ethics review will be brought into legislation and approval timelines will be internationally competitive.

Move away from a one-size-fits-all approach, to be responsive to innovation—the new legislation has been drafted to ensure it is as future-proof as possible and is responsive to different types of trials and innovative ways of carrying out trials. Guidance will be used for specific details, rather than granular and duplicative requirements in legislation.

Ensure patients and their safety are at the focus of all clinical trials and supported by greater transparency bring the benefits of clinical trials to everyone—the new legislation will ensure increased public transparency about trials, including a requirement for registration on a public database and sharing of trials results with participants.

The reforms were developed by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the Health Research Authority through a series of stakeholder workshops, seeking the views of a wide range of organisations and individuals from across the clinical research sector, including patient representatives. A public consultation took place in January to March 2022, to which over 2,000 responses were received, and the Government response was published in March 2023.

The regulations, along with the associated explanatory memorandum and de minimis assessment, an analysis of the impact of the reforms on business, will be published on gov.uk today.

[HCWS310]

Commercial Research Delivery Centres

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Baroness Merron, has made the following written statement:

Today, I am pleased to announce an ambitious expansion of commercial clinical research capabilities across the four nations of the UK through the establishment of 20 new commercial research delivery centres.

The CRDC programme will be funded across the UK by the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing, access and growth investment programme and, in part, by the Department of Health and Social Care through the National Institute for Health and Care Research in England. The VPAG Investment programme, a unique joint public-private partnership between the UK Government and the pharmaceutical industry agreed as part of the 2024 VPAG Scheme, aims to boost economic growth and the global competitiveness of the UK's life sciences sector. This network of CRDCs is the first clinical trial infrastructure to receive funding from the VPAG investment programme to accelerate access to new medicines and vaccines to patients, through research.

Funding is being allocated to NHS organisations across all four UK nations, reinforcing the pan-UK commitment to research. The CRDCs cover the length and breadth of the UK from the Sussex coast to Aberdeen, including coverage across Wales and Northern Ireland, ensuring a truly UK presence. They will act as hubs for pioneering approaches in commercial clinical research delivery with a dedicated workforce and facilities and streamlined and efficient trial set-up to support industry trials. The CRDCs will enhance the UK's competitiveness on the global health research stage and make it a destination of choice for life sciences innovation, supporting both the health and growth missions set by Government.

In a significant step forward, the CRDCs will bring clinical trials beyond large hospital trusts and into smaller hospital community settings and primary care. This will make research participation easier for people across our communities, including those currently underserved by research, ensuring that everyone can have access to new treatment through cutting-edge medical research.

Aligned with the UK Government's missions to build a healthcare system fit for the future and kickstart economic growth, the CRDCs bring enhanced resource and infrastructure across the NHS, by growing research capacity and creating opportunities for collaboration with industry partners to trial new treatments. They will contribute to the strength and vitality of our life sciences sector, creating opportunities for growth and collaboration across the UK. This significant investment in commercial research delivery is a powerful signal of the UK's commitment to the life sciences and it contributes to advancements in patient care to improve health outcomes for people across the UK.

[HCWS309]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building the Homes we Need

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): This Government have inherited an acute and entrenched housing crisis. The average new home is out of reach for the average worker, housing costs consume a third of private renters' income, and the number of children in temporary accommodation now stands at a historic high of nearly 160,000. Yet just 220,000 new homes were built last year and the number of homes granted planning permission has fallen to its lowest in a decade.

That is why the plan for change committed to rebuild Britain, with the hugely ambitious goal of delivering 1.5 million new homes this Parliament, and the vital infrastructure needed to grow our economy and support public services.

The Government have responded with the urgency this demands. We published a consultation on a revised national planning policy framework within a month of gaining office, proposing measures to reverse anti-supply changes introduced in December 2023 and in their place setting out pro-growth reforms. Since then, we have published proposals to prioritise and fast-track building on previously developed urban land through a brownfield passport and for speeding up decision making through modernisation of planning committees. Next year, we will introduce a planning and infrastructure Bill to speed up and streamline the planning process, to build more homes of all tenures and accelerate the delivery of major infrastructure projects. At the Budget on 30 October, we committed an additional £50 million to boost capacity to deliver this ambitious planning reform agenda, alongside providing an additional £500 million in grant for affordable housing, and further £3 billion of additional support to the private housing market, to translate permissions into build out.

Today's publication marks the next step in delivering on our promise to radically reform the planning system. The measures set out below build on more than 10,000 consultation responses and extensive engagement with private house builders, affordable housing providers, local authorities and other organisations from the sector. Taken together, they reflect our commitment not to duck the hard choices that must be confronted in order to tackle the housing crisis—the alternative is a future in which a decent, safe, secure and affordable home is a privilege enjoyed only by some rather than being the right of all working people.

Restoring and raising housing targets

The plan-led approach is, and must remain, the cornerstone of our planning system. It is through local plans that communities shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development their area needs. But we are clear that these decisions must be about how to meet those needs, not whether to do so at all. We are therefore restoring mandatory housing targets. This means that local authorities must use the standard method as the basis for determining housing requirements in their local plans.

As we set out in July, a mandatory method is insufficient if the method itself is not adequate to meet housing need. We consulted on an ambitious revision of the existing standard method, increasing the total annual national target from 300,000 to 370,000, ending the reliance on decade-old population projections, and removing the arbitrary 35% urban uplift that resulted in a skewed national distribution, disproportionately focused on London to the detriment of the rest of the country. Instead, the new method relies on a baseline set at a percentage of existing housing stock levels, to better reflect housing pressures right across the country, and uses a stronger affordability multiplier to focus additional growth on those places facing the biggest affordability challenge.

We heard through the consultation that our method could go even further in targeting growth at those places where house prices are most removed from local

incomes, and so we have made an adjustment to the method to make it more responsive to demand pressures. The final method now incorporates an even stronger affordability adjustment—nearly four times as strong as the inherited formula. This will have the effect of altering the distribution, increasing numbers in those places facing the most acute affordability pressures while maintaining ambitious targets across the whole of the country.

Building in the right places

Meeting ambitious new targets relies on allocating sufficient land to do so. We have been clear that developers should first look to brownfield, or previously developed, land. That is essential to protect our most valuable countryside and agricultural land. And we have made changes to support that, making the default answer to proposals to build on brownfield “yes” and expanding the current definition of brownfield land to include hard standing, ahead of further reforms planned for next year on the back of our brownfield passport working paper. Together, these changes will ensure that we make full and efficient use of previously developed land.

But we know that there are simply not enough sites on brownfield land registers to deliver the volume of homes that the country needs each year, let alone enough that are viable and in the right location. And that is why we have grasped the nettle and proposed a modernised, strategic approach to green belt land designation and release, fit for the 21st century.

In the first instance, it requires local authorities to use the local plan process to adopt a “sequential approach”, considering brownfield, then grey belt, and only then higher performing land—all while ensuring that sustainability is a central consideration throughout. We expect authorities to conduct green-belt reviews, to identify the right land to bring forward in their areas. Where authorities fail to meet development needs, developers may bring forward proposals on low-performing grey-belt land outside of the plan process, but with higher-performing land protected from this form of release.

Through our consultation we found broad support for this strategic approach to green-belt release, and for the concept of grey belt, which recognises that there are significant parts of the green belt that contribute little by way of aesthetic, public access, or ecological value. However, we did see evidence that our proposed definition of grey belt was likely to leave too much room for subjectivity and debate. In response, we have set out a clearer description of how to assess whether land meets the definition, and we will be providing further guidance in the new year. We remain clear that existing protections for land covered by environmental and national landscape designations—for example national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and sites of special scientific interest—will remain.

At the centre of our reformed green-belt policy lie our golden rules, which mean that housing can only be built on green-belt land if developers deliver high levels of affordable housing, appropriate local infrastructure, and accessible public green space. Our consultation proposed rules requiring that residential schemes across the country would deliver 50% affordable housing, while recognising that because land values vary, the limited use of viability assessments should be permitted within certain constraints. The objective of these rules was to

make sure that the public would receive the fair share of the planning uplift driven by the new rules, and that returns to landowners would be fair but not excessive.

We received significant feedback from a wide range of stakeholders who welcomed the ambition of these rules and the commitment to maximising affordable housing delivery, but who shared strong evidence that fixing the affordable housing requirement at 50% nationally would not reflect regional variations in viability and would hinder delivery. This risked leaving authorities with a choice: allow flexibility and turn the amount of affordable housing into a negotiation; or hold firm and make sites unviable, delivering no homes, affordable or otherwise. Responding to this, our final policy introduces a 15 percentage point premium on top of existing affordable housing requirements, up to a maximum of 50%, and rules out any negotiation until we have strengthened national planning practice guidance on viability—in which we will consider the case for permitting viability negotiations on previously developed land and larger strategic sites, likely to carry greater infrastructure costs.

In a majority of authorities, this will result in an affordable housing requirement of 50%. Local authorities will be required to adopt their own ambitious golden rules through the local plan process, which will supersede these national requirements as new plans come into force. This revised approach delivers on our commitment to sharing the proceeds of land value uplift fairly, securing clear public benefits, while delivering more homes and more affordable homes than a flat 50% rate. It will increase the speed of housing provision by giving all actors greater certainty about what is required and what will achieve planning permission.

Supporting local planning

We have made clear our commitment to universal local plan coverage—local plans are the best way of engaging communities in decisions about the future of their area, of optimising use of land to deliver for the economy and for the environment, and for giving the certainty businesses need to invest in development. A plan-led system in which fewer than a third of places have up-to-date plans does not work. That is why we are taking a tough but pragmatic approach to imposing new housing numbers on local plans—one which sees new numbers feed through into local plans as quickly as possible, while allowing well-developed plans to be adopted.

We are making three changes to the proposals we consulted on, reflecting these twin objectives. First, we will give local authorities an extra two months to progress their plans under the existing framework. Those that reach examination will be assessed in line with existing housing targets, but where there is a significant shortfall, they will be required to begin work on a new plan as soon as the new plan-making system commences next summer. Similarly, those that reach the final stage of plan preparation will be allowed to progress only where there is no significant shortfall. Secondly, responding to feedback that we should measure significant shortfall in proportionate rather than absolute terms, we are replacing the 200-home threshold with a requirement that plans provide for at least 80% of the new standard method figure. Thirdly, we are introducing a new requirement that authorities with plans adopted under the old standard method must provide an extra year’s worth of homes in

their five-year housing pipeline. This requirement will kick in from 1 July 2026 and drive authorities to take steps to close the gap between existing housing requirements and the new targets by bringing more land into the system.

We recognise that going back and increasing housing numbers will create additional work, which is why we will provide financial support to those authorities asked to do this. To ensure that local authorities are well equipped and supported to implement our policy changes, we will provide grant funding to support authorities with local plan delivery and green belt reviews. A total of £14.8 million is available across both funds to support local planning authorities with these costs. In the light of the revised national planning policy framework, I will be writing to all local planning authorities with more details, and asking them to provide an updated plan-making timetable within 12 weeks, in order to drive delivery and give transparency over progress.

I expect authorities to rise to this challenge—over the last five months we have seen an acceleration on plan making, which demonstrates what is possible with clear policy direction from national Government and the right political will at a local level. But we will use the full range of ministerial intervention powers at our disposal if that does not happen, including taking over an authority's plan making directly. The revised local plan intervention criteria, published today, will boost our ability to act quickly where plan making stalls.

The pressure on planning departments goes beyond plan making, as we drive towards the unprecedented numbers of planning permissions needed to meet our 1.5 million homes and wider development objectives. That is why, responding to consultation feedback, we will set householder application fees at what we estimate is cost-recovery level, in order that applicants cover the costs of processing their planning applications. This will bring a boost of more than £50 million per year into local planning authorities from next year, enabling authorities to provide a quicker, better service. We will, through the planning and infrastructure Bill, go further in enabling local planning authorities to vary or set fees to cost recovery levels as appropriate for their area. This funding comes on top of the additional £50 million of planning capacity and capability funding announced at Budget. In combination with the dedicated support for updating local plans, this amounts to a package of over £100 million in the coming year.

Securing high-quality development and more affordable housing

Rapidly driving up planning consents in the context of a system with woefully inadequate local plan coverage will increase the number of permissions secured outside of local plan allocations in the short-term. This is necessary if we are to see the scale of delivery we need to meet our commitment to 1.5 million homes. Therefore, where it applies, the presumption in favour of sustainable development must have real teeth. The changes we make today ensure that the presumption carries real weight, acting as a significant adjustment to the decision-making balance in favour of approving development. We are however absolutely clear that this is not a green light for low-quality development. That is why we have amended the presumption to call out the existing safeguards that exist in national policy around the provision of affordable housing, design quality, and sustainability of location,

in line with the proposals we consulted on. We simply do not accept there is an inherent trade-off between supply and quality.

We have taken wider steps to drive the reformed house-building industry we are committed to delivering—one that is more responsive to consumer needs, which places affordability at the heart of what it does, and which builds out faster. We are therefore making changes to set an expectation of mixed-tenure on large sites, support more small sites to come forward to support SME delivery, and make clear our support for social rent schemes. Reflecting the absolute priority we attach to delivering social rent homes, we are amending the definition of affordable housing to carve it out as a separate category, distinct from the broader category of affordable housing for rent.

As part of the Government's plans to deliver much needed affordable homes, Homes England is today launching a new clearing service to help unblock the delivery of section 106 affordable housing. This follows reports in recent months of developers experiencing greater difficulty in selling section 106 affordable homes for which they have planning permission. This new service will help improve the functioning of the market for affordable housing, by supporting buyers and sellers to find each other more effectively—with developers able to share details of unsold section 106 affordable homes for registered providers and local authorities to search. The service aims to facilitate dialogue and partnerships that allow homes to be delivered in line with the originally agreed tenure mix set out in section 106 agreements. It will also provide new data and insight into the section 106 market. The Government are calling on all developers with uncontracted section 106 affordable homes, including small and medium builders, to proactively and pragmatically engage with the new clearing service, and on registered providers and local planning authorities to engage positively as providers and enablers of affordable housing. This is an important step in unlocking these homes and driving delivery.

As new land enters the system, we expect to see new permissions rapidly translated into build-out. In order that we have transparency and accountability, I will introduce secondary legislation next year to implement powers brought forward under the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 to require developers to commit to a build-out trajectory up front and report on delivery against it. Where that does not happen, authorities will be empowered to hold them to account, including through declining to determine applications from developers with a poor record of delivery. We will publish technical consultations to guide delivery of the necessary regulations in the new year.

Building infrastructure to grow the economy

Finally, in July we proposed changes to the planning system to drive greater commercial development in those sectors which will be the engine of the UK's economy in the future. We will confirm the changes as detailed in the consultation and make it easier to build laboratories, gigafactories, data centres and digital infrastructure, and the facilities needed to support the wider supply chain. We will also specifically recognise the need to support proposals for new or upgraded facilities and infrastructure, setting the expectation that suitable sites for these types of modern economy uses

are identified in local plans. As proposed in the summer, we will bring onshore wind back into the nationally significant infrastructure projects consenting regime, and raise the threshold of projects for both onshore wind and solar to 100 MW. We will follow through with prescribing data centres, gigafactories and laboratories as types of business or commercial development capable of being directed into the nationally significant infrastructure projects consenting regime, depending on the scale of the project.

Part of a bigger plan

These changes are necessary to unlock the land needed to deliver 1.5 million homes and the scale of new infrastructure we will need to support growth. But we are clear that they must form part of a wider plan to address wider blockers in the planning system and to drive rapid build-out. We will use the planning and infrastructure Bill to improve certainty in decision making, create a win-win for development and nature, and streamline processes for critical infrastructure. Since we know that we cannot meet housing need without planning for growth on a larger than local scale, we will empower local leaders to work cross-boundary to deliver strategic plans.

Only by delivering these reforms will we unlock investment and delivery. It is also vital that, alongside the appropriate infrastructure, these reforms also deliver substantial affordable housing. It is vital that local communities can see the benefits of development in terms of enhancements to public services and more affordable housing for local people. We recognise that to deliver on these reforms we will need to work in partnership with local leaders, house builders and infrastructure developers to deliver investment into these sectors, and we are grateful for the support for these proposals from across the sector.

These reforms are essential to transform the housing crisis, deliver growth, protect the environment, and provide hope to the many thousands of people locked into substandard and unaffordable housing.

[HCWS308]

Local Government Best Value

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): All hon. Members will recognise the importance of having well-functioning local councils which provide essential statutory services local residents rely upon. The Government will continue to work directly with a small number of councils in difficulty, and this should be done in a way that is not punitive and is based on genuine partnership to secure improvements. Today, I would like to update the House on the statutory interventions in Croydon and Nottingham.

Croydon

In February 2021, the previous Government intervened in Croydon following serious financial and governance concerns raised in the non-statutory review of the council and two reports in the public interest from external auditors. A non-statutory improvement and assurance panel was appointed in February 2021. The intervention was then escalated in July 2023 through the issuing of directions which strengthened the remit of the panel by moving it to a statutory footing. The panel continues to

be led by Tony McArdle OBE and consists of experts in finance, commercial, adult social care, housing and children's services.

I will today publish the latest report from the panel, received in April this year, alongside its subsequent letter received on 15 November. Overall, there have been significant developments in the council's progress towards reform and recovery, particularly improved governance, leadership and service delivery.

Despite this progress, the council remains one of the most financially distressed in the country. The council's general fund debt sits at £1.3 billion and it relies on the allocation of exceptional financial support (EFS) through in-principle capitalisation directions to balance its budget. The council has produced a transformation plan and a medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) to attempt to reduce its large deficit and debt to a more manageable level. I recognise that there is further work to be done to restore the council to long-term financial sustainability and that this should be a priority area of action for the council moving forward.

I have asked the panel to provide a further update on the intervention's progress in April 2025, with particular attention to the council's budget-setting process and delivery of its transformation plan, in which it aims to become the most cost-efficient authority in London. I will continue to work closely with the council as it seeks to address its financial challenges and sustain the strong working relationship both the panel and council have built with the Ministry. I will continue to monitor progress over the coming months and keep the House informed of developments.

Nottingham

As the House will be aware, the Ministry's involvement began with a non-statutory improvement and assurance board in January 2021 following serious governance and risk management issues associated with the council's now closed private energy company, Robin Hood Energy. The council also identified unlawful practices associated with its housing revenue account in December 2021 and issued a section 114 notice shortly afterwards.

The board was escalated to a statutory footing in December 2022. Serious issues remained with finances, governance and culture—including the council's second section 114 notice in November 2023—and progress was felt to be too slow.

On 22 February 2024, the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Michael Gove, announced that directions had been issued to implement a commissioner-led intervention package. These required the commissioners to report to the Secretary of State at six-monthly intervals, and the first report was received on 22 August 2024, which I will publish today.

This report makes clear that progress has been made: council officers and members have been working constructively with commissioners to map out a path to recovery, and have a strategy in place to reach a more sustainable position and better deliver services to their residents. It is clear that significant challenges remain—including the ongoing budget gap, need for service modernisation and culture change across the organisation—and I look forward to hearing more about the council's progress in the next report, which I have requested in March 2025.

Conclusion

The Government will play their part by repairing the foundations of the sector overall, with the settlement this month being the start of that programme. This will include an immediate funding injection worth over £4 billion, including a £600 million recovery grant, which will be distributed to places with greater need and demand for services (we have used deprivation as a proxy for this), and which are least able to fund their own services locally. It also includes a £680 million uplift to the social care grant for adult and children's services, a new children's social care prevention grant, worth £250 million, which will lay the groundwork for children's social care reform and an additional £44 million of new funding to pilot a kinship allowance and create hundreds of new foster placements. To fix the broken care market, the Government are also bringing forward legislation to crack down on the profiteering from our most vulnerable children and plans include a financial oversight regime, enhanced Ofsted powers and powers to cap profits if excessive profit making continues.

Moving forward we will hardwire stability and security into the system with multi-year settlements and fewer restrictive grants. This will allow councils to focus spending on local priorities, and we will set out and measure progress on the key services and outcomes we expect local government to deliver.

These measures as a whole go hand in hand with the work to make every council fit, legal and decent with a rebuilt system of accountability and oversight. We will repair the early warning system, deal with the audit backlog, and focus on raising standards in local government will help support the overall resilience of the sector in the long term.

The road to financial recovery in Croydon and Nottingham must be met with the seriousness it deserves, and I am pleased to see a clear commitment to move to new operating models. Because of the scale of the challenges, it is self-evident that there will still be difficult decisions to come. It is essential that in making these decisions there is a clear strategy for the form respective councils will take as their new operating model, and that prevention and reform of local public services is central to it.

The Government are committed to work in genuine partnership with councils under intervention to support their reset, reform and recovery, making sure residents have what they need from their local council, including confidence in its governance, financial management and service delivery. I will continue to monitor progress over the coming months and ensure these councils get the support they need to secure sustainable continuous improvement.

I will deposit in the Library of the House copies of the documents I have referred to, which are also being published on gov.uk today.

[HCWS307]

JUSTICE

Criminal Courts: Independent Review

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): This Government inherited a justice system in crisis with huge delays to hearings and victims left in limbo waiting to see justice done. We are committed to reducing the outstanding caseload in the Crown court and ensuring justice is delivered.

The first thing we had to do was understand the scale of the problem facing us. When this Government took up office in July, errors in His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service data meant there was no published data for the Crown court caseload. I asked the Department to commission an external auditor to look into the data so we could be certain of the scale of the challenge ahead of us in tackling the Crown court backlog.

Following this independent assurance review, we can now confirm that the open caseload in the Crown court has risen to around 73,000, up from 38,000 cases in December 2019. This means victims are waiting far too long to see justice, with some trials now being listed for 2028.

The data published today has been through an intensive series of reviews and validation to ensure it reflects the reality seen at the courts. However, these statistics show the scale of the challenge and now we must continue to bear down on the backlog to deliver swifter justice for victims. Since July, we have begun that work.

We first increased the number of Crown court sitting days this financial year to 106,500, a higher allocation than in six of the last seven years. We then expanded magistrates court sentencing powers so they can hand down custodial sentences of up to 12 months for a single triable either way offence. This frees up the equivalent of 2,000 sitting days per year in the Crown court so judges can focus on the most serious cases.

Meanwhile, we are continuing to use 16 Nightingale courtrooms across seven venues to hear more cases up and down the country and are recruiting approximately 1,000 judges and tribunal members annually across all jurisdictions.

But we must also be honest. The scale of this challenge is greater than these measures alone can achieve. Even if our courts sat at their maximum possible capacity, we could not stop the backlog from increasing, let alone bring it down.

If victims are going to see justice done more swiftly in this country, we cannot simply do more of the same. We need to do things differently.

That is why today, with the agreement of the Lady Chief Justice, I have asked Sir Brian Leveson to undertake a review of our criminal courts to consider how we can speed up the hearing of cases, and I am grateful for his support with this.

The review will have two goals:

First, to consider how the criminal courts could be reformed to ensure cases are dealt with proportionately, in light of the current pressures on the Crown court. The review will look at when we use our Crown courts and when we should make more use of other courts. Specifically, whether more cases should move from the Crown court to the magistrates court and whether offenders should be given the right to appeal a magistrate's sentence, where today they are able to appeal their case in the Crown court. Sir Brian will also consider the case for a new "intermediate court" for cases too serious to be heard by a magistrate alone but which could be heard by a judge alongside magistrates.

Second, to look at how the criminal courts could operate more efficiently. This includes consideration of how new technologies, including artificial intelligence, could be used to improve the criminal courts.

The pressure facing our criminal courts is considerable and I am grateful for everyone who works tirelessly across the system to ensure justice is heard. The backlog is at a record high. In the short term, it will continue to rise. But this review will ensure that, in the years to come, we bear down on the backlog. Criminals will face the consequences of their actions more swiftly and victims will receive the justice they deserve.

[HCWS300]

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): The United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe is as follows:

Full representatives

Sharon Hodgson MP (Leader of the UK delegation)
The Baroness Blower
Colum Eastwood MP
The Lord Hannett of Everton
Sir Mark Hendrick MP
The Lord Smith of Hindhead
Dr Rupa Huq MP
Mike Martin MP
Anneliese Midgley MP
Jon Pearce MP
The right hon. Mark Pritchard MP
The right hon. Sir John Whittingdale MP
The right hon. the Baroness Winterton of Doncaster

Substitute members

Alex Ballinger MP
Lee Barron MP
The right hon. the Lord Bruce of Bennachie
Neil Coyle MP
Dame Caroline Dinenage MP
Helena Dollimore MP
Anna Gelderd MP
Stephen Gethins MP
Tracy Gilbert MP
James MacCleary MP
The Lord McInnes of Kilwinning
The Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath
The Lord Shamash.

[HCWS302]

UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly: UK Delegation

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): The United Kingdom delegation to the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly is as follows:

Full representatives

Marsha de Cordova MP (Leader and Co-Chair)
Catherine Atkinson MP
The Lord Bach
Alex Ballinger MP
Matt Bishop MP
Sarah Bool MP (Vice Chair)
The Baroness Bull
The Baroness Crawley
Stella Creasy MP
The Baroness Donaghy
Catherine Fookes MP
Sir Ashley Fox MP
The right hon. the Lord Frost
The Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town
Sir Mark Hendrick MP
Uma Kumaran MP
Katie Lam MP
The right hon. the Lord Lamont of Lerwick
Noah Law MP
The Lord Liddle
The Baroness Ludford
James MacCleary MP
Frank McNally MP
The Baroness Mobarik
Abtisam Mohamed MP
Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne
Steve Race MP
Shivani Raja MP
Connor Rand MP
The Lord Ricketts (Vice Chair)
The Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick
Peter Swallow MP
Robin Swann MP
The Lord Teverson
Caroline Voaden MP
Substitute Members
Lee Barron MP
The right hon. the Lord Bruce of Bennachie
Ben Coleman MP
Jacob Collier MP
Wera Hobhouse MP
The Lord Kempself
The Lord Krebs
Laura Kyrke-Smith MP
Alice Macdonald MP
Jack Rankin MP
Laurence Turner MP
The right hon. the Lord Whitty.

[HCWS303]

Petition

Thursday 12 December 2024

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Fakenham Swimming Pool

The petition of residents of the constituency of Broadland and Fakenham,

Declares that local people in the Broadland and Fakenham constituency require access to adequate facilities to conduct regular exercise; further declares that since the closure of the swimming pool in Fakenham there has been limited facilities in the area; and notes that the Treasury has been instructed to review the £9.9 million previously committed to fund a new swimming pool.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the resource needs of the new swimming pool and 3G sports pitch in Fakenham, Norfolk, whilst undertaking its funding review, and to retain the funding previously committed.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Jerome Mayhew, Official Report, 24 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 498 .]*

[P003014]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):

I would like to thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for raising this issue on behalf of his constituents.

The Government are committed to ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, should have access to, and benefit from, quality sport and physical activity opportunities.

Sport and physical activity are central to delivering the Government's health mission. Providing local access to high quality, accessible community facilities provides important places for people of all ages to be active, as well as vital social spaces and community hubs.

The £4.8 billion levelling-up fund was launched by the previous Government. North Norfolk district council was initially granted £9.875 million by the previous Government under the levelling-up fund, and NNDC had been waiting for confirmation of the funding, pending spending review decisions this autumn.

The Government have now confirmed funding, meaning that the £9.875 million awarded to NNDC for the Fakenham leisure and sports hub is secure, and the council will be able to proceed with the project.

This funding has been granted to build new facilities at Fakenham sports centre, including a 25-metre public swimming pool and improved outdoor sports facilities. Funding will also enable the district council to develop a full-size 3G all-weather artificial grass pitch for competitive sports and outdoor sports changing facilities on the Trap Lane sports ground owned by Fakenham town council.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 12 December 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	1015	BUSINESS AND TRADE—continued	
Business Confidence	1016	Hospitality Businesses	1019
Business: Northern Ireland.....	1025	Paid Employment Leave: Kinship Carers.....	1019
Chancellor's Mansion House Speech:		Parental Leave Take-up	1029
Funding Plans	1024	Post Office Closures.....	1030
Co-operatives.....	1025	Small and Medium-sized Businesses.....	1021
Creative Industries.....	1029	Steel Industry: South Yorkshire.....	1015
Free Trade Deals: Farmers	1020	Topical Questions	1030
High Streets: Government Support	1026	UK Exports	1016

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 12 December 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	41WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND	
United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020:		LOCAL GOVERNMENT	47WS
Review	41WS	Building the Homes we Need	47WS
		Local Government Best Value	53WS
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	42WS	JUSTICE	55WS
Covid-19 Day of Reflection 2025	42WS	Criminal Courts: Independent Review.....	55WS
DEFENCE	43WS	PRIME MINISTER	57WS
LGBT Veterans: Etherton Review	43WS	Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for	
Operation Stifftail	45WS	Security and Co-operation in Europe.....	57WS
		UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly:	
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	45WS	UK Delegation	57WS
Clinical Trials Regulations.....	45WS	TREASURY	42WS
Commercial Research Delivery Centres.....	47WS	LGBT Financial Recognition Scheme Payments:	
		Income Tax Exemption	42WS

PETITION

Thursday 12 December 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	7P
Fakenham Swimming Pool	7P

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**not later than
Thursday 19 December 2024**

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CONTENTS

Thursday 12 December 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1015] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Business and Trade

Business of the House [Col. 1037]
Statement—(Lucy Powell)

Building Homes [Col. 1057]
Statement—(Matthew Pennycook)

Qualifications Reform Review [Col. 1081]
Statement—(Janet Daby)

Prison Capacity Strategy [Col. 1089]
Statement—(Alex Davies-Jones)

LGBT Veterans: Etherton Review [Col. 1099]
General debate

SEND Provision: Autism and ADHD [Col. 1139]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Disability History Month [Col. 383WH]
Floating Offshore Wind: Celtic Sea [Col. 406WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 41WS]

Petition [Col. 7P]
Observations
