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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 30 January 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 30 January 2025*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

*The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Order, 28 January, and Standing Order No. 3).*

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CITY OF LONDON (MARKETS) BILL

*Bill read a Second time.*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### BUSINESS AND TRADE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### **Business Growth Service**

1. **Jade Botterill** (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on establishing the business growth service. [902446]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** Small businesses are critical to our economy and to the future of all our communities. We will bring forward our small business strategy later this year to improve the environment for small businesses to grow. As part of that work, we are consulting widely with small businesses and other stakeholders on the design of the business growth service, which we will launch later this year.

**Jade Botterill:** Before Christmas, I was pleased to meet some of the many microbusinesses operating in Osset and Denby Dale. They told me that they previously felt that they had fallen through the cracks of Government policy and economic ambition. How will the Minister's business growth service assist those microbusinesses, as well as broader measures that the Government are taking to help smaller organisations to grow?

**Gareth Thomas:** I commend my hon. Friend on her support for the microbusinesses in her constituency. We want to get behind all those who are willing to take the risk to set up their own business. They help to make our communities more vibrant, they create jobs, and they generate the tax revenues that make our country stronger. The business growth service will be designed to get businesses quicker access to the support they need from the Government, such as applying for a start-up loan, access to training and management support and help with exports.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his positive response to that question. In Strangford, small businesses are the backbone of the community, and many people in those businesses work from home. The business growth policy may be specific to England, but what discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Business and Trade in Northern Ireland to ensure that we benefit?

**Gareth Thomas:** The hon. Gentleman has always been a great champion of small businesses in his constituency and in Northern Ireland more generally. We want the business growth service to complement the support that the Northern Ireland Executive and the Welsh and Scottish Governments already give their businesses, to improve the quality of advice and support available to all businesses in all parts of the UK.

### **Employment Costs**

2. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What steps he plans to take to help reduce employment costs. [902447]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** The Government are pursuing the reforms needed to deliver sustained long-term growth. Developed and delivered in partnership with business, we have taken significant steps, including launching a consultation on the modern industrial strategy, establishing the national wealth fund, transforming our planning rules, committing to a 10-year infrastructure strategy and introducing the Employment Rights Bill to boost productivity. We have also added extra protections for small businesses by increasing the employment allowance and freezing the small business rate multiplier.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I think the Minister may have misunderstood my question; I asked how he would reduce employment costs. The president of the Confederation of British Industry recently said that, because of things like the Employment Rights Bill, employers will be laying people off and will be less likely to employ, and that is before the national insurance tax on employment imposed by this Government. Does the Minister accept responsibility for the increase in unemployment that we are already seeing?

**Justin Madders:** I think it is something of a stretch to say that a Bill that is not even law yet, most of the provisions of which will not come into force until next year, is driving unemployment already. I quote back to him what the head of the CBI said yesterday about our growth plan. He said:

“This positive leadership and a...vision to kickstart the economy and boost productivity is welcome.”

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): In the week of Labour's latest reset, how does the Minister reconcile imposing an additional £5 billion of costs on business—on the Government's own figures—with growing the economy? What was it about the breakfast with the Prime Minister that saw bosses laying off more workers 24 hours later?

**Justin Madders:** I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. We believe that a 0.4% increase in the overall pay bill, which is what we have estimated the Employment Rights Bill will mean for businesses, is actually a fantastic return for greater security at work, greater pay, better staff retention, increased productivity, making jobs more secure and family friendly, banning exploitative zero-hour contracts, supporting women in work in every stage of life, providing a genuine living wage, turning the page on industrial relations, and bringing an end to fire and rehire. This is a pro-business, pro-growth, pro-worker agenda from the Government, and we are determined to deliver it.

### Fireworks

3. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): If he will take steps to reduce the noise level of fireworks on public sale. [902448]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** The Government understand the effects that fireworks can have on animals and vulnerable individuals. Consumer fireworks have a 120 dB noise limit, but numerous low-noise options are available on the market at around 90 dB or below. This year's fireworks public information campaign has highlighted low-noise fireworks and the importance of considerate use. Additionally, I am meeting businesses, consumer groups and charities at the conclusion of the fireworks season in the next coming week or two to discuss their concerns.

**Sarah Owen:** Antisocial fireworks keep our constituents awake, cause alarm for pets, and seriously affect people with post-traumatic stress disorder or special educational needs. I know the Minister heard extensively from colleagues, campaigners and charities on this during the Westminster Hall debate on my Bill. Will he meet me to discuss the implementation of the common-sense measures presented in my Fireworks Bill, including lowering the noise limit on fireworks sold to the public, closing the licensing loophole and reviewing social media and online sales?

**Justin Madders:** It is always a pleasure to meet my hon. Friend and I am happy to do so. Indeed, we will see whether we can get her to come along to some of the other meetings that we are holding with interested groups, some of which she has mentioned.

**Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): May I wish a belated happy Chinese new year to all those who were celebrating yesterday? One beauty of our great country is its diversity, but with that comes causes for celebration throughout the year. My own community in South West Hertfordshire celebrates Diwali, Eid, Christmas, Chinese new year and other events, which often entails the use of fireworks. There is an expectation of fireworks and the noise associated with them at the main events of Christmas and new year, so pet owners inevitably take safeguarding measures then, but given the likelihood of fireworks throughout the year, may I urge the Minister to get on to this Bill quickly, ensuring that we do not stifle the celebrations, but that we do protect our animals and those vulnerable children who may be affected by noise?

**Justin Madders:** I thank the hon. Member for his question. He is right to recognise that fireworks are used at a number of events throughout the year, but it would be wrong to characterise that as people having to expect that there will be noise. There is now a sufficient number of lower-decibel products on the market for everyone to act more responsibly, and we will be exploring that in our meetings over the coming weeks.

### Industrial Strategy

4. **Alan Strickland** (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on developing an industrial strategy. [902449]

10. **Tracy Gilbert** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on developing an industrial strategy. [902456]

14. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on developing an industrial strategy. [902463]

16. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What progress his Department has made on developing an industrial strategy. [902468]

**The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones):** This Department and, indeed, Departments across Government are working extensively on developing our industrial strategy, which the Conservative party opposes, but which business and industry welcome. Last month, we launched the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council, comprising a very impressive group of the UK's top business leaders, policy experts and trade union leaders. My right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade attended the council's inaugural meeting on 17 December. In addition, we are currently analysing more than 3,000 responses to the Industrial Strategy Green Paper from businesses, academics, think-tanks and unions, and their insights and feedback are incredibly valuable as we develop the strategy.

**Alan Strickland:** I strongly welcome the inclusion of defence in the draft industrial strategy and was pleased yesterday to host a roundtable in Sedgfield with the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry. Many of the innovative small and medium-sized enterprises that we talked to spoke of the struggles that they have with red tape, bureaucracy and contracting with Departments across Whitehall. How will Ministers grab the opportunity of the industrial strategy to remove this red tape, which too often can thwart SME growth?

**Sarah Jones:** I am really pleased my hon. Friend held that roundtable. It is quite a turning point to have an industrial strategy with defence as one of the sectors; building new relationships across Departments with colleagues who work in defence is a really powerful and important thing to do. He speaks to a wider problem face by a lot of industry when it comes to dealing with Government agencies and Departments. We are working hard to make these things easier, because growth is our priority and we have to break down those barriers.

**Tracy Gilbert:** It is essential that the Government's industrial strategy creates manufacturing jobs across the country, including in my constituency. The RenewableUK

offshore wind industrial growth plan shows the UK can be a global technology leader in advanced turbine tech, foundations, electrical systems and cables. Will my hon. Friend commit to using our industrial strategy to ensure there is growth in these areas to put British manufacturing at the heart of the clean energy transition?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question, for her defence of her constituency and for her ambitions, which we share. I believe the report she refers to came out before this Labour Government came to power. With our new policies and the new drive and ambition from our Secretaries of State for Business and Trade and for Energy Security and Net Zero, we are powering forward with our renewable agenda, and we will make sure that all of our growth driving sectors speak to my hon. Friend's area and everyone's area of the country and drive growth across the board.

**Sarah Coombes:** Manufacturers in my constituency are really excited about the upcoming industrial strategy and all the growth that will bring. However, steel and aluminium businesses in particular are concerned about the upcoming carbon border adjustment mechanism, the gap with the EU, and whether the whole system will be ready for implementation. If we do not get it right, the CBAM will have a big impact on our ability to trade and on growth, so can the Minister assure me she is going to be working with the Treasury to ensure we get this right and that it supports manufacturers in the west midlands?

**Sarah Jones:** I know my hon. Friend will hold this Government to account on what we are doing and how we are going, and she will push, and already has done, to make sure we are doing everything we can for the industries in her area. The CBAM will be introduced in 2027, and she speaks to concerns that I have heard in conversations around steel in particular, which is very important to this country. That is why we are developing a steel strategy, which will set a future direction of travel for steel, but we are working with the EU and with industry here to make sure the CBAM works and does what it is supposed to do.

**Paul Waugh:** Andy Burnham's Atom Valley mayoral development zone is creating a world-class supercluster for advanced manufacturing right across 70 million square feet in Rochdale, Oldham, Bury and Middleton. Rochdale's Kingsway business park will be home to the SMMC—the sustainable materials and manufacturing centre—a world-class cutting-edge research centre. Will the Minister join me in supporting the SMMC, and perhaps arrange a visit either by herself or the Secretary of State to see what is happening with the jobs of the future in Rochdale?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to the House the work that is going on for the Atom Valley development zone, which is incredibly important and exactly what we want to see. The Mayor of Greater Manchester is to be congratulated for his leadership in this space as well. I am very interested in the work my hon. Friend refers to, not least because of the critical minerals strategy we are developing and the graphene work that I know will be under way in the manufacturing

centre hub, so I very much look forward to talking further to him about what is happening and how we can help.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Why is it that the Government's energy policy is driving uncompetitive energy costs in absolutely the wrong direction? Sir Jim Ratcliffe has pointed out that the principal threat to any strategy is actually the uncompetitive costs for those enterprises that will have to populate it.

**Sarah Jones:** This Government inherited very high energy costs from the previous Government, who had taken no action to make our country more energy secure. We are powering through to have clean, green, home-grown energy that will bring costs down and make sure we are secure as a country and not reliant on the whims of global leaders and the price of oil and gas. We will bring those costs down and we will support our industry, which I am afraid the previous Government failed to do.

**Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): Over the past week, the UK Government have committed to support a runway in London, a football stadium in Manchester and a science corridor for Oxford and Cambridge, yet for the past year, Conservative and Labour Governments have failed to act to secure the long-term future of Grangemouth, after INEOS announced the closure of the oil refinery. Despite general election promises to step in and save the plant, why are the Labour Government willing to jeopardise jobs at Grangemouth, the country's energy security, which the Minister has just spoken passionately about the need to secure, and the wider industrial strategy through this inaction?

**Sarah Jones:** The hon. Member will be pleased to hear that we have re-established a working group with the Scottish First Minister and the Welsh and Northern Irish leaderships to make sure we are working collectively, because we do not want to take a party political approach to the growth of all our nations. We are collaborating well with the Scottish Government on Grangemouth, where we are working at pace and putting in investment and support. We are working to transition people from North sea oil and gas into the new energies of the future. There is the passport that we published, and we have set up Great British Energy, which will be headquartered in Aberdeen. A lot of work is going on, and we need the Scottish Government to support us in that work. We will work in partnership, because that is what will create good jobs.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The chemical industry is an important employer in my constituency, with the HEX Group and SI Group employing many people. As mentioned, Sir Jim Ratcliffe is already highlighting the extinction of the British chemical industry. My chemical manufacturers need to ensure that they are buying energy at the same price as manufacturers in Germany, the Netherlands and France. When will they be able to do that?

**Sarah Jones:** The chemical industry has been suffering for many years because of the previous Government's economic policies, crashing the economy under Liz Truss and failing to deal with energy prices over multiple

years. I have met the chemical industry. It is an important part of our economy, and we need to do what we can to protect it. I am having conversations, and we are building our energy policies. We are building our industrial strategy.

**Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Word salad!

**Sarah Jones:** Word salad? Gosh. That abuse from the Opposition Front Bench has cut me to the core. The industrial strategy has set out eight sectors that will turbocharge the economy. Across all those sectors lie our foundational sectors, of which the chemical industry is one. We will support that industry in a way that his Government failed to do.

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

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I will try to avoid a word salad. We have heard from various different industrial sectors how important it is to have stable and predictable energy costs. This month has seen little sun and only intermittent wind, so we have been heavily dependent on imported oil and gas. Are Ministers in the Department for Business and Trade challenging the Energy Secretary over his policies?

**Sarah Jones:** I am disappointed by the hon. Lady's approach to this matter, and I am disappointed by the Conservative party's overall abandonment of previously strongly held views about the need to balance climate change with our economy. It is a fact that we are moving faster towards renewable energy. Last year, 50% of our energy came from renewables for the first time. We are growing them at pace because they are cheaper. Onshore wind is the cheapest form of energy we have, solar is very cheap and floating offshore wind brings us huge opportunities. Renewables will bring our costs down and make sure we are energy secure, and they go hand in glove with growth, as the Chancellor set out in her speech yesterday.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** The Minister's Government have changed policy to not issue any new licences for domestic oil and gas, so we will become more dependent on imports at times when solar and wind are not working, unless we can increase nuclear generation. It is Nuclear Week in Parliament, so what pressure is she putting on the Energy Secretary to make new nuclear an important part of our industrial strategy?

**Sarah Jones:** I sit jointly in the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, so the hon. Lady can be reassured that I talk to my colleagues and am working with them. Indeed, I am leading on hydrogen and carbon capture, which is an important part of the mix. We are clear that nuclear is an important part of our future and that the strongest approach to deliver energy security and bring prices down is to have all the opportunities available to us and to build at pace. That is why we are trebling our solar, doubling our wind and supporting big nuclear as well as small modular reactors. She can be reassured that we are putting a strategy in place, which the previous Government failed to do.

## Steel Strategy

5. **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on developing a steel strategy. [902450]

**The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones):** I delighted to tell my hon. Friend that we are working hard on our steel strategy. Immediately after we have finished these questions, I will be going to Sheffield to talk to the industry about future demand. Steel is an important industry for our future, to which we have made a £2.5 billion commitment. We will ensure that we turn around the decline we saw under the previous Government and deliver a steel industry fit for the future.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The steel industry is an important part of Wolverhampton North East's heritage and must remain a part of our future. Will my hon. Friend outline how the £2.5 billion UK steel strategy and the new steel council will boost competitiveness and secure jobs at Tata's Steelpark in Wednesfield, which is the UK's largest processing and distribution centre?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for standing up for her community and protecting her industry. I would be happy to have a conversation with her about the changes she thinks we need to make.

Steel output in the UK fell by 49% in 2021, by 30% in 2022 and by 11% in 2023—what an awful thing to have happened to our industry. We need to turn that around. We do not underestimate how hard that will be, but we are putting in place the money, the policies and the Government dedication to ensure that we support a thriving steel industry.

## Support for High Street Businesses

6. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high street businesses. [902451]

13. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high street businesses. [902461]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** We are continuing to work with colleagues across Government to develop a programme that will revitalise the nation's high streets and support businesses. We will publish a small business strategy later this year, and high streets will be a key pillar of that. We have already committed to continuing funding for business growth programmes such as the growth hub network and announced plans for a new business growth service.

**Bradley Thomas:** Yesterday, Bromsgrove received the devastating news that it is about to lose both its Lloyds and Halifax bank branches in the town centre. Those banks are a lifeline to many small businesses, particularly those run by independent small entrepreneurs, as well as many residents who use their banking facilities on probably a weekly or daily basis. Does the Minister agree that banking hubs can be part of an ongoing solution to retain banking services in our towns? Will he support my campaign for a banking hub in Bromsgrove? Will he meet me to make that a reality?

**Gareth Thomas:** I recognise that there will be a lot of concern in the hon. Member's constituency following that news yesterday. I agree that banking hubs can make a significant difference, which is why we have been quick to roll out more than 100 of them. Plans for another 76 have already been developed and we are committed to rolling out 350 in total. In the spirit of one Thomas trying to help another Thomas, I am happy to meet him.

**Sarah Bool:** Our small businesses are the lifeblood of our high street and often give young students their first opportunity for a job on a Saturday or in the holidays. However, one of my local small business owners says that she can no longer afford such roles because of the increase in employer national insurance contributions and changes to business rates, among other things. What will the Government do to support our young people into jobs when small businesses are left in that awful position?

**Gareth Thomas:** The hon. Lady might want to check again with the business she refers to, because, in the most recent Budget, the employment allowance was raised to some £10,500, which will help every small employer's national insurance bill every year, and should ensure that more than 1 million firms benefit. That is a very practical measure; more broadly, on the point about national insurance contributions, she will know that Labour inherited a very difficult financial situation because of mistakes made by the Conservatives, and difficult decisions have had to be taken.

**Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab):** Small local businesses in Grangemouth such as pubs, restaurants, cafes, hairdressers and garages all rely on the custom that they receive from the workers of the Grangemouth refinery, but the Government have been very passive in allowing the refinery to close, thus impoverishing the local community. What message do the Government have, first for the refinery workers who face redundancy, and secondly for the small local businesses that rely on their custom?

**Gareth Thomas:** In her speech yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out a series of measures that the Government want to take to boost growth across the country and benefit every part of the UK, from investing in modern road and rail systems to expanding airport capacity, rebalancing the planning system and driving investment in cheaper renewable energy, and by creating a national wealth fund that can back the new technologies of the future. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the specific concerns he has mentioned, if he thinks that would be useful.

**Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab):** Falkirk High Street is the beating heart of our district, with recent additions including Barracuda chippy, El Toro Gaucho steakhouse, Greek Theory restaurant and Rock Bottom beer hall. Many Falkirk town centre businesses still raise with me the hardship they have faced because of cost rises and utility, rent and parking increases over a number of years, as well as rental value threshold changes by the Scottish Government, which have contributed to decreased footfall and failing business over a number of years. While I welcome the Government's commitment to shifting

the burden away from the high street, will the Minister outline what further steps he is taking to support my high street, and what engagement he has had with the Scottish Government to support shifting the rate burden away from Falkirk High Street taxpayers?

**Gareth Thomas:** I referred to the establishment of the business growth service in answer to an earlier question. We are working with the Scottish Government to begin to think through how that service can support businesses in Scotland and complement the support already provided by the Scottish Government. We are clear on the need to reform business rates to support retail, hospitality and leisure businesses on the high street. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend if he thinks there are further initiatives we can take to help small businesses in Falkirk.

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

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** R Young Art Gallery is the last art gallery in Wokingham town centre and a proud feature of our high street. However, political inactivity on business rates reform means that it is on the precipice of closing. I was shocked to learn that it is the impending cuts to business rate relief, with no measures in the short term to provide financial support, that have led the owner to fear for the survival of his business. High streets across the country continue to struggle. What is the Minister doing to ensure that small, independent businesses such as R Young Art Gallery are supported?

**Gareth Thomas:** One reason why the Conservatives lost the confidence of the British business community was that despite repeated promises to reform business rates, they took no steps to do so. We announced plans in the Budget, back in October, to reform business rates and introduce permanently lower rates for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. The Conservatives were going to end business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure; we have chosen to extend it. We also announced in the Budget that we were looking at what further steps we could take on business rates reform.

### International Investment

7. **Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the UK in attracting international investment. [902452]

8. **Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the UK in attracting international investment. [902454]

**The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones):** Through increased inward investment, we can innovate, create jobs and deliver on our growth mission to become the fastest-growing nation in the G7. We have wasted no time: on top of the £63 billion raised at our international investment summit, our new national wealth fund has already leveraged £1.6 billion of private sector investment, and we have outlined ambitious plans for planning reform alongside a modern industrial strategy to secure record levels of investment.

**Mohammad Yasin:** I am honoured to have been appointed as the UK trade envoy to Pakistan. Given the growing financial pressure on UK universities, with several leading institutions announcing job cuts amid the deepening funding crisis, what steps is the Department taking to foster stronger educational partnerships with Pakistan to help alleviate financial pressures in the sector in the UK, while supporting Pakistan's educational goals?

**Sarah Jones:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment as the trade envoy to Pakistan. I can think of no one better, and I know he will make a big difference in that role. The Government took the decision to reappoint Professor Sir Steve Smith as our international education champion to ensure that the UK-Pakistan education partnership's work continues as part of the international education strategy, which is now jointly led by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Department for Education and the Department for Business and Trade. Led by Sir Steve, the UK has worked closely with the Pakistan Higher Education Commission on revising Pakistan's new transnational education policy. That work will continue, and I am sure my hon. Friend will bring great help to it.

**Steve Race:** The south-west is home to an incredibly important economy based on defence, food security, space, maritime, and, in Exeter, life sciences and climate tech and research. We are also home to huge green energy potential, utilising floating offshore wind. However, we currently need investment in our port facilities so that the new green jobs will be based in the south-west, not in France or elsewhere. Will the Minister meet me, along with colleagues and the sector, to discuss to the future of green energy generation in the south-west?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I saw the talent and potential for myself when I visited Exeter in September for Great South West's annual conference. I am visiting the region again in a few weeks, because there is huge potential, huge excitement and huge opportunities to grow. As he knows, there is £1.8 billion from the national wealth fund to invest in our ports. I am very happy to meet him and others to see what potential we can discuss.

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

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** I declare an interest: a family member has shares in a medical company.

In the United States, President Trump created chaos by freezing funding for the National Institutes of Health, and his nominee for US Health Secretary is an anti-vaccine conspiracy theorist. The United Kingdom has the perfect opportunity to seize this moment and make ourselves a beacon for global research investment. Already, Wokingham has many pharmaceutical businesses, such as Becton Dickinson and Hollister. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure we attract global life sciences sectors to the UK?

**Sarah Jones:** I was in Davos last week meeting representatives from the life sciences industry and talking about the huge potential for growth that we have in the UK. One of the eight sectors we have identified as part

of the industrial strategy, is life sciences, where we have huge talent and huge skills. We need to build on that and be really ambitious in what we can deliver. Through the industrial strategy and the work with the brilliant industries we have in this country, we can do just that.

### Business Confidence

9. **Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con):** What steps he is taking to help increase business confidence. [902455]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** As the Chancellor of the Exchequer said only yesterday, we are driving forward planning reforms, boosting capital investment by over £100 billion over the next five years, and creating the national wealth fund. We are launching the business growth service and will soon publish our modern industrial strategy, which will be unreservedly pro-business. Business leaders, not surprisingly, have backed those measures.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** But the Minister will be aware that in the last few weeks the CBI, the Institute of Directors and the London chamber of commerce have all said that business confidence is plummeting. Given the tsunami of national insurance contribution increases, business rates increases and employment cost rises, is it not hardly surprising that confidence is being destroyed? Are the Government, rather than promoting growth, not actually destroying it?

**Gareth Thomas:** I think the right hon. Gentleman needs to check his sources for comments from business leaders. Only yesterday the British Chambers of Commerce, the CBI and the Federation of Small Businesses were making very positive comments about our plans for growth, and last week, interestingly, PwC published its annual survey of global CEOs to reveal that Britain was the second most attractive country in the world in which to invest. That is something that I do not think the party opposite ever achieved.

**Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab):** Business confidence increases when businesses know that they have the skilled workforce they need in order to grow. We have just had Nuclear Week in Parliament, and it was a pleasure to host Rolls-Royce and its apprentices. Its nuclear skills academy is providing a pipeline of talent, and the same is needed across other industries—from technical skills to creative skills, and from multinationals to small businesses. What cross-departmental discussions have Ministers had about helping businesses of all sizes to provide skills opportunities for our future workforce?

**Gareth Thomas:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her support for Rolls-Royce, which is one of our great British companies leading the way in many export markets across the world. Only yesterday I was discussing with the Minister for Skills our plans to reform the growth and skills levy to make it easier for businesses such as Rolls-Royce to recruit apprentices and find the talent that they need to continue to be successful.

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



**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I begin by drawing attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

When consumer confidence is low, business confidence is low, and nowhere is that more visible than in our automotive sector, with UK car production slumping to its lowest level since 1954. *Autocar* magazine warned today that the zero emission vehicle mandate

“is currently the industry's biggest headache, as...consumer demand is not there to meet the stringent regulations which are increasing each year.”

When policy fails, it is sensible to admit it and change course. Will the Minister accept that the ZEV mandate flies in the face of what consumers actually want, and that a radically different path is required to boost business confidence in our automotive sector?

**Gareth Thomas:** No, I do not accept that, and I would gently remind the hon. Gentleman that the policy to which he has referred was introduced by his party. I recognise that there are many aspects of the Conservative party's record about which he and his colleagues are probably embarrassed. The Liz Truss Budget—which the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), helped to write—did huge damage to our country and to consumer confidence. The measures that the Chancellor announced yesterday, for example, will drive growth forward, and that is one of the reasons why businesses backed them so strongly yesterday.

**Greg Smith:** It normally takes longer than six months for a Government to drift that far from reality. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has predicted that just 775,000 cars will roll off production lines in 2025, compared to 1.3 million in 2019. Today's edition of *The Telegraph* reports:

“The slump has been accelerated by a slowdown in demand across Europe, particularly by drivers shunning new electric vehicles”.

Why does the Minister persist in a policy to undermine our automotive businesses by forcing them to make a product that people just do not want to buy? Is it not time to get the state out of the way, let our innovators innovate, and boost automotive businesses' confidence by letting them deliver to actual consumer demand?

**Gareth Thomas:** The hon. Gentleman seems to have forgotten the extra investment that Nissan has announced, and the extra investment that has been announced by a number of other car manufacturers. He and his colleagues were very clear in opposing the measures that we took in the Budget, including measures that backed investment in the automotive sector, and they set out no plans to pay for that investment. I gently encourage him to reflect a little further on the mistakes that his party made in government, which have caused some of the problems that we are having to sort out now.

#### Post Office Closures: Impact on Communities

11. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Post Office closures on local communities. [902457]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** The Post Office has the freedom to operate the branch network within the

parameters set by the Government. We protect the network by setting minimum access criteria so that, in urban and rural areas, everyone has easy access to their nearest post office. Those criteria ensure that however the network changes, services remain within local reach of all citizens.

**Rebecca Smith:** The community of Plymstock in my constituency saw its main post office close in September 2021, when Morrisons closed more than 80 of its newsagents across the country; the post offices were essentially collateral damage. Despite the best efforts of the community, my predecessor and councillors—including me, at the time—since the Post Office has downgraded the franchise on offer from main branch to post office local, it has been impossible to secure an operator due to the financial unviability of the model. Yesterday, the final local branch announced that it will close later in the year. What is the Minister doing to ensure that sustainable joint post office and banking services replace closing branches in constituencies like mine?

**Gareth Thomas:** We have supported the Post Office in taking measures to increase sub-postmaster pay, to make it a more attractive profession to come into, in order to deal with precisely the issues that the hon. Member set out. She will understand that I do not have specific knowledge of the issues around the post office in her constituency, but I am always happy to challenge the Post Office on constituency issues, so if she would like to write or speak to me about this afterwards, I would be happy to look at the issue in more detail.

#### Free Trade Agreement: India

12. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to negotiate a free trade agreement with India. [902459]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** As the Chancellor announced yesterday, the Secretary of State will travel to Delhi in February to relaunch trade talks with India. Work is under way across Government to prepare for those negotiations as we seek a deal that drives economic growth. An agreement with India, projected to be the fourth-largest global importer by 2035, could provide further opportunities for businesses across the UK and further unlock growth.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my constituency neighbour for that update. The previous Government had more than 15 rounds of trade talks with India before the general election, in both India and the UK. Will the Government ensure that we in the UK gain access to the services market in India, which has previously been denied to UK firms? That is the key issue in our negotiations.

**Gareth Thomas:** If I remember rightly, the hon. Member and I were probably the two most enthusiastic Members of this House for a trade deal with India—me slightly more than him, I think. We are determined to do everything we can to secure a trade deal with India. He will forgive me, I am sure, if I do not give a running commentary on our priorities for those trade talks with India, but they represent a significant prize for the UK if we can reach an agreement. The Secretary of State

and the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security are determined to work extremely hard and do everything they can to reach an agreement.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Although it is appreciated that a new trade deal with India could support jobs and prosperity in the UK and thus drive growth, will the Minister ensure that the talks include discussion of an agreement to the immediate release of my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal from arbitrary detention in India before any trade deal is concluded?

**Gareth Thomas:** I recognise that this is a significant issue for my hon. Friend. We remain committed to encouraging the Government of India to make faster progress on resolving this case. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister raised this case with Prime Minister Modi on 18 November, and we have made clear the need for faster progress towards a resolution.

### Encouraging Entrepreneurship

15. **Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage entrepreneurship. [902465]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** The Government continue to support entrepreneurs through, for example, start-up loans via the British Business Bank. We will publish our small business strategy later this year, which will signal a clear, overarching ambition to promote entrepreneurship, and will articulate a new vision for business support, built around the new business growth service that I have alluded to.

**Lewis Cocking:** Economies grow and jobs are created when individuals are able to take risks and invest in their ideas, so what have the Government done specifically since the general election to help more people in my constituency of Broxbourne become entrepreneurs?

**Gareth Thomas:** One thing we need to continue to do is make it easier for entrepreneurs in the hon. Member's constituency and across the UK to access the finance that they need to set up their business. We have given an extra £250 million to the British Business Bank, which will help to ensure that more people have access to finance across the country, including in his constituency. We will publish our small business strategy later this year, in which he will see further measures to support entrepreneurs in Broxbourne and across the UK.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What specific support is being provided for women entrepreneurs? They are the driving force behind small businesses in my Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituency, and deserve all the support that they can get.

**Gareth Thomas:** I strongly support my hon. Friend's substantive point. We are backing the Invest in Women taskforce, which was set up to increase the number of female-powered businesses. We are looking at how to increase significantly the proportion of investment going to all-female founding teams; it has been stuck at just 2% of equity investment in the last decade. That is one example of the things we need to change to help women-led businesses realise their full potential.

### North-east: Support for Businesses

17. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses in the north-east. [902469]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** The Government are investing £1.4 billion, with the North East combined authority, to deliver our shared objectives of economic growth and business support. That includes the development of the local part of the industrial strategy, guiding investment to deliver sustainable economic growth, and delivering support to grow all businesses. In 2023-24, there was £420,000-worth of direct support given to the North East Growth Hub, which provides businesses across the area with practical advice and support to grow and thrive.

**Ian Lavery:** Yesterday saw full-throated Government support for projects across the UK, but not so much for the north-east. The region was decimated by 14 years of Tory Government, and that cannot be repeated. I accept what the Minister says about what has happened, but what will the Government do to ensure that businesses in my Blyth and Ashington constituency can play their part in the cutting-edge technologies of the future and, crucially, see improved investment, which will create much-needed jobs with good wages and terms and conditions?

**Justin Madders:** I am at one with my hon. Friend in wanting all parts of the country, especially the north-west and the north-east, to have high-paid, well-skilled, good jobs, in tech sectors in particular, but also in other areas where we can see great advantage for the economy. The local skills improvement plan for the north-east will help, and the excellent facilities at Blyth's Energy Central Learning Hub are supported by over £6 million of Government funding. That is already developing sector skills in a real-world port setting. With the reopening of the Northumberland line, we have reconnected towns in south-east Northumberland with Tyneside, improving links and opportunities across the area.

### Support for the Automotive Industry

18. **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the automotive industry. [902470]

**The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones):** As we have already discussed, the automotive sector is absolutely vital to the Government's plans for green economic growth, and for growing the economy more widely. That is why, at the Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor committed to ensuring over £2 billion of capital and research and development funding before 2030 for zero emission vehicle manufacturing and its supply chains. We are also consulting the industry to make sure that the zero emissions transition works for the UK's car industry, and working with the automotive transformation fund and the Advanced Propulsion Centre to make sure that we carry on innovating and seeing the growth of the automotive sector in the UK.

**Rachel Taylor:** Around 3,000 of my constituents in North Warwickshire and Bedworth work in the automotive sector. I have met representatives of many small and

medium-sized businesses that provide engineering and manufacturing services for the sector, as well as Jaguar Land Rover, which has a battery assembly centre in my constituency. A career in the automotive industry should be an attractive prospect to many young people in my constituency. What is the Minister doing to support the sector in upskilling its workforce and providing apprenticeship schemes, so that companies are not left relying on immigration to fill skills gaps?

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend makes a really good point. There is a lot of work under way to look at skills across the board, because thus far no Government have had a proper strategy on the skills that we need, and on how we make sure that we train our own people, so that we do not have to rely on immigration. There are examples in the automotive sector of absolutely brilliant apprenticeship schemes that other industries can learn from, and we are working with Skills England. I have regular meetings with colleagues in the Department for Education, the Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions to make sure that we crack this nut and encourage people to go into good, well-paid jobs.

### Topical Questions

T1. [902471] **Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones):** The Secretary of State and the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security are at the funeral of the late, great John Prescott. In this place, we remember him.

Yesterday, the Chancellor set out this Government's plan for growth, our vision for the country and our path to putting more money in people's pockets, reviving our high streets and supporting thriving businesses that create wealth, jobs and new opportunities. I was in Davos last week with the Chancellor and the Business Secretary, and there was enthusiasm about investing in a country that believes in open and free trade, that is resetting its relationship with the EU, that is forging new free trade agreements and that is creating stability here in the UK economy. It is little surprise that the UK has just been ranked by PwC as the second most attractive country in the world for investment.

We recognise that growth will not come without a fight, which is why we are pressing ahead with our industrial strategy, and channelling support for eight growth-driving sectors of our economy. It is why we are developing our small business strategy and working across all Government Departments to deliver the growth we need. We are supporting the Prime Minister's plan for change, putting more money into people's pockets and realising a new decade of national renewal.

**Sally Jameson:** Yesterday, the Chancellor announced that the Government will work with Mayor Ros Jones and the Mayor of South Yorkshire to reopen Doncaster airport, so will the Minister meet Doncaster MPs to discuss how the Department can meaningfully help? Will she also acknowledge that the growth agenda will be a success only if areas like Doncaster, South Yorkshire and the north are a critical part of it?

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I would be happy to meet a group of MPs from her area. The ambition on airport expansion was very clear in the Chancellor's speech yesterday. We are hungry for growth; we set that need alongside the need to decarbonise our airspace. Yesterday, I chaired a meeting of industry experts looking at how we can turbocharge our decarbonisation of aviation.

I would be pleased to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson), and I agree that we need to grow all parts of the UK to make this work.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Next week, members of the Public and Commercial Services Union in the Department for Business and Trade are once again out on strike. Does the Minister consider the union's demands to be reasonable? Will Ministers cross picket lines to return to work?

**Sarah Jones:** The shadow Secretary of State shows a new-found respect for the trade unions, after the previous Government's failure to engage with them caused multiple strikes and huge amounts of wasted money. The contract is not directly with the Department, but obviously we work with PCS and all our trade unions. I regularly meet our trade unions to make sure that we have good workers' rights.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We need to keep questions and answers short and sharp.

T3. [902473] **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): The UK has the world's largest deposits of polyhalite, which is used as a low-carbon fertiliser but is not on the Government's list of critical minerals. The extraction of polyhalite is being developed at the Woodsmith mine near Whitby, employing over 1,000 people. Will the Minister meet me to discuss polyhalite's inclusion on the critical minerals list, given the potential of the deposits at Woodsmith to cut carbon emissions, boost exports and create skilled jobs?

**Sarah Jones:** I met Anglo American to talk about Woodsmith just a couple of weeks ago when I was in Saudi Arabia, and it is an important site. I promised to go and see it, so perhaps I can go with my hon. Friend. It is important that the critical minerals strategy we are developing marks a step change from the previous Government's strategy, which just looked at a moment in time and said, "We need to do a bit more of this, that and the other." We will have targets, will be driving forward, and will look at our future demand. We are going to look at the eight sectors that we want to grow, consider what critical minerals we need, and think about how to ensure that we have the supply chains to get it right.

T2. [902472] **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): The outgoing chair of the Competition and Markets Authority warned of the authority being vulnerable to "expediency or vested interests". Does the Minister believe that appointing a former Amazon executive produces that risk?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** No.

T4. [902474] **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): Basingstoke is a digital powerhouse, once dubbed the “silicon suburb”. It is home to over a thousand tech companies and thousands of high-quality tech jobs. Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing to support high productivity digital hubs, like Basingstoke, to scale, secure investment and contribute towards the Government’s national growth mission?

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend is right that there is a lot of expertise and a lot of tech companies in his patch, and we want to see them thrive. It is for the Government to support that growth, to listen to what the barriers to growth are and to tackle them. Our digital development strategy, the UK’s digital strategy and our AI strategy, which the Prime Minister launched, are all vehicles to support these brilliant industries that we want to encourage. I am always happy to talk to my hon. Friend about what more we can do to encourage more of them on to his patch.

T8. [902479] **Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): My constituent, Charlotte Durrant, runs a plant shop called the Aroid Attic on Bath Road in Cheltenham. Before Brexit, she was able to import her plants from the Netherlands with no bureaucracy and without any import duties. Do Ministers agree that a customs union with the European Union would solve that problem? If they do not agree with that, do they agree that more needs to be done to help small and medium-sized enterprises like Charlotte’s to tackle the competition from larger supermarkets, which are her main competitors?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** I commend Charlotte on her business. We recognise that we need to do more to help businesses like hers to be able to export more easily to Europe. That is why the Prime Minister has set out our determination to reset the relationship with Europe. We have made clear our plans to negotiate a phytosanitary agreement with the EU, which may or may not make an immediate difference for Charlotte, but there are other aspects of our plans to reset the relationship with Europe that I hope will help.

T5. [902475] **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): Despite repeated Government and union engagement, it seems that Luton could be set to lose one of its largest private sector employers, as Stellantis closes its Vauxhall plant, despite our excellent transport connections, skilled workforce and proud industrial heritage. In the light of that devastating blow, does the Minister recognise the importance of Luton airport as a tool to invest in growth and attract private sector employment to our town?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for her work supporting workers at Stellantis. I met several of her colleagues and representatives from Stellantis this week, who I meet regularly. We stand ready to talk to them about whatever they need to remain. The consultation finished on 24 January and we await the final decision. She makes a good point about Luton airport, which I use very often because there are very good train links from Croydon to Luton. I should say that there are also

good train links from Croydon to Gatwick. We know that the Secretary of State will be making a decision in due course, but the direction of travel on growth and breaking down barriers was clear in the Chancellor’s speech yesterday.

T9. [902480] **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Despite the very brief answer given by Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders) to the question asked by the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), is he aware that there is widespread concern among small and medium-sized tech firms and trade associations about the replacement of the chair of the Competition and Markets Authority by a former Amazon executive? Will the Government make clear their commitment to the operational independence of the CMA and the Digital Markets Unit, and to obtaining stronger competition in digital markets?

**Justin Madders:** I can give the right hon. Member that reassurance. The independence of the CMA is very important. That will remain in place and a new strategic steer will be issued shortly that will reaffirm that independence.

T6. [902476] **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): The pandemic exposed the woeful inadequacy of the previous Government’s statutory sick pay provisions, and I am pleased that this Government have committed to reforming those through the Employment Rights Bill. Will the Minister look at the specific wording of the Bill to ensure there are no unintended consequences of the provisions on the removal of the lower earnings limit for statutory sick pay? Will he meet me to ensure that all workers receive proper statutory sick pay and no one is left worse off?

**Justin Madders:** The experience of the pandemic really brought home that millions of people in this country do not qualify for statutory sick pay. We are determined to deal with that and I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the issue in more detail.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Yesterday, out of the blue, Bank of Scotland announced that it will close five branches in my constituency, leaving hundreds of square miles of the rural south of Scotland without a single bank branch. While we must work with Link and others to ensure access to cash in those communities, does the Minister share my concern not only that this will leave empty premises prominent on the high street, but that it sends a message that the banks are giving up on rural areas and on those who do not bank online?

**Gareth Thomas:** I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman’s constituents will be concerned about the Bank of Scotland’s decision. He may know that more than 9,500 bank branches closed between 2010 and 2023. That is why the Government are determined to ensure the much more widespread roll-out of banking hubs, with a commitment to roll out 350 banking hubs. I strongly suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that he get in contact with Link and Cash Access UK to make the case for a banking hub in his constituency. If I can help in any way, I will be happy to consider doing so.

T7. [902477] **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): This week saw DeepSeek throw the global tech market into utter meltdown, with the Chinese AI app spooking investors, to say the least. With huge national infrastructure projects required to underpin the UK's place in the AI revolution, what does this turmoil mean for projects such as the Blackstone AI data centre in Cambois in Bedlingtonshire, in my constituency?

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend and I have previously talked about this great opportunity. The rapid development and breakthrough of new AI models such as DeepSeek tell us that we need to go further and faster to remove barriers to innovation and make Britain the most competitive market. We need to be developing the technology ourselves. That is why we have set out our new AI strategy and why we are scaling up our capacity, creating AI growth zones and putting in place every vehicle we can to support the growth of technology innovation in our country, because we will need it in future.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Our precious high street in Eastbourne is blighted by the dilapidated Debenhams building on Terminus Road, whose owner has left it empty for years, attracting antisocial behaviour and crime. Will the Minister meet me or support me to meet his colleagues from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Eastbourne borough council to discuss how we can use the new high street rental auction powers to force the owner to make that unit occupied again, so that we can regenerate our high street in the sunniest town in the UK?

**Gareth Thomas:** I have already met the hon. Gentleman to discuss some of the issues facing the high streets in his constituency. If he thinks I am the most appropriate Minister for that discussion, I am happy to make sure that it happens. He may actually want to discuss this particular issue with colleagues in MHCLG, whose attention I will draw to the question, because they and their officials are working much more closely on the implementation of the powers he mentions.

## Avian Influenza

10.38 am

**Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will make a statement on avian influenza.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes)**: Before I call the Minister, I give Members a brief reminder that laptop use in the Chamber is not permitted.

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner)**: Avian influenza is once again posing a threat to both kept and wild birds across the country, and supporting birdkeepers, the public and conservation bodies to manage and prepare for avian influenza continues to be one of our main priorities. Following the detection of highly pathogenic avian influenza in poultry and other captive birds this winter, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Animal and Plant Health Agency have stood up their well-established outbreak structures to control and eradicate disease, restore normal trade and assist local communities' recovery.

DEFRA's disease control measures seek to contain the number of animals that need to be culled, either for disease control purposes or to safeguard animal welfare, and our approach aims to reduce adverse impacts on the rural and wider economy, the public, rural communities and the environment, including the impact on wildlife, while protecting public health and minimising the overall cost of any outbreak. Our approach to avian influenza considers the latest scientific and ornithological evidence and veterinary advice. Current policy reflects our experience of responding to past outbreaks of exotic animal disease, and is in line with international standards of best practice for disease control.

All birdkeepers are urged to remain vigilant and take action to protect their birds from avian influenza. Scrupulous biosecurity by all birdkeepers at all times is essential to protect the health and welfare of flocks. In response to the heightened risk levels and escalating number of cases, an avian influenza prevention zone, mandating enhanced biosecurity, is in force across England, Wales and Scotland. In addition, mandatory housing for kept birds is in force across the unitary authority of the East Riding of Yorkshire, the unitary authority of York, the city of Kingston upon Hull and all districts in Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, North Yorkshire and Shropshire, to mitigate the risk of further outbreaks of disease occurring.

In areas where an AIPZ is in force, it is a legal requirement for all birdkeepers, whether they have pet birds, commercial flocks or just a few birds in a backyard flock, to follow strict biosecurity measures to limit the spread of, and eradicate, the disease, including—when mandatory housing measures are a requirement of an AIPZ—a requirement to keep their birds housed. The need for an AIPZ is kept under regular review as part of the Government's work to monitor and manage the risks of avian influenza. Together with the devolved Governments, we will closely monitor the need to extend mandatory housing to other areas of the country.

While avian influenza is primarily considered a disease of birds, it can infect humans, although this is a very rare event in the UK and the risk to the general public remains very low. Nevertheless, protecting public health remains of paramount importance, and DEFRA and the APHA work closely with regional UK Health Security Agency health protection teams to monitor the situation and provide health advice to persons at infected premises and those who have been in close contact with infected wildlife as a precaution. As a further reassurance, the Food Standards Agency has confirmed that avian influenza poses a very low food safety risk for UK consumers. Properly cooked poultry and poultry products, including eggs, are safe to eat.

DEFRA and the APHA will continue to work with birdkeepers, who are on the frontline of this terrible disease. Compensation is paid for any healthy kept birds culled. As the House will know, compensation was updated to involve earlier assessment of the number of healthy birds and swifter calculation of compensation. That allows DEFRA to provide earlier certainty about entitlement to compensation, better reflects the impact of outbreaks on premises, and leads to swifter payments to help to stem any cash-flow pressures.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: Order. I am sure that the Minister has concluded his remarks. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Victoria Atkins**: This is a very difficult time for birdkeepers and farmers, particularly those whose birds have died or been culled, and all those who have had to upend their flocks and move them inside, given the impact that doing so can have on both the mental and economic resilience of individuals. I thank everyone who is involved in tackling avian influenza, and is working tirelessly to prevent the spread of this disease, including in my constituency.

I thank the Minister for his response. I regret that the Secretary of State has not made an oral statement on this important matter; particularly in the light of the revelation that a farm worker has been infected with avian influenza, I would have thought that the Secretary of State would have thought to update the House. However, we have managed to secure this urgent question, for which I am grateful. On the subject of the farm worker infected with the virus in the west midlands, first, how is this person? Have they recovered, and has anyone else been infected? What are the wider risks to human health?

Elsewhere, one of the largest and most modern egg-laying sites in the country has been affected, with more than a million birds being culled. Given the site's significant role in processing the UK's barn egg production, what discussions is the Minister having with the sector to mitigate the impact on supply? Will he please update us on his discussions with the devolved Governments about introducing similar restrictions to those in England? Of course birds, and indeed viruses, do not recognise borders. How is he ensuring that compensation is made without delay, and how much is it costing? Is the Department keeping the scheme under review, including the loss of profit for farmers and the conservation impacts for zoos housing rare and critically endangered species, such as the Bali starling at Battersea zoo, which I visited this week?

We are also concerned by reports that the avian influenza vaccination taskforce has stalled. Is that correct and, if so, why? Finally, DEFRA Ministers—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. The shadow Minister is trying my patience. We have a lot of business to get through today, and time limits are there for a reason. I call the Minister.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank the shadow Secretary of State for her important questions. First, I reassure her and the House that the individual in question is, in my understanding, making a full recovery, but obviously we want to ensure that no one is put at undue risk. The advice is clear: the only people at risk are those who are in very close proximity. People should follow the guidance and advice.

On mitigating sector supply, my understanding is there is sufficient supply within the system. Although the right hon. Member is absolutely right to raise the point that it was a significant and large producer that was affected, we are confident that supply is secure. On working with the devolved Administrations, my officials are in regular contact, as I said in my opening statement. The situation is being constantly monitored.

The right hon. Member will be familiar with the compensation arrangements because they are the same as when she and her colleagues were in government. They are designed to control the disease, but of course they are also absolutely important to secure cash flow for farmers.

**Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab):** My recollection from previous bouts of avian influenza is that there were serious problems with delays and with compensation, because farmers who were trying to do a preventive cull of their birds had to wait for an inspection to take place, and if that inspection had not taken place, compensation would not be given. Therefore, some birds died from avian influenza that should have been culled, and some birds did not die but the compensation was not paid. I would be grateful if the Minister updated the House on exactly what the new arrangements for compensation will be.

**Daniel Zeichner:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will recall the terrible outbreak a few years ago when exactly those questions were raised and, as the shadow Minister, I asked similar questions at the time. The compensation arrangements were changed by the previous Government in a beneficial way, and I am absolutely confident at the moment that the delays we saw before are not happening. But he raises an important point: anyone who has a suspicion of an outbreak should report it as soon as possible, and they should not be concerned that they will suffer detriment from so doing.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD):** Farmers and vets will remember the 2022 outbreak, which was the biggest we had seen in the UK and which killed millions of birds worldwide, so this new outbreak is of huge concern for three major reasons.

First, there is the impact on animal welfare, not just the birds catching avian influenza and dying or being culled, but their having to be kept inside rather than being free range. Secondly, there is the impact on farmers, their businesses and their mental health. As with any notifiable disease, this is hugely stressful, and it is hugely disruptive to business models. What are we doing to ensure that compensation and support are given to farmers quickly? Thirdly, there is a huge potential impact on public health. While we fully understand that there is a low public health risk at the moment—this is a disease of birds—we have just come out of covid-19. We know that if someone is infected with human flu and potentially gets infected with avian influenza, there is a risk that it becomes more infectious to humans. What discussions is the Minister having with APHA and the Department of Health and Social Care to monitor the genotypes?

**Daniel Zeichner:** Let me deal first with the second of those two questions. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Of course there is concern, but I can assure him and the House that the advice from the UK Health Security Agency is that avian influenza is primarily a disease of birds, and the risk to the health of the general public is very low. However, of course we are monitoring it, and genetic testing and sequencing is available to us for that. He is right about the impact on bird keepers and on farmers. It is why the compensation scheme is in place and working. We absolutely recognise the pressures on people and the effect on their mental health.

**Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab):** Has the Minister assessed the Conservative Government's underspend of the agriculture budget?

**Daniel Zeichner:** We have indeed assessed it. Of course, it is extraordinary that that happened. In terms of what we are doing, the system is well resourced to deal with these outbreaks, and we work in a cross-party way on that.

**Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con):** This outbreak is concerning for the whole of Norfolk, and particularly for the bird-rearers in Broadland and Fakenham, but it highlights the critical importance of the Animal and Plant Health Agency in New Haw, and the plan for its full redevelopment. Do the Government agree that that redevelopment is long overdue, and if so, will they commit to supporting it?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank my hon. Friend—and he is a friend—for his concern. Of course, this is of particular concern and interest to representatives from the east of England, and I share that concern. We have discussed the future of Weybridge and the investment many times before. I gently point out that the Conservative Government had the opportunity over 14 years to make that investment. Over £200 million has been allocated by this Government, and we will continue to make sure that the agency is properly resourced.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):** I do not think anybody would disagree with the comments by the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) about the redevelopment of the facility

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

at Weybridge, but I suspect that once avian influenza is in the wild bird population, as it is here, even the best facility in the world will struggle to contain it. On disease containment, I remember the absolutely heartbreaking experience of walking along beaches in Orkney and seeing dead body after dead body. Is the Minister engaging with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and other major organisations so that he can at least be aware of the impact on the wild bird population?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee, who is absolutely right. We have heard harrowing accounts in this Chamber of the experiences in Members' local communities—the situation with wild birds is awful. Of course, officials and I are constantly in dialogue with those organisations, but the truth is that in the wild bird population there is not much we can do about it.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I have one of the UK's largest egg producers in my constituency. However, the other trend is that more birds are being kept in a domestic situation—hens, geese and ducks. How are the Government monitoring those who are not professional bird keepers and ensuring that such situations are also subject to the necessary control and regulation?

**Daniel Zeichner:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The importance of biosecurity cannot be overstressed—that is the way to tackle this. He is also right to say that amateurs and small bird keepers are important, and that is why they were brought within the registration scheme, which is beneficial and welcome.

**Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Scientists at the University of Glasgow found last month that avian influenza can spread to horses without any symptoms. Will the Minister clarify how the Government are monitoring the spread of the virus among other species?

**Daniel Zeichner:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right: we need to be very careful about that. I can assure her that those are exactly the kinds of discussions that I am having with officials. We are tracking that and have the technology these days to look closely at what is going on. I will not go into the expert account on the Floor of the House of how the serotype works, but I am happy to put her in contact with officials if she needs more information.

**Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his update to the House about the spread of avian flu. I want to ask a couple questions. First, as this is happening in cities as much as in rural areas, how are people who live in cities being made aware that they should look out for dead or dying birds so that we can get a more accurate reflection of where it is spreading? Secondly, what discussions has he had with Departments of the Scottish Government to ensure that we have reliable and up-to-date data across these islands?

**Daniel Zeichner:** The hon. Gentleman makes strong points. I think there is general awareness of, and concern about, what is going on. It is important to say to people

that, if they have concerns and they see such things, they should report them. On our work with the devolved Administrations, we have a very strong structure that allows all the devolved Administrations to be involved so that we have a consistent framework.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Again, we rely on the facilities at the Animal and Plant Health Agency, based in New Haw in my constituency, and we thank it for its work. A few weeks ago, I asked the Minister if he would visit the site with me to see for himself the work that needs to be done and the urgent need for massive investment in the site. Do we have to wait until the next urgent question or statement before he will take me up on my offer?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his invitation. I have had numerous invitations. Last week, I was in Northumberland looking at rural crime, and this week I was at the Fenland SOIL—sustainability, opportunity, innovation, learning—conference. I will add the hon. Gentleman's invitation to my list.

**Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): For my daughter's second birthday, I took her to the wonderful Birdland in Gloucestershire, which has hundreds of different exotic and rare birds. Could the Minister please tell me how he is going to support that type of business model and how he is going to keep staff and visitors safe?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his important question. Everything we do to stop the spread will help businesses such as the one he described. Some specific rules and regulations also apply in those particular cases, which I can make available to him if he wishes.

**Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Does the Minister accept that avian influenza represents an existential threat to businesses such as Kelly Turkeys in my constituency? Paul Kelly has called this the covid of the poultry industry. Does the Minister accept that it is likely, as with covid, that the only way forward will be vaccination?

**Daniel Zeichner:** The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. As he will be aware, significant international trade issues are involved, but as we look to a world in which we seem to have more and more of these cases, that is certainly something that we keep under consideration.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank the Government for their strong and fast response, which I know will be a big reassurance for lots of the farming communities impacted. May I ask the Minister to provide a bit more detail about the support we are giving not just to those who are directly impacted now, but to those who are understandably very deeply concerned about what this may mean for their businesses over the coming months?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank my hon. Friend for his very important question. I can assure him that an entire apparatus is in place to ensure that all reassurance can be given to the kind of businesses that the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) described. From an animal welfare point of view, we will ensure that everybody involved in the sector has the kind of



advice and support that is needed. If my hon. Friend has colleagues who wish to look at the advice, they should look at the webpages available on Government websites, which are significant and thorough. If people need advice, they should not hesitate to come to my officials or to me, and we will point them in the right direction.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his response to the urgent question. Poultry and egg production contributes significantly to the Northern Ireland economy—it is valued at some £600 million—so it is little wonder that the agricultural community has great concerns. What discussions has the Minister had with the devolved nations, particularly the Northern Ireland Assembly, about putting in place the support that is needed, taking into account that wild bird cases have been found in the last two weeks in Northern Ireland?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am, as ever, grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue as it impacts Northern Ireland. We have been developing a UK-wide response to this, and my officials are in constant contact with officials from his Administration. We will ensure that this UK-wide response continues to be in place, because it is very important that we work together on all these issues. I hope in the not-too-distant future to continue my tour of the country, and I very much look forward to taking up his long-standing invitation—not only to Stormont, where I have been before, but to his fishing sector—and the very warm welcome that I know I will receive.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. The sitting is suspended.

10.59 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Women's Health Strategy

11.3 am

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the women's health strategy.

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):** I thank the hon. Lady for giving me the opportunity to set out our commitment to the women's health strategy and everything that this Government are doing to fix our broken NHS, clean up the mess that the Conservatives left after 14 years and get women treated on time again.

When we came into office we inherited record waiting lists. The gynaecology waiting list stood at just under 600,000 women. Let that sink in—600,000 women in pain, waiting to be cared for. Almost half the women on gynaecology waiting lists are waiting more than 18 weeks. That is why the Prime Minister kicked off 2025 with our elective reform plan, setting out how we will cut the longest waiting lists from 18 months to 18 weeks. Our new agreement with the independent sector will mean that, where there is spare capacity in the private sector, women will be treated faster for gynaecology care, paid for by the state.

The Government are also committed to rooting out the appalling inequalities in maternity care. We are supporting failing trusts to make rapid improvements, training thousands more midwives for the first time, and we will set an explicit target to close the black and Asian maternal mortality gap. We are piloting a training programme to help avoid brain injury for babies in childbirth and, if successful, we will crack on with rolling it out nationally this year. In October, we extended the baby loss certificate service to help mums and dads who have suffered the heartbreak of pregnancy loss.

Let me also address the issue of women's health hubs. There was a target in last year's planning guidance to roll out pilot women's health hubs across the country by last December. Today, there are at least 80 hubs, and at least nine out of every 10 integrated care systems have an open women's health hub.

Let me correct some fake news. We are not closing these hubs; we are not cutting them. The target to roll them out was in last year's planning guidance. It was achieved in 93% of integrated care systems, which is why the target is not repeated in this year's guidance—it has been met in 39 out of 42 areas.

Today, we have slimmed down the number of targets for the NHS so that we can focus on fixing the fundamentals—the system that the previous Government broke. We are instructing the NHS to prioritise: cutting waiting times for operations, A&E and ambulances; making it easier for people to see a GP or a dentist; and improving the mental health of the nation. That will mean around 60,000 women with suspected cancer are diagnosed earlier and treated faster; more than 200,000 extra women will be treated within 18 weeks, as we drive down long waits; and fewer women will be forced to wait 12 hours in A&E. That is the difference that a Labour Government are making to women's health.

**Mims Davies:** For too long, a woman's experience of the health service has been one of being pushed from pillar to post. Crucially, women's voices have been ignored

[Mims Davies]

and responses to their pain, suffering, poor sex lives and traumatic births have been too slow. Overall, women have a sense of being forgotten. Some 2.4 million more women were in work under our Conservative Government. Pain and suffering were affecting too many women and their ability to remain in the labour market, resulting in early retirement or not having their true career potential fulfilled.

We took direct action, crucially, by listening to women's experiences. We had almost 100,000 responses to our call for evidence on the gender health gap. We appointed Dame Lesley Regan as the woman's health ambassador, and Helen Tomlinson as the cross-government menopause ambassador to find out the experience of women employed in different sectors. We delivered and funded new women's health hubs and created joined-up services in the community. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists estimates that removing the requirement of integrated care boards to have a woman's health hub will impact 600,000 women on waiting lists in England, creating longer waits, disease progression that could be prevented, and resulting in more women attending A&E, unable to work, care or live a fulfilled life.

Labour's manifesto said that it will prioritise women's health. Women are now reported to be a lobby group, relegated to being unheard once again. Will the Minister confirm whether it is true that the targets to deal with women's needs will be dropped? If so, what is her justification for that? Will she be delivering on the roundly welcomed women's health strategy from 2022?

A total of 1,300 families gave evidence to the all-party group on birth trauma. What are the plans to drive up maternity safety standards across the country? Will there be a response to that? Will Dame Lesley Regan be sacked, will she remain the women's health ambassador, or will she be replaced, as Helen Tomlinson was, by someone who seems more interested in selling books than in delivering on the ground for women? What steps are being taken on sex-specific language in health communications and guidance—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. The shadow Minister will know that there is a time limit, which she has exceeded. I have been very generous. I call the Minister.

**Karin Smyth:** I addressed most of those points in my outline statement. I think the shadow Minister wrote her comments when the Opposition thought that we were cancelling things, only to find out that we are not cancelling things. I have made clear our commitment to the women's health strategy and how we seek to instruct the system at a local level to serve the needs of women and particularly prioritise those waiting lists. As I have outlined, the targets have already been achieved. Unusually, I will give a bit of credit to the other side, because a lot of this was rolled out and it was good practice, and the system still thinks that it is good practice, so sometimes Opposition Members should take a win. We are committed to that, it is embedded in the system, and we look forward to outcomes being improved for women.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

**Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab):** The Committee report on women's reproductive health, started under our fantastic predecessors, laid out how medical misogyny has left far too many women suffering. Women have been left undiagnosed for debilitating conditions such as endometriosis for an average of eight years—not for treatment, for diagnosis. Black women are four to five times more likely to die during childbirth, and the rate of maternal death in the UK has risen by 15% in the last 10 years. The leading cause of that is suicide, accounting for 39% of deaths in the first year postpartum. Does the Minister therefore agree that women, and women of colour especially, have borne the brunt too often of 14 years of disastrous health policies? How can the Government reverse this trend?

**Karin Smyth:** I thank the Committee Chair for her question. I think she was congratulating the previous Committee and Chair rather than those who are now in opposition. I was very pleased to witness some of that work when we were in opposition, and she is absolutely right about it. The work of many women Members when in opposition, and, to be fair, of many women in the previous Government, have made sure that issues around endometriosis have risen up the agenda; indeed, we had a good debate in the Chamber recently. We are committed to taking forward the strategy. We think the health hubs, for example, are doing a good job, but there is a lot of learning to be done on them, and we will continue to do that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD):** Nearly 600,000 women are waiting for treatment on gynaecology waiting lists in England; the longest waits are leading to preventable diseases progressing and it is one of the worst specialties for long waits. The Care Quality Commission has investigated and reported that 65% of maternity units are not as safe as they should be. That high number could almost be considered a public health crisis, and it has led to the highest amount of negligent payouts due to avoidable injury and even death. This absolutely needs to be addressed.

Many women, such as my partner Emma, have had to fight for years to get just a diagnosis for endometriosis, let alone any treatment, having been told for years that the symptoms are completely normal and do not need investigating. In the Government's—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I know I am being difficult on time limits, but the Liberal Democrat spokesperson should have one minute in an urgent question, which the hon. Gentleman has already far exceeded. Perhaps he will come up with a question in one sentence for the Minister.

**Dr Chambers:** Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yes, in one sentence: the Government's manifesto rightly said that

“Never again will women's health be neglected”.

Can we have assurances that we will not remove the ICB requirement to have women's health hubs?

**Karin Smyth:** The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight those long waits. That is why we particularly highlighted gynaecology for attention in the elective reform plan.

It is shocking that the last Government left 600,000 women on these lists, and moving back to making sure people wait no longer than 18 weeks will predominantly be helping those women.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to highlight the appalling maternity situation. The Secretary of State and my noble Friend Baroness Merron, who leads in this area, have met many families to discuss their experiences, and we know those experiences are unacceptable. We know there are big issues around staffing, and it is a priority to work with NHS England to make sure that we grow workforce capacity as quickly as possible so that we can be sure that those situations are safe. There are many debates in this place about the issue and we will continue to update the House.

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Under the last Government, five times more research went into erectile dysfunction, which affects 19% of men, than went into premenstrual syndrome, which affects 90% of women. Women are waiting more than eight years for endometriosis diagnoses. GPs are not required to undertake a gynaecological rotation within their training. Women's health must be put at the head of our agenda. Will the Minister assure women in this country that things will change under this Government?

**Karin Smyth:** I absolutely will give my hon. Friend that assurance. The situation will change partly because there are more people like her and more women in this place. We have more women across all parties raising this issue and more women in senior positions in the National Institute for Health and Care Research. Crucially, we have women leading in science and research. Dealing with the misogyny around the system and in medical systems is also important for making sure that women lead this work. We want to make sure that the NIHR, which has a strategy to address this issue, rectifies the situation that she outlines.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the Ockenden report back in 2022, which highlighted the tragic cases of more than 200 mothers and babies who were killed over a period of years at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust. Donna Ockenden recently returned to the trust and said that she was surprised and disappointed to hear from those parents and families affected that the trust had not been communicating as well as it should have been and had not been updating the families in a timely manner. Does the Minister agree not only that communication is key, but also that reviews, such as those undertaken by Donna Ockenden, should have the remit to go back to check and monitor the progress of maternity services that are either improving or not?

**Karin Smyth:** I completely agree with the right hon. Member. Donna Ockenden's work is hugely valuable, and a lot of faith and trust has been placed in it, particularly by families. I do not know specific dates, but the Secretary of State and my noble Friend Baroness Merron, who leads on this work, have been discussing the matter with Donna Ockenden. I am happy to get back to the right hon. Member with the details.

On the specific point about the remit, I do not know the answer to that question. It is entirely sensible to look at progress and learn from mistakes. I know it is a

challenge system, and we have to learn from those areas. If there are specific things to report back to the right hon. Member, I will get back to him, but this issue is absolutely a priority. The Secretary of State is meeting families directly. We know and understand that we have to do much better on this for everybody.

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): Having listened to the shadow Minister, I am slightly tempted to suggest to the Minister that our women's health strategy include provision for the treatment of collective memory loss. The shadow Minister completely ignored the fact that the Tories let our NHS fall into disrepute over the past 14 years.

I want to ask specifically about how our health strategy will deal with treatment and support for young people, particularly young women, suffering from depression and anxiety. That follows a tragic case in my constituency and a coroner's report last week, which found that our local hospital was not able to support that patient.

**Karin Smyth:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight some tragic incidents, and I know she will be working hard on behalf of her constituents. We are absolutely committed to the women's health strategy. Clearly, that will be taken forward as part of the 10-year plan, and it is an important part of that. I met my noble Friend Baroness Merron yesterday and the team supporting that plan to make sure that we understand how those key issues are taken forward.

This is an opportunity, if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, to say that the consultation on that plan is still open for ideas. We are keen to hear in particular from young people to make sure that we get a true representation. These sorts of things are not often consulted on, so we encourage young people and people who are suffering from depression and mental health issues to contribute their thoughts about the system they face as part of our 10-year plan consultation.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am sure we all welcome the move to reduce waiting lists and recognise that the women's health strategy is a 10-year plan. But given the enormous problems highlighted by the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), does the Minister appreciate that, to many women who are having trouble accessing often fragmented gynaecological services, it will seem like a vital facility is about to be lost and that the Government's promises of "never again" will sound hollow? What will the Government do to reassure all the women who are concerned about this move?

**Karin Smyth:** I am not entirely clear what the hon. Member is referring to. I have been clear that we are committed to the women's health strategy, and we will take it forward as part of the 10-year plan. Most of the—*[Interruption.]* If it was about the women's health hubs, they are mainly there but in different forms and with different levels of services. We want to ensure that the systems reflect their local population needs. That is an entirely proper way to go about things.

As I said, unusually, we think that many of the hubs, which were rolled out as pilots under the previous Administration, are doing a good job in most areas—although not everywhere, so we want to learn from the pilots. Our commitment is absolutely to women. That is

[Karin Smyth]

why gynaecology waiting lists are particularly targeted: we had 600,000 women on them. Women should feel really assured about the support that the Government are giving them and their health, to prioritise their health. We are keen to learn more about women's health hubs. They will be different in different places because they have different populations, and that is entirely in keeping with the direction of travel of the Government.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) for her work in raising the serious health inequalities that women across the UK face every single day. Does the Minister agree that we need more expertise in women's health issues in primary care settings to ensure early diagnosis and that women get the treatment they need at the earliest point?

**Karin Smyth:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about both the work of the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), and the importance of primary and community care recognising, listening to and supporting women through women's health, as well as making sure that our knowledge and good practice is spread across the team. This is an area where different systems have women's health hubs using different teams and different technology, and they have different links to secondary care colleagues and specialist colleagues. By listening to each other and working together, they are so good at spreading some of that good practice.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I welcome the Minister coming to the House to answer the urgent question, because the argument she is putting forward seems slightly confused. First, women's health hubs seem to be working on the whole, and there are lots of them, so why remove the target for everybody to have them if we are already 90% there? Secondly, many of the hubs seem to be doing good work, and best practice is clearly emerging, so why cancel the target for the programme rather than spread that good practice throughout the system? I think the broad question from the Opposition is: why remove the targets specifically relating to women from the Government's agenda going forward? It feels to many women and to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which has been in contact with me, that that downgrades the status of women in the NHS.

**Karin Smyth:** I will try to be brief, but this is hard to explain—[*Interruption.*] No, this is to answer the right hon. Gentleman. Targets in the NHS have not been met since 2015, which was under his Government's watch but, actually, this target has been met—there are only three places in the country that do not have a hub—so there is no target for them because that has already been met. The issue now is to look at the outcomes from those hubs to see how they are performing. We think, and the system thinks, that they do a good job. That is why they are staying, why we are committed to them, and why we want to learn from them.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Bedford hospital once had a gold-standard home-birth service, but in recent months it has been run down within the wider

trust due to unfilled vacancies. Many of my constituents are concerned at the prospect of losing that service, which puts women's needs and health choices first. Will the women's health strategy ensure that women can access a consistent midwifery service that provides genuine choice for safe home births?

**Karin Smyth:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about maternity services, which are inconsistent and not good enough around the country. It is a source of great alarm for many people. Maternity absolutely remains a high priority within the overall women's health strategy.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): If you are black and having a baby, you are more than three times more likely to die than if you are white and having a baby. I am sure that the Minister and Members across the House will agree that that is a national disgrace. I was encouraged to hear the Minister mention a target for maternal mortality disparity in her opening remarks, but I would be grateful if she could confirm that the elimination of that disparity is the target and update the House on when the NHS plans to achieve that.

**Karin Smyth:** The hon. Lady makes the point about using targets. This is something that is a high priority, but it is not happening. That is absolutely why I mentioned it in my opening comments—to ensure that that happens.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): Forty years ago this month, my wife almost died of an eclamptic seizure because a general practitioner had failed to recognise the symptoms of pre-eclampsia. According to the most recent report on pre-eclampsia, four times as many women are dying of pre-eclampsia today than were dying in 2012. That is an absolute disgrace. If men got pre-eclampsia, they would have solved the problem many, many years ago. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Will the Minister assure me and everyone else that the women's health strategy will focus on pre-eclampsia, and try to finally find a solution?

**Karin Smyth:** My hon. Friend makes a very powerful case and talks of an experience that he and his wife went through forty years ago, which highlights that it can sometimes take an unacceptably long time to get what is known as good practice through the system and to have that consistency for women and their families across the overall system. We absolutely need to ensure that maternity services understand best practice and that it is rolled out properly across the country.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): In an earlier answer, the Minister rightly talked about the arrangement the Government have over spare capacity in the independent sector. My female constituents and women up and down the land want to know what that actually means in practice: what does that mean for the 260,000 women waiting more than 18 weeks for gynaecology treatment? How many treatments will the independent sector be delivering, and to what timescale? We need to get those women the treatment that they need.

**Karin Smyth:** The hon. Gentleman can tell his women constituents what I hope everyone across the House will be able to tell their constituents: this Government inherited

600,000 women on those waiting lists, and we are committed—as said in our elective reform plan, which highlighted gynaecology in particular—to getting those waiting lists down from 18 months to 18 weeks in the lifetime of this Parliament.

**Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): I represent almost 40,000 women, and they and the men who love them would invite the Minister to state explicitly that the Government will not draw down their access to women's health hubs or remove their women's health targets.

**Karin Smyth**: I have made that commitment several times from this Dispatch Box. We think the women's health hubs are working across the country—I do not know exactly how the hon. Gentleman's hub is working at the moment. Only three areas do not have a women's health hub, and we expect them to get on with that and have one. We will ensure we have the learning from them across the country.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Minister got her tone wrong in dealing with this urgent question. If a Minister turns up late for a UQ, the least they can do is take the questions from the Opposition Front Bench seriously.

Amanda Pritchard, the CEO of NHS England, has said that the health service does not “always have the needs of women at its heart.”

What message do the Government think scrapping women's health targets will send?

**Karin Smyth**: The chief executive is right that the previous Government did not have women's health at the heart of their strategy, and that is why we do.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV, AIDS and sexual health, may I ask the Minister about the very low take-up of pre-exposure prophylaxis among women in the UK? What steps are being taken to change that? Obviously, there are barriers such as stigma and low levels of information, but does she agree that PrEP should not just be made available in sexual health settings, particularly as we have had the roll-out of opt-out testing?

**Karin Smyth**: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the work he does in this area. He does an excellent job and makes an excellent point. I do not know the detailed

answer to that question—it is not directly my area—but I am very happy to make sure that we write to him.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her answers. The women's health survey for Northern Ireland closes tomorrow. Through it, the Department of Health back home is hoping to have a greater understanding of how government fails women. The results of this Northern Ireland-wide project will ensure the Department will be able to find the areas that are lacking, in particular endometriosis support. Will the Minister make contact with the Northern Ireland Assembly to discuss the health strategy and to share the results and the data, so that the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly back home can work better together to make women's health better across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**Karin Smyth**: As I hope the hon. Gentleman knows, I think the health needs of women in Northern Ireland and the waiting lists there are particularly problematic, so finding out anything our Department can do to support or share learning across the United Kingdom is a personal commitment of mine. I will absolutely make sure that we do that. I am happy to meet, talk or even visit, which I always like doing.

**Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On this incredibly important issue of the women's health strategy, and the fact that the word “woman” has been excluded from the updated planning guidance, could you help me understand this? As a common courtesy to both you and the House, when a Minister is unable to organise herself such that she can get to the Chamber on time, is it not courteous to apologise to those of us she has kept waiting before we were able to discuss this important subject?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order. She is, of course, correct that it is courteous to the House for an apology to be made. Five minutes of time was wasted this morning. I think the Minister would like to make a further point of order.

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth)**: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I absolutely, unequivocally apologise.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I thank the Minister.

## Business of the House

11.32 am

**Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell):** I shall. The business for the week commencing 3 February includes:

MONDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill.

TUESDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Debate on motions to approve the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2025 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2025, followed by debate on motions to approve the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments, National Insurance Funds Payments and Extension of Veteran's Relief) Regulations 2025 and the draft Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Order 2025.

WEDNESDAY 5 FEBRUARY—Motions related to the police grant and local government finance reports.

THURSDAY 6 FEBRUARY—General debate on Government support for coalfield communities, followed by a general debate on financial education. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 10 February will include:

MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

TUESDAY 11 FEBRUARY—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Arbitration Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 12 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Data (Use and Access) Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY—General debate. Subject to be announced.

The House will rise for the February recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 13 February and return on Monday 24 February.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Before I call Joy Morrissey, I think it appropriate to wish her a happy birthday.

**Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I hope that the House will join me in offering thoughts and prayers for victims and their families following the collision this morning when an American Airlines plane crashed into the Potomac following a collision; but I believe that the Leader of the House will join me in rejoicing at the return of more of the Israeli hostages today.

It is an honour to respond to the right hon. Lady. Serving with her on the Modernisation Committee, I have observed the energy that she puts into bringing this House into the second quarter of the 21st century. We are lucky to have someone so persuasive in her position, someone who really listens to Members. [HON. MEMBERS: "But—"] No buts, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I approach this session of business questions in that spirit. One innovation that would be very welcome would be a commitment from the Leader of the House to providing our dates for Opposition day debates, which we have still not received. Another extremely welcome innovation would be the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero finding time to reply to numerous letters sent by Opposition Members; perhaps the Leader of the House could persuade him to do so, but perhaps she would have more luck with the Chancellor.

As each week passes, our constituents face more and more negative consequences from the Chancellor's disastrous Budget. Last week the Office for National Statistics revealed that there had been a staggering 47,000 drop in employment in December, the sharpest fall since the pandemic. Job vacancies have also collapsed. The day before the Chancellor's Budget, in which she launched her attack on British businesses, there were 858,000 job vacancies in our economy; now the number has fallen to just 740,000, a drop of 14% in just two months. I know that she is proud of being the first female Chancellor, but would it not be even better for her to be known as the Chancellor who was brave enough to change course? Because of her Budget, business confidence has collapsed. Because of her Budget, growth has collapsed. Because of her Budget, employment is falling and unemployment is rising. Because of her Budget, UK gilt yields are at an eye-watering level. Because of her Budget, mortgage rates are now rising, despite her promise that she would bring them down.

We have seen a glimmer of hope with the Chancellor's U-turn on her non-doms policy, which has caused some of the UK's biggest taxpayers to flee her socialist nightmare. It is a welcome U-turn, but I feel for the Leader of the House and for Labour Members. I cannot imagine that they ever thought they would be explaining why a Labour Government had U-turned on punishing non-doms, but not on punishing pensioners. Will the Leader of the House seek to persuade the Chancellor to be bold, change course again, and spare British pensioners, farmers, businesses, workers and households from more economic pain?

May we have a debate in Government time to explore the many areas in which a Chancellor U-turn would indeed be welcome? If not, will the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to be bold and U-turn on punishing pensioners, and reinstate their winter fuel payment? Will she ask the Chancellor to be bold and U-turn to spare family farms that have put food on our tables from her tax raid? Will she ask the Chancellor to be bold and U-turn to save businesses that create jobs, wealth and growth in this country from her catastrophic national insurance tax raid? Will she ask the Chancellor to be bold and U-turn on her 1970s-style tax and borrowing spree, to protect the households that now face rising mortgage costs because of her? That is a task that I hope the Leader of the House will agree is in the interests of the House, its Members, and the people of this country.

**Lucy Powell:** All our thoughts are with those affected by the air crash in Washington DC. The scale of this tragedy is still unfolding, and we send our deepest sympathies to all those involved and those still carrying out the rescue operation.

This week saw the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. No one could ever forget visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau, as I did with young people from my constituency

with the Holocaust Educational Trust. We must never forget. I join the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) in welcoming the further release of hostages in Israel and Gaza today.

Members will have noticed that Mr Speaker is not in his Chair today. I can assure them that he is not taking up a new acting role on the set of “Emmerdale”. He is instead celebrating the life of another northern legend, at the funeral of Lord Prescott.

I welcome the hon. Member for Beaconsfield to business questions, on her birthday. I very much welcome working with her on the Modernisation Committee. I have found her contributions to be greatly valuable and enlightening, and I know she does a really good job as a Whip and a constituency MP, supporting colleagues across the House. Given her contribution today, she could perhaps give a few tips to the shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), when he returns, because she has taken a very business questions-style approach. I will follow up with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero if there are issues with correspondence.

The hon. Lady raised issues around the economy. I will gently remind her of a few stats. Inflation is down now, thanks to this Government. Wages are growing at their fastest rate in three years. We have created more than 70,000 jobs since we came into office, and business investment is at its highest level in 19 years. PwC has just rated the UK the second best place in the world to invest after the US. The International Monetary Fund and the OECD both predict that Britain will be Europe’s fastest-growing major economy in recent years.

This Government are getting on with the job, and it has been another week of delivering the change that people voted for. The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill will be introduced today, with real action to tackle small boats and smuggling gangs, in contrast to the Conservatives’ costly Rwanda gimmick. The Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill gets its Second Reading next week. Despite promises from the Conservative party, it failed to bring that forward. That important piece of legislation will address the huge cost of fraud in our welfare system.

We have taken major strides to get growth going, taking the difficult, bold decisions that the hon. Lady asked for, many of them on issues that have been raised in business questions over recent weeks. They include the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, creating the UK’s answer to silicon valley; the redevelopment of the huge site around the Old Trafford football ground, which even I can welcome, as a City fan; and, thanks to the tireless campaigning of Mr Doncaster Airport himself, my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), and my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson), their airport is set to become thriving once again. We are backing airport expansion across the congested south-east.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) will be over the moon that we are investing in Cornwall’s mineral industry, which he has raised with me many times. We are giving the go-ahead to the lower Thames crossing, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) has long championed and raised with me. We are supporting Port Talbot and Teesside through the advanced fuels fund and Wrexham and Flintshire through the advanced

manufacturing investment zone. We are building nine reservoirs—the first in 30 years—to provide water for new homes.

We are reviewing the Green Book, to enable better public investment and growth outside London and the south-east. We are taking difficult decisions, some of which the hon. Member for Beaconsfield raised, because we had to fix the foundations to get our country growing again, so that we can invest in the public services that people desperately need and voted for at the last election.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): Brent is known as the reggae capital of Europe. Bob Marley wrote some of his best hits there, and we have Janet Kay and Carroll Thompson, who celebrate their birthdays this week, too. Today, in the Jubilee Room, we will be honouring one of the lead singers of Boney M, Liz Mitchell. As people will know, the band’s hits include “Daddy Cool”, “Rasputin” and “Rivers of Babylon”.

**Adam Jjee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Sing it!

**Dawn Butler:** I would sing it, but my voice is a little bit croaky today.

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Liz Mitchell? Maybe we should have a debate in Government time about music and how it can be a unifier and bring about community cohesion.

**Lucy Powell:** I congratulate Brent on being the reggae capital. We can all recognise some of the great hits that my hon. Friend mentioned, and I am pleased that she is hosting an event today in the Jubilee Room for Liz Mitchell of Boney M. I cannot think of a decent pun on “Daddy Cool”, but my hon. Friend is definitely “Brent cool”. I watch her social media and TikToks, and she probably has a glittering career ahead of her in that regard.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): May I echo the words that have been spoken about the unfolding tragedy in Washington DC? My thoughts go out to all the victims and their families.

When I am out and about talking to people on the doorstep in my Chelmsford constituency, the issue of crime often comes up. That is not because Chelmsford is a criminal hotspot—far from it—but because of the often frustrating low-level crime that takes place, which concerns my constituents. They often say that they want to see more bobbies on the beat. They want to see more uniformed police patrolling our streets, making their presence felt, and reassuring the community by building relationships and deterring wannabe criminals. Much of that presence is provided by police community support officers, who work with police officers and share some of their powers. They do genuinely wonderful work that frees up precious police officer time for other and perhaps more complex policing issues. In short, they are very welcome and an important part of our communities.

In Essex there are 99 PCSOs, but not for much longer. Essex police have just announced that they are getting rid of all of them, as they face a £12.5 million budget shortfall for 2025-26. I doubt that Essex police will be the only force to consider such drastic action,

[Marie Goldman]

and I am sure that I am not alone in being extremely concerned about the implications of that decision. Will the Leader of the House consider asking the Home Secretary to make a statement on the effect on our communities, and on what can be done to salvage the situation before the experience of all these dedicated individuals is lost and society suffers as a consequence?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Lady for sending her thoughts to those affected by the air crash in Washington DC. She, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) and I are all members of the Modernisation Committee, and we represent three different parties. It is great to work with her on that Committee, and on the House of Commons Commission. As a new Member, she has really got to grips with some of the difficult issues that we face in this place.

I thank the hon. Lady for drawing attention to the challenges that her constituents face with bobbies on the beat in her area. She will know that the funding for Essex police will increase by £25 million next year, but I absolutely share her view that strengthening neighbourhood policing is vital for tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. We are committed to providing an additional 13,000 neighbourhood officers and PCSOs nationwide, but local decisions are a matter for local police. She can rest assured that after years of cuts to police forces, we are determined to recruit extra officers. I will certainly make sure that the Home Secretary has heard her question, and that she gets a full response about what is happening in her local area.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Flexible Engineered Solutions International in my constituency is an excellent example of a strong and successful business. It delivers projects in oil and gas, and in renewables. Last week, it hosted clients from Rio de Janeiro, and the Brazilians travelled on the newly reopened Northumberland line. They travelled 5,600 miles, and the new line was the last leg. It was fantastic. Can we have a debate in Government time on the strategic importance of good local transport infrastructure that allows people from places like Brazil easy access to constituencies such as Blyth and Ashington?

**Lucy Powell:** I am delighted that, after 60 years of closure, the Northumberland line was finally reopened last December. I would have loved to have been a passenger on that train, and to have heard how the conversation between my hon. Friend and the Brazilians flowed—or not, as the case might be. He is absolutely right that vital transport infrastructure, especially in our regions and in constituencies like his, is the bedrock of ensuring economic growth, prosperity, rising wages and good jobs for his constituents. I am delighted to support his call for that today.

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

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I am sure the whole House will express condolences to the victims at the Kumbh Mela in India who sadly lost their lives or were badly injured.

In addition to the business announced by the Leader of the House, there will be a debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 4 February on apprentices and Apprenticeship Week. On Thursday 6 February, there will be a debate on open access to rail services, followed by a debate on debt cancellation for low-income countries. On Tuesday 11 February, there will be a debate in Westminster Hall on the cost of energy. On Thursday 13 February, there will be a debate on HIV Testing Week, followed by a debate on the prevention of cardiovascular disease.

After the recess, on Tuesday 25 February, there will be a debate on maternity services, which we have heard about this morning. On Thursday 27 February, there will be a debate on rural crime, potentially followed by a debate on mental health support in educational settings.

We have a veritable queue of debates for the Chamber, so it is a bit disappointing that there will be a general debate in Government time next week. We have debates lined up that will take us through to the April recess. Will the Leader of the House give us an early indication of when the estimates day debates will be held? I ask because we have to consider applications for, and advertise, debates to be held in the week commencing 3 March.

Yesterday, I met representatives from Balochistan, Sindh and the Muttahida Qaumi movement in Pakistan. They recounted to me atrocities too horrible to describe, committed against minority communities. We give Pakistan millions of pounds in aid, money that appears to be diverted away from the communities that desperately need it. Can we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary or the Minister for Development on what will be done to make sure that our aid is concentrated on areas of Pakistan that desperately need it, and that human rights triumph and the money is used effectively?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for informing the House of the important debates that his Committee has allocated for the coming weeks. I think we have been very generous in allocating Backbench Business time in recent weeks, and we will continue to be so. We have been doing our best to announce business as far in advance as possible—sometimes three weeks in advance—which is unprecedented in recent times. I will ensure that he is made aware of when the estimates day debates are likely to be.

The hon. Gentleman raises important issues about Pakistan. As he will know from his very good attendance at business questions, the subject is regularly raised with me and other Ministers. The Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has recently raised a number of these matters with the Government of Pakistan, and I think it would make a good topic for an update statement to the House. I will ensure that Ministers have heard that call today.

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): Four Carlisle men, Rae Daly Armstrong, Ivan Cooke, William Lewis Johnston and Charles Ross, were among almost 500 casualties from the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit who served in the second world war. The casualty rate for that very small unit was the second highest in the war. When planning the debates and events in this House that will mark the 80th anniversary of the end of the second world war, will the Leader of the House give particular consideration to that small unit, which suffered such great losses during the war?



**Lucy Powell:** I am sure the whole House will join my hon. Friend in putting on record our thanks for those involved with the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit and its important work. As she will be aware, we have funding for a huge number of activities to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of the second world war. The Minister responsible will make a statement shortly about how that funding will be allocated and what activities will be involved. I will ensure that the Minister hears my hon. Friend's pleas for commemoration of the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit to be part of those activities.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for her further commitment to the development of aviation in the south-east, which I am sure will extend to the development of Manston airport in my constituency. It already has a development consent order and is, in common parlance, shovel-ready. During the debate on the Climate and Nature Bill last Friday, I raised the subject of public funding for the Drax power station, an environmentally wholly unacceptable operation. At Prime Minister's questions yesterday, the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) again raised the issue of Drax and pointed to a KPMG report that suggests that the funding for Drax had been claimed illegally. Can we have a debate on that report and on the funding of Drax in Government time?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the Government's commitment to alleviating passenger congestion in the south-east, and for his local airport's commitment to doing that, which I am sure we all welcome. He raises some serious matters, which were mentioned at Prime Minister's questions yesterday, about the Drax organisation and whether public funds have been used appropriately. This Government take such reports incredibly seriously, and I will ensure that the House is updated in due course.

**Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I too wish the shadow Minister a happy birthday. In October 2024, people from across Newcastle-under-Lyme came together for the unveiling of a wonderful statue of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in Queen's Gardens. There has been much talk of Heathrow airport in recent days. As our nation will mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of the late Queen in April 2026, will the Leader of the House back my calls to rename Heathrow after Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II? What a wonderful tribute that would be to a lifetime of service to the country and the Commonwealth.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that excellent idea with me. He is absolutely right that we need to appropriately mark the late Queen's extraordinary 70-year reign in a very big way, given all that she contributed to our public life and national identity. He will be aware that the Queen Elizabeth Memorial Committee has been set up to consider how best we could do that, and I will ensure that his suggestion is fed into that committee.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Yesterday, I re-established the all-party parliamentary group on freedom of speech. I am sure Members on the Government Front Bench will welcome that, given their

recent slight changes of opinion on free speech in higher education. Will the Leader of the House find space in Government time for a broader debate on freedom of speech, given that her neighbour, the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer), is the deputy chairman of the APPG? In addition, will she clarify what she said at the start of business questions about the lower Thames crossing getting the go-ahead? My understanding is that the development consent order has not yet been passed; in fact, it has been delayed twice. That clarity will be important for people in constituencies like mine, who are eagerly awaiting the Government's actions in that area.

**Lucy Powell:** The right hon. Gentleman will know that this Government are committed to free speech and to making sure that everybody has the ability to express themselves freely and without recourse. He might want to join my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer), to apply for a Backbench Business slot. We have had a number of urgent questions and statements to the House on those matters, but I will ensure that we are updated.

On the lower Thames crossing, the right hon. Gentleman will know that the Chancellor gave her commitment to that project in her speech yesterday. There is, as always with such matters, the quasi-judicial process that has to be gone through, which is a matter for the Secretary of State for Transport, but I will ensure that he is kept updated on that.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): Today, Lord Ericht has ruled that the consent for the Rosebank and Jackdaw oil and gas fields was granted unlawfully by the previous Government because they had failed to properly account for the effect on the climate of burning the fossil fuels that would be extracted. Can we have a debate on the future of the Rosebank and Jackdaw oil and gas fields and on the UK joining the countries that formed the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend will know that we have been clear that we will not challenge the judicial reviews in this case. We will consult on new guidance that takes into account the Supreme Court's ruling on environmental impact assessments to enable the industry to secure jobs and invest in the economy of the future. We aim to conclude that by the spring of this year and I will ensure that the House is updated.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The My Name's Doddie Foundation has told me that, aside from funding, motor neurone disease research needs a better regulatory framework to encourage investment into this country and to make it easier for UK citizens to take part in overseas trials. That research benefits not only the one in 300 who will develop MND but those who develop other neurodegenerative conditions, such as the many forms of dementia. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement to the House on that issue?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that issue, because people are still suffering, as are the families of those affected by MND. We need more research. We have some great campaigners, such as Kevin Sinfield, who have raised a huge amount of

[Lucy Powell]

money. The hon. Lady is right that access to trials and research is critical. I will ensure that she gets a ministerial update on what the Government are doing.

**Louise Jones** (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Constituents in the village of Killamarsh in my constituency, a community of just over 9,000 people, do not now have any access to cash—not even an ATM—in the village. Will the Minister grant a debate on access to cash in semi-rural communities and make sure that my constituents' voices are heard?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue for her constituents. It gets raised with me many times in business questions, because access to cash and making sure we have banking hubs in all our communities, which this Government are committed to doing, is critical to thriving market towns and high streets such as those in her constituency. We have already opened more than a hundred banking hubs, and I will ensure that she is updated, including on the banking hub in her constituency.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): A rail freight interchange is being proposed near Hinckley and Burbage in my constituency. Before Christmas, the Planning Inspectorate passed its judgment on it and the then Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh), said she was “minded to refuse” the application. However, in an unprecedented decision, the Department extended the call for further information, which closes in a couple of weeks' time. After yesterday's speech from the Chancellor, there is growing concern among my community that the project might be greenlighted.

In the light of that, while I know that the Leader of the House cannot comment specifically on that case, will she write to the new Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander), to make sure that all protocols are followed as they are written? May we have a debate in Government time on having a joined-up national strategy on rail freight interchanges and where they are placed?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising what I am sure is a huge issue for his constituents. He is right that I cannot comment on the specifics of the case, but I know that the Secretary of State for Transport takes her quasi-judicial role in such cases extremely seriously and is mindful to ensure that due process is followed in all circumstances. I will raise the issue that he has raised with me with Ministers today. It is vital that we upgrade rail freight capacity in this country. We are now at capacity in many places. Interchanges with other services are vital, and I will ensure that he is updated.

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Yesterday, it was reported that a former constituent of Kensington and Bayswater, Roman Abramovich, owes up to £1 billion in UK tax—potentially a bigger case than even Bernie Ecclestone. Does my right hon. Friend share the country's anger at people such as Roman Abramovich using complex corporate structures and British overseas territories to dodge tax while others pay their fair share, and will she ensure that time is made to scrutinise whether

His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has all the resources it needs to pursue the case and recover as much money as possible for the Treasury?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is right to raise tax evasion, tax avoidance and, in some cases, illegal tax avoidance—industrial-scale tax avoidance such as in the case he raised. Obviously, I will not get into individual cases, but the gap is still too wide. Just a few years ago, the tax gap between what was being avoided and what was being collected was a staggering £36 billion. We are recruiting 5,000 new HMRC compliance officers and aim to close the tax gap over the coming years.

**Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): This week, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation forecasted child poverty levels across England and Wales for the next five years. The results are stark: child poverty rates are forecast to increase in both Labour-run Wales and Labour-run England. However, there is hope and a way forward. Child poverty rates in Scotland, which are already estimated to be the lowest in the UK, are set to drop further, with the SNP Scottish Government's Scottish child payment recognised as a driving force in that reduction. Can we have an urgent statement from the UK Government on extending the Scottish Government's approach to child poverty, including the Scottish child payment, to the rest of these islands to ensure that a reduction in child poverty is not confined solely to Scotland?

**Lucy Powell:** This Government are absolutely committed to tackling child poverty. We inherited a very challenging context from the previous Government. The child poverty taskforce has been set up, and has funding. Its urgent work has begun, and we will publish the child poverty strategy in the spring. The hon. Gentleman mentions the SNP's plans to end the two-child cap in Scotland, but he will know that there is not a single penny to back that up. It is a promise in the never-never land, trying to make politics out of this issue. I suggest that he takes seriously what we are doing to tackle child poverty, rather than making party political points.

**Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Rochdale Get Together After Serving is opening a brand-new military veterans and community hub at R-KIX sports centre this Saturday. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking all the local businesses and charities that donated computers, carpets and even new windows for this new hub, which will support job searches and provide skills help? Will she congratulate in particular Royal Navy veteran Adam Trennery on his excellent initiative, which will help all veterans in Rochdale?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Adam Trennery and all those involved in the Get Together After Serving team. It sounds like a really great initiative to support veterans in his constituency. The Government take these sorts of initiatives very seriously, and I thank him for raising it.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Could the Leader of the House bring forward a statement on smart meters and their roll-out? She may be aware that there was a geographic divide in the United Kingdom in the original roll-out, whereby properties essentially north of the M62 were

supplied with data by something called the radio teleswitch service. The service is due to be switched off in June, but over 165,000 properties in Scotland still rely on it, of which 3,745 are in my Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale constituency. It appears that the roll-out of the new meters will not be able to meet the timescale of the switch-off, and it is important that we hear the response from Ministers to that.

**Lucy Powell:** The right hon. Member raises a very important matter, and I thank him for doing so, because we recognise how important it is to have a smooth transition for consumers away from the radio teleswitch service. I am concerned to hear what he says about that being off track for many of his constituents. We will continue to work closely with Ofgem and the RTS taskforce to ensure that the deadline is met, but I will absolutely ensure that Ministers come to this House regularly and update him and other Members on progress.

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): My constituent Clare Rogers came to my surgery after she lost her son to a ketamine addiction. Clare told me of the severe pain and neurological damage he suffered. A crisis of ketamine usage among our young people has become apparent, and we must look to mental health and addiction services because they are ultimately the ones that will treat addiction, prevent relapses and give people a chance to turn their lives around. Will the Leader of the House provide time for Members to discuss this issue, which goes across the Home Office, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, so that our young people understand the harms of ketamine usage and so that we can put this issue to bed?

**Lucy Powell:** I am saddened to hear the case that my hon. Friend raises. She is absolutely right that ketamine is extremely dangerous, and the rise in its use across many of our towns and cities is deeply concerning. This issue has been raised with me a number of times in these sessions, so I will ensure that a response is made available for all Members about how the Government are tackling it.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): I ask this question of the Leader of the House on behalf of my constituents and neighbouring constituents from Cheadle, because their MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison), is on paternity leave following the birth of beautiful baby Poppy last week. He, his partner Lou and Poppy are all doing well, and I am sure the whole House sends them our very best.

Stepping Hill hospital in Hazel Grove has a reported repairs backlog of £130 million, yet it does not qualify for the new hospital programme. Will the Leader of the House encourage Health Ministers to come to the House to update us with a statement on what the plans are to repair those hospitals that do not qualify for the new hospital programme?

**Lucy Powell:** I join the hon. Member in congratulating the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) on the birth of his daughter Poppy last week, and I thank her for stepping in to do some cover for him.

I am very familiar with Stepping Hill hospital and can appreciate the state of disrepair it is in and how much it is in need of capital investment. The hon. Member

will know that this Government inherited a hospital building and capital investment programme that was, frankly, a work of fiction: it had no money backing it up and deadlines that were never ever going to be delivered. We have now turned it into an actual plan of action for those hospitals, but I will ensure that she gets an update on Stepping Hill hospital and what more can be done.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her warm words earlier about the work many of us have done to get the lower Thames crossing greenlit by the Chancellor yesterday—something the Conservatives simply failed to do over 14 years.

I warmly welcome the Government's commitment in the devolution White Paper to a strong new right to buy and maintain beloved community assets. Stone parish council in my constituency has been attempting to purchase the freehold to the Lads of the Village pub for some time. The pub has been an important part of Stone village since 1793, playing a significant role in community life. Despite offers from the parish council at full asking price, the owner has refused to negotiate or sell. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate in Government time about how we protect vital community assets like this one?

**Lucy Powell:** I take this opportunity to once again congratulate my hon. Friend on all his campaigning and all the times he has raised with me and other Ministers the lower Thames crossing—I am sure he is pleased with this week's announcement.

I join my hon. Friend in welcoming some of the measures outlined in our devolution White Paper around community ownership and the right to buy, so that communities like his can take on and restore, or bring back to life, vital community assets like the one he describes. I am sorry to hear that the owner of the pub in his constituency is not engaging in the way they should.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): The Secretary of State for Health made a promise to the House that the Government will recruit an extra 1,000 GPs. In a recent statement, he said they have already recruited hundreds of GPs. We have asked for evidence of that claim, but the Minister of State for Care has not been able to provide us with a specific figure. Will the Leader of the House inquire with her colleagues as to whether hundreds of new GPs have been hired, so that we can see what progress the Government are making?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Member is absolutely right that it is vital that we recruit more GPs. We have been left a terrible situation with the NHS workforce. That is why workforce planning was at the heart of our recent 10-year plan for the national health service. I will absolutely ensure that Health Ministers and the Secretary of State for Health regularly come to this House to update us on progress, and I will get him a correct figure, if I can, as soon as possible from the Department of Health and Social Care.

**Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): My constituency has some of Britain's most beautiful beaches, beloved by swimmers and the local community in Portobello and Joppa. Groups like the Porty Water Collective are fighting hard to protect the

[Chris Murray]

beaches from sewage overflows and sewage-related debris washing up on them. The UK Government are taking big, important steps to fix England's sewage crisis, but in Scotland, water is devolved to the SNP Government, we do not monitor sewage overflows as much as in England, and local groups cannot access what little data there is. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time so we can solve Scotland's sewage crisis?

**Lucy Powell:** The beaches around my hon. Friend's constituency do indeed sound beautiful, and I am sure he regularly gets his kit off to go for a swim in the sea there. He is right that it is unacceptable that sewage is still flowing into the waters and seas of Scotland and that we do not even know the extent of it. The Scottish Government, as he says, are responsible for Scottish water and should frankly get their act together. We have brought forward legislation that will start to take action on this matter, and the Scottish Government should follow suit.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): King Lifting Ltd is a west country firm that operates mostly mobile cranes across the UK. The company holds a Home Office licence for sponsorship, but cannot employ the heavy crane operators it needs. The work is not for everyone because it involves long stays away from home working on major infrastructure projects, such as wind farms, High Speed 2 and our nuclear sites. Operators qualify as individuals not through the company and must also be experienced. Every time King Lifting advertises, it gets dozens of applicants, almost all from abroad, and the company trains and tests heavy crane operators to meet the UK's high standards. Please may we have a debate on adding crane operators to the UK immigration skilled workers eligible occupations list?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Member is absolutely right that skills are at the heart of all these industries that are vital to creating the new jobs and industries of the future through our mission to be a clean energy superpower by 2030. The Government want to take more action to ensure that those who live and work in this country have access to such opportunities by having a much stronger emphasis on skills development and work opportunities through reforming the Department for Work and Pensions and jobcentres, but I will have a look at the issue she raises and ensure that she gets a response.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Unless questions are short and answers are on point, we will not get everybody in. I call Mark Swards.

**Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Greenhill primary school serves the small Armley and Bramley parts of my constituency. Its excellent work was recognised in its most recent Ofsted report this month, which states that the school has improved rapidly and pupils are safe. I have seen that excellent work at first hand, including through the Solar for Schools programme. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the school for its amazing Ofsted report, and grant a debate in Government time on the need for solar energy programmes in primary schools?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Greenhill primary school for its achievements in that regard. He is absolutely right that schools could do more to provide sustainable energy for themselves through Solar for Schools—a school in my constituency has embarked on that. The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero is keen on that issue, and I will ensure that he is updated.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): In Kyrgyzstan, President Sadyr Japarov has signed two new laws—the religion law and the amending law—imposing stricter regulations on religious communities in that country. Those laws, effective from this Saturday, introduce more stringent requirements for registration, impose bans on unregistered religious activity and increase state control over religious practices, so freedom of religious belief is impeded. The laws introduce heavier fines for violations, raising concerns about the restriction of religious freedom there. As the climate of uncertainty and fear among believers rises, will the Leader of the House join me in condemning those actions, and will she speak to her Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office colleagues about any policy implications?

**Lucy Powell:** Once again, the hon. Gentleman raises an important breach of freedom of religious belief—in this case in Kyrgyzstan. I will of course raise that with the Foreign Office and ensure that he gets a full reply about it.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): This week, I visited Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, which is managed brilliantly by Sally Godden and her team, and I met Rugby Artists and Makers Network painters Jan Clark and Aish Magesh, ceramicist Belinda Edwards, and spinner Angela Dewes. Does the Leader of the House agree that any support given to such municipally run galleries, or to creative entrepreneurship such as Art at the Alex—a former pub run by Chris Pegler and Steve Davies—is much needed to allow artists to showcase their talent, strengthen our community, inspire the next generation, boost the local economy and, importantly, make a living through their artistic endeavour, and will there be time for a debate on that?

**Lucy Powell:** The Government are absolutely committed to municipally run galleries such as the one that my hon. Friend mentions. The culture sector and the cultural offer are at the core of making our towns, villages and cities vibrant places where people want to live and work. I join him in welcoming that.

**Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): In my constituency, the Isle of Arran has been connected to the mainland through harbours at Brodick and Ardrossan for 190 years. I have mentioned before the Save Ardrossan Harbour group, which is fighting hard to keep the ferry sailing from Ardrossan. Although I welcome the new ferry that is currently sailing from Troon to Brodick, I am concerned that fewer sailings are timetabled. I have been made aware of an island constituent who has had to reschedule a health screening on the mainland three times as they are unable to make the journey and return home on the same day. Had the ferries still been sailing from Ardrossan as usual, that would not have been a problem. Will my right hon. Friend grant a debate to discuss the fact that the SNP

Government and other stakeholders need to sort out the ferry situation as soon as possible to provide clarity for the people of Brodick?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is a real campaigner on this matter, which she has raised with me a number of times. She knows that the SNP Government have wasted over £5 billion of taxpayer's money on pet projects, including ferries that did not sail. They have had a massive boost to their budget as a result of the UK Government's Budget, and their excuses really have run out.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Kinneil Estate, which is home to a UNESCO world heritage landmark and where James Watt tested his steam engine prototype, attracts thousands of visitors to Bo'ness. Kinneil Museum, which is operated by Falkirk council and supported by the fantastic Friends of Kinneil, provides space to learn about local history dating back to Roman times. It is, however, threatened with closure, which risks damaging local tourism and the preservation of local heritage. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time to debate the importance of local heritage centres?

**Lucy Powell:** What my hon. Friend raises is particularly concerning given that it relates to a UNESCO world heritage site. Heritage is of course a devolved matter, but we take it very seriously indeed, and it would make an excellent topic for a debate.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Questions are getting even longer. I said short questions, please. I call Connor Rand.

**Mr Connor Rand** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Duchenne muscular dystrophy is a severe progressive muscle-wasting disease that affects around 2,500 people in the UK, including Felix from my constituency. Felix's mum, Lisa, has told me about Givinostat, a promising new treatment that could be transformative. However, not all NHS trusts are signed up to the early access programme for the drug, even though it is free. That needs to change, so could we have a debate or a statement on Duchenne muscular dystrophy and how we can improve access to treatments for it?

**Lucy Powell:** As my hon. Friend says, that treatment is free to patients and the NHS under the early access programme, but whether local trusts can cover the cost of administering it is a matter for them. I know that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence aims to publish guidance on the use of Givinostat in the NHS shortly, and we will update the House as soon as possible.

**Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): On 16 January, WHSmith in Stockton announced its closure, putting at risk our town centre post office. I am leading a campaign with local Labour councillors to find an alternative location. Does my right hon. Friend agree that post offices provide vital services for towns such as Stockton, and will she consider a debate in Government time on this important issue?

**Lucy Powell:** Post offices play a vital role for our communities, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to stand up and call for their services to continue in his constituency. He will know that there is such a debate this afternoon—he may wish to raise those issues then.

**Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): Last week, I received letters from year 5 pupils at St Thomas Becket Catholic primary school in my constituency. They raised concerns about deforestation and highlighted the alarming decline of tropical rainforests by 50% and the unacceptable use of child labour by the industries driving deforestation. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a statement on what progress the Government have made on their pledge of £239 million of funding to halt and reverse deforestation in forest-rich nations, and will she join me in thanking the pupils of St Thomas Becket school for raising that important issue?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in thanking those students—year 5 pupils are often the toughest of audiences. She will know that the UK supports a variety of programmes aimed at preventing deforestation, and we are a major contributor to Brazil's Amazon fund. I am sure that that would make a good topic for a debate.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Yesterday the Bank of Scotland announced the closure of its Alexandria branch in my constituency. Branch offices are essential to ensure access to cash and face-to-face banking for the most vulnerable and for many small businesses in my constituency. Does the Minister share my concern about the loss of such vital services and recognise the urgent need for the Government to roll out more banking hubs, and will she raise with Government colleagues the need for a banking hub in Alexandria and West Dunbartonshire?

**Lucy Powell:** Banking hubs are critical to communities such as that of my hon. Friend in West Dunbartonshire. The Government are committed to rolling out our 350 banking hubs—more than 100 are already open. I think that would be an extremely popular topic for a debate.

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): This week, the YMCA released its annual report, revealing the devastating cuts to youth services over the past 14 years. Spending in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire has been cut by more than 90% since 2010 and funding is not equitable: in Stoke-on-Trent, spending per young person is 10% less than in inner London. Families in my constituency deserve better. Will the Leader of the House make time to debate the need for adequate and equitable funding for youth services?

**Lucy Powell:** It is a source of national shame that youth funding decreased by three quarters under the previous Government—one of the deepest cuts made to any public services. There was no real strategy for young people, and we are seeing the consequences of that. The Government are determined to turn that around, and we will work with my hon. Friend to do that in Stoke-on-Trent.

**Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): I am delighted about the recent announcement at the creative industries growth summit of new funding for West Yorkshire. This funding will enable local leaders to address the specific needs of local creative businesses, which is a priority for Mayor Brabin, and it will benefit towns such as Holmfirth, home to the Picturedrome. Could we have a debate in Government time on what further support can be given to local creative and entertainment venues?

**Lucy Powell:** Culture and Holmfirth go hand in hand. Many of us of a certain age will remember “Last of the Summer Wine”, filmed in Holmfirth. I recently went to Compo’s chippy, and I can say that it does great fish and chips. West Yorkshire is one of the priority areas for our creative industries sector plan, and we are working closely with the fantastic Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, who is a real leader in this regard.

**Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): This week, I met a constituent, Bradley Price, who has recently taken up a degree apprenticeship with Nuclear Transport Solutions. We talked about the excellent transferable skills he is gaining and the great career options open to him. There is no doubt that high-quality apprenticeships like that can be the right route for so many school leavers, yet it seems from talking to pupils in Rossendale and Darwen that awareness of the range and quality of such opportunities is remarkably low. I welcome the announcement of a Backbench Business debate on apprenticeships, but would the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on raising awareness in schools about apprenticeships?

**Lucy Powell:** I wish Bradley good luck with his degree apprenticeship. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that degree apprenticeships offer a real career opportunity for many of our young people, and they are still not as widely known about as they should be through careers advice in schools. He raises a really important point, with which this Government wholeheartedly agree.

**Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): Wrexham is a thriving hub of business, and the continued investment in the Wrexham and Flintshire investment zone is very welcome indeed. Companies such as Wrexham Lager, Kellogg’s and JCB, among others, are exporting from Wrexham around the globe. However, too many businesses have had to give up on exporting due to the huge increase in costs from red tape introduced under the previous Government. Such things are critical if we are to achieve the growth we want, so will the Leader of the House please consider providing parliamentary time to debate how we can ensure that these businesses get the support they need?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sure my hon. Friend welcomes—in fact, he has done—the much deserved announcement this week of an investment zone for his constituency of Wrexham. He is absolutely right that businesses face far too much red tape, especially because of the botched Brexit deal by the last Government, and this Government are committed to reducing that.

**Claire Hughes** (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Since last year, all parents in England who have experienced the heartbreak of losing a pregnancy have been able to apply for a certificate that formally recognises their loss. An agreement was made in principle with the previous Secretary of State of Health to extend the scheme to

Wales, but discussions were paused before the general election. Would the Leader of the House consider writing to the relevant Ministers to ask them to meet me to discuss how this scheme could be extended to Wales, so that baby loss certificates are made available without any further delay?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that really important topic. She is absolutely right that baby loss certificates in England have provided recognition and comfort to many families who have been bereaved by baby loss. I think her call for the scheme to be extended to Wales is absolutely right, and I will make sure she gets some contact with a Minister to discuss it further.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Saving the best contribution to last, I call Sureena Brackenridge.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): In Wolverhampton North East in the past five years, we have lost banks from Wednesfield High Street and all banking facilities in the Scotlands and Three Tuns areas. Can the Leader of the House make time for a debate on banking hubs to keep banking on our high streets?

**Lucy Powell:** I think that is the fourth time banking has been raised with me today, which just goes to show how vital having access to cash and banking hubs is for communities such as those in Wolverhampton. That is why this Government have committed to opening 350 hubs; over 100 are already open. I think that would be an extremely popular topic for a debate.

## BILL PRESENTED

### BORDER SECURITY, ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Yvette Cooper, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary David Lammy, Pat McFadden, Secretary Shabana Mahmood, Secretary Hilary Benn, Secretary Ian Murray, Secretary Bridget Phillipson, Secretary Jo Stevens and Dame Angela Eagle, presented a Bill to make provision about border security; to make provision about immigration and asylum; to make provision about sharing customs data and trailer registration data; to make provision about articles for use in serious crime; to make provision about serious crime prevention orders; to make provision about fees paid in connection with the recognition, comparability or assessment of qualifications; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 3 February, and to be printed (Bill 173) with explanatory notes (Bill 173-EN).*

## Backbench Business

### Proportional Representation: General Elections

12.34 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered proportional representation for general elections.

Before I speak on the matter at hand, I note that today is the funeral of one of my party's and our country's greatest politicians, John Prescott. I send my thoughts to his family and friends. They include some who would otherwise have been with us today; equally, some of us here would have wished to be there.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time in the Chamber for this crucial debate, and the many colleagues from across the House, and from every nation and region in the UK, who co-sponsored or supported the application. It is right that the House should provide time to consider proportional representation for general elections to this place. Just last month, the House voted in favour of PR for the first time ever, by giving leave to bring in the ten-minute rule Bill on the subject moved by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who I see in her place.

That historic vote was an indication of the strength and breadth of feeling among Members on both sides of the House that our first-past-the-post electoral system is not working. It is desperately in need of an upgrade, and we need seriously to consider the alternatives. The last time we did so was through the Jenkins commission in 1998, when elections produced results in which the numbers of seats more closely matched the numbers of votes than they do now. My hope for today, and it is one I know many others share, is that Members can explain why so many colleagues and so much of the public at large have reached the conclusion that it is time to think again about our electoral system. In doing so, I want to encourage the Government to be bold and to be honest about how unrepresentative British general elections have become.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful opening speech. Turnout at the general election in July last year dropped to below 60%, which means that two in every five people did not participate. Does my hon. Friend agree that that shows we need change, so that more people engage in our democratic system?

**Alex Sobel:** Absolutely. The turnout and engagement of voters in general elections should be a matter of concern for everybody in this place and in the country at large.

The truth is that first past the post is failing on its own terms. It is becoming less and less representative and producing more and more random results; there are more outliers and more MPs are elected on less than 30% of their constituents who voted. In reality, some MPs represent constituencies in which perhaps 85% of those they represent did not vote for them. These are the lowest figures since the beginning of universal suffrage.

The numbers do not lie, and they can no longer be ignored. The public know it, our parties know it and we in this place know it.

These growing failures of representative democracy—the widespread feeling that ordinary people do not have a fair say over who speaks for them or how they are governed—are feeding the record low levels of trust in politics and faith in democracy, and that should worry all of us. The Government have a responsibility to face up to those problems and address them before the next general election, starting with the launch of a national commission for electoral reform. The 1997 Government were brave enough to undertake this work at a time when confidence in the electoral and political systems was much higher and those systems were less stressed than they are now.

Let me begin by looking at last year's general election. Most people got neither the party they voted for into government nor the candidate they voted for as their local MP. Labour won a historic majority, and like other Labour MPs whose seats are perceived as safe in the living memory of all party members and probably all parties, I travelled around the country to work in many marginal constituencies where we needed to get votes to win. However, this speaks to the failure not to the success of our system. The 2024 general election was a culmination of years of falling vote share for the winning party, and we—the Labour party—won on just one third of the national vote.

Of course I always work extremely hard for my party to be in government, and I am delighted that almost 10 million people voted for us. However, 19 million people voted for other parties, and we must admit that they are the vast majority of those who took part in the election. They did not get to influence the kind of Government the country has, and it can no longer be acceptable to have a winner-takes-all culture on the basis of a third of the country's vote. That erodes our democracy.

One of the arguments of supporters of first-past-the-post elections is that people are not really voting for a Government, but just for a local MP. Let us take this at face value. Only four out of 10 voters got the local MP they voted for at the last election, and six out of 10 did not get the MP they voted for. We have a system that ignores those six out of 10 people. We are now in an unprecedented situation where 554 MPs—85% of us—were elected by less than 50% of the voters who turned out to vote. I am one of the lucky few who received over 50% of the vote, so this debate and the changes I am proposing are not of personal benefit to me. Some 266 MPs—41%—were elected with less than 40% of the vote. A few colleagues—I am not sure any are in the Chamber—were even elected with less than 30% of the vote. When most people's representatives in Parliament do not reflect how they voted, it feeds the all-too-pervasive sense that Westminster is some distant, unresponsive institution in which voters have no real voice.

Like all first-past-the-post elections, 2024 was one in which some votes and areas mattered more than others. A system that forces parties to prioritise small groups of votes in a handful of marginal seats also forces them to neglect large parts of the country—where to go, who to speak to both directly and through the media, and the policies put forward. People in non-battleground seats, which make up the majority of seats at every first-past-the-post election, never have the resources spent on

[Alex Sobel]

them that are spent on marginal seats. Candidates and activists are directed away from those perceived safe seats to marginals, meaning less contact in those seats. That is usually reflected in the turnout of safe seats compared with marginal seats, as voters are generally well aware of the relative importance of their constituency. It is hugely corrosive to our trust in politics, and we end up with most people and communities up and down the country saying that they feel “invisible to politicians”, to use the words of the Brown Commission. People can tell when they are being ignored. They can also smell unfairness a mile away.

First past the post means that people’s votes are not equal in value. Sometimes, I fear that we in this place are used to that gross unfairness in elections and have become numb to it. But for millions of people, their stake in national politics is the vote that they get to cast in a general election every few years. When they see that a party won 2 million votes and got four MPs, or a party won 4 million votes and got five MPs, it is clear to them that the system is not fair. It drives voters either into the margins or away from voting at all. If we in Westminster are content to say, “That’s just the way it is”, it is no wonder that hardly anyone trusts politics.

**Florence Eshalomi:** My hon. Friend may be aware that an Electoral Commission poll from 2023 found that more people were dissatisfied with our democratic election system than were satisfied. Does he think that looking at changing our current voting system would make more people feel satisfied?

**Alex Sobel:** I am coming to that exact point shortly, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising it.

The 2024 general election was a stark illustration of the problems with our voting system, and it is important to understand that it was not a one-off. These problems have been getting worse for decades, and that is set to continue if we keep the system as it is. We have gone from 97% of people voting for Labour or the Conservative party in the 1950s, to just 58% doing so in 2024—a record low. In the first-past-the-post system, that produces hugely volatile and erratic results—electoral chaos theory, as Professor Rob Ford has called it.

Back in the mid-20th century, parties needed close to 50% of the vote to win a majority of seats, but that threshold has been falling to new lows for decades—39% in 1974, 35% in 2005 and, as I said, one third last year. There is every reason to think that this trend will continue. That a party, even an extreme one, can win a huge majority with less than a third of the vote is not just senseless but dangerous. If we do not address this now, I fear that election results will become even less representative. Governments and MPs will be elected with lower support than ever, and there will be increasingly chaotic and random results. That will drive trust and engagement still lower. That is unsustainable, and I think the Government know it.

Labour’s official policy on first past the post is set out in the final national policy forum document that the party produced in the previous Parliament, which set the policy platform for our manifesto. It stated:

“The flaws in the current voting system are contributing to the distrust and alienation we see in politics.”

I agree, as do almost all the parties on the Opposition Benches. We know that the public agrees—two thirds want the flaws in the voting system to be addressed before the next general election, according to Survation. The long-running British attitudes survey found record majority support for changing to PR, with those who trust politics least the most likely to support change. Are they not the people we need to engage? Just this month, YouGov found that support for PR hit an all-time high, with support for first past the post at an all-time low.

Every single MP in Great Britain has been contacted by constituents in recent days asking them to support PR in this debate. I have received hundreds of emails, even though my name is on the debate. The Prime Minister has made it clear that restoring trust in politics is a key priority, calling the fight for trust “the battle that defines our age”.

If the Government are to win the battle, they must address our flawed voting system—one they know is driving distrust and alienation in politics, which means that millions of people’s votes do not count, and which most people do not want to continue with. That is why I urge the Government to take this first step by establishing a national commission for electoral reform, as recommended by the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections, which I chair.

The Government have said that there is no consensus on a new system, but that is exactly why there is a great opportunity to set up a process that begins to build consensus: a national commission to examine the issues that first past the post is causing, and to recommend a fair and democratic alternative.

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a good case, though one that I fundamentally disagree with, as he will hear later. He has just outlined his own Government’s position on proportional representation. We have already had an answer on that, so where can he go now? On 2 December 2024, when asked by the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), the Deputy Prime Minister said that this Government would not set up a national commission and would not examine proportional representation any further. What does the hon. Gentleman propose to do to make the Government change their mind?

**Alex Sobel:** I have just said that the first step would be for the Government to set up a national commission. This debate is the first step for the APPG to try to persuade the Government to set up that national commission. We are on a journey. Not everything the Government announced at the start of the Parliament is what they are still announcing. Change is possible.

The commission could draw insights from the experience of devolved bodies and other democracies. It could allow citizens, as well as experts, to contribute to evaluating the options and finding a way forward that would command public trust and confidence. None of this need distract from Government’s core mission of delivering their manifesto priorities, but it would demonstrate beyond doubt that they are serious about giving a stronger voice to millions of people who feel increasingly excluded from British politics.

12.47 pm

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): When I was out knocking on doors in my constituency in last year’s general election campaign, lots of people reminisced



with me about a previous general election when the Liberal candidate came just 378 tantalising votes short of the incumbent Conservative. They spoke very fondly of that candidate, which might not be surprising, except the election that they were recalling was in 1983—over four decades ago.

I also remember speaking to an elderly, lifelong Labour voter who was lending me his vote for the very first time because he had to do something different. When I thanked him for placing his trust in me, he told me not to take too much from it, because his entire life he had never voted for a candidate who had won. I will always remember that conversation. As I walked away, I said, “Well, we’ll see about that.”

Until last July, for 74 years the constituency of Chelmsford, in its various shapes and sizes over the years, had never been represented in Parliament by anyone other than a Conservative. In fact, it had been 100 years since Chelmsford was last represented by a Liberal—something I am extremely proud to have corrected. It should not have to be this way. I hugely admire the tenacity of that erstwhile Labour voter who lent me his vote, hoping against all the evidence of his lifetime that this time it might make a difference.

No wonder turnout in elections is often so painfully low. Our antiquated first-past-the-post system can be incredibly demoralising, even for a committed political campaigner like myself. Believe it or not, I do not like having to ask people on the doorstep to lend me their vote so that, together, we can game the system to get the change that we want. Would it not be better if people could cast their vote in a way that let them set out their preferences? They would know that all would not be lost for them if their first preference candidate did not win, as their vote could be transferred to someone else that they also would not mind seeing elected. The turnout in last year’s general election, as has already been alluded to, was 65.9% in Chelmsford, slightly better than the national turnout, which was a pretty poor 59.7%. In Manchester Rusholme, the turnout was just 40%. But these are dizzying heights compared with the turnout in local elections.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I appreciate that the hon. Lady is talking about a preferential voting system, rather than a proportional voting system. Does she understand that there is quite a big difference between those two options, and obviously today’s debate is about proportional representation?

**Marie Goldman:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I do not think those two things are mutually exclusive. There are preferential systems that can lead to proportional results. In fact, we see that in many places that use preferential systems.

In the election in May 2024 for the police, fire and crime commissioner in Essex, the turnout was barely 25%. So why are people not voting? Surely part of the issue is simply that they do not believe that their vote counts. They do not believe that they can make a difference. Although I do not completely agree with that, I certainly agree that the first-past-the-post system makes it harder.

There are also other things in our electoral system that make it harder, and I do not think that we should be talking about changing our voting system without

also talking about them. For example, the introduction of voter ID was supposedly designed to enhance trust in our elections, but the evidence suggests that there have been some other consequences. In the 2024 general election, 4% of people who did not vote said that the voter ID requirement was the reason that they could not do so. Additionally, 0.08% of those who went to the polls were unable to cast their ballot because they did not have the correct ID. Those may seem like small figures, but if we put them into rough numbers, rather than percentages, we can see that, with about 28.9 million people casting their vote, the number of people who showed up who could not cast their vote because they did not have the correct ID was approximately—unless I have got my maths wrong—23,000 people. That is an incredibly high and quite shocking number.

Let us think about that for a moment—23,000 people could not vote because we wanted to stop voter fraud. Of course that might be a good idea if there was lots of voter fraud going on, but the Electoral Commission’s own website says:

“In the past five years, there is no evidence of large-scale electoral fraud. Of the 1,462 cases of alleged electoral fraud reported to police between 2019 and 2023, 11 led to convictions, and the police issued four cautions.”

Talk about a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Voter registration is another area where improvements are needed. Research shows that as many as 8 million people across the UK are not registered correctly at their current address. This affects key groups such as young people, private renters and recent home movers who may not realise that they are missing from the register until it is too late. Although the current system allows for late registration before elections, this puts unnecessary pressure on electoral services and risks leaving some people unable to vote on polling day.

We can see the impact that even small barriers to voting can have. Imagine what would happen if we broke down those barriers and got rid of them. We must recognise that barriers to participation, including voter ID, voter registration and the voting system itself, are dangerous to our democracy. I urge the Government to take the opportunity to fix this and thereby to strengthen democracy and democratic engagement in our country.

12.53pm

**Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): I will be very brief in so as not to repeat the arguments that have already been made in such a good style by hon. Members across the House. I too wish to take this opportunity to put on record my support for electoral reform, to ensure that the composition of our representatives better reflects the wishes of voters and that voters can exercise more choice.

The Labour party has a long and proud history of supporting the objectives of proportionality and choice in other legislatures across our United Kingdom and, of course, in other elections. Until recently, voters were able to offer a nuanced view, utilising the supplementary vote system in mayoral elections. Sadly, that level of choice was rescinded by the last Conservative Government. As the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) pointed out, that was just one step taken by the Conservative party in its Elections Act 2022, alongside the introduction of the need to show identification when voting, which has left many people feeling locked out of voting altogether.

**Florence Eshalomi:** Another change put forward by the previous Government in the Elections Act was in relation to postal votes, which, again, has disenfranchised many people. Does my hon. Friend believe that if we are to look at electoral reform, we should consider some of the consequences of the changes that were made by the previous Government?

**Steve Race:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

As I was about to say, whether it be the inequity of allowing the older person's bus pass to be used as ID but not the young person's bus pass, or leaving out entirely the ability to use a veteran's ID card or a train driver's licence, the Act was largely unnecessary and introduced many retrograde measures designed to restrict access to our democracy, rather than to encourage participation.

**Paul Holmes:** I have a lot of respect for the hon. Gentleman. He says that the Elections Act restricted people's ability to vote. Can I therefore ask him what measures he would put in place to stop the restricting of genuine voters from voting when their vote is taken away by fraud?

**Steve Race:** As has already been pointed out, the level of voter fraud in this country was minuscule—

**Paul Holmes:** So that's okay then.

**Steve Race:** It is not that it is okay, but we have introduced legislation that has essentially restricted many, many more people from voting than otherwise would have happened.

**Mr Holden:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Steve Race:** I will make some progress, if I may.

I am pleased that this Government have legislated to allow the use of the veteran's ID card, and I ask that they look at a wider range of suitable ID, including train driver licences, in any future review. Preferably, though, we should return to the traditional British approach of not demanding ID to have access to a vote.

On the issue at hand, I want to recommend to colleagues the outcome of the Jenkins Commission of 1998, which designed an elegant solution to the issues that our democracy faces when it comes to representation. Jenkins, one of the great social reformers of this place to whom many of us still owe a great debt of gratitude, proposed a hybrid system that kept many of the benefits of first past the post, such as the strong relationship that an MP has with a defined and manageable area, but with additional proportionality through the additional member system. Constituency MPs would be elected through the alternative vote system to add choice into the system.

Versions of that system are now in operation for elections in the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Senedd and the London Assembly, so this is not theoretical and voters understand it perfectly well. This is proof that a Labour Government can and do deliver much-needed social reform and always has.

Although I do not support electoral reform in the sense of pure PR, I absolutely accept that politics is about priorities. This Government have a huge task to do—three things all at once, I believe, which is not something that many Governments have faced before.

We must stabilise our public finances, get the economy growing in a sustainable way, and rebuild our public services. That is a mammoth task, but it is what the public demanded when they elected our party with a landslide last year. I can well understand that these issues take priority over time for electoral reform. I do not think that I could look my constituents in Exeter in the eye if I knew that we were spending much time—and it would be much time—in this place discussing how to be elected, rather than addressing their immediate concerns.

As I have mentioned, there is much that we can do to make the current system more democratic and accessible, so I support the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for a commission to look into this issue and find a way forward. Therefore, although I remain an electoral reformer, I also welcome the Government's current focus on supporting the development of a stronger economy, grabbing the opportunities that are on offer for my region, and delivering jobs and investment in places such as Exeter, while also working and legislating hard to fix our roads, end our homelessness and housing crisis, clean up our waterways and rebuild our health system.

12.58 pm

**Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD):** It is an honour to sit on the fair elections all-party group, which is so well chaired by the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel). It is also an honour to take up this fight in this House with the Liberal Democrats for whom electoral reform has been a central tenet for decades.

In order to be here today, I had to resign my commission in the Royal Air Force where I had, for 23 years, defended our country and our interests overseas. However, I came to recognise that the most crucial way to defend our democracy was to do so here while backing proportional representation. Throughout the 2024 general election campaign, residents across Tewkesbury constituency frequently expressed their frustrations with an electoral system that was certain to condemn them to another five years of the same Conservative Member of Parliament whichever candidate they voted for. Tewkesbury had been represented by my predecessor for 27 years, and it was the view of many residents that Tewkesbury would never experience change because our broken electoral system would see this safe Conservative seat won by the Conservatives at an eighth consecutive election.

**Mr Holden:** Does not the hon. Gentleman's presence in this House demonstrate that the system does work, and can deliver change in individual seats?

**Cameron Thomas:** No, for two reasons: the Liberal Democrats defied the odds, but there are many other smaller parties who are not adequately represented; and, as I will come to later, 58% of voters across the country did not get the MP they voted for, and that is true even in my constituency.

At the general election, Tewkesbury did see change, but only through the coming together of several unique circumstances, and despite first past the post. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), I was loaned the trust of Labour, Green and Conservative supporters. The general election may have been won by Labour and returned Liberal Democrats in record numbers, but let us not delude ourselves: the country voted tactically

in record numbers for whoever would remove the catastrophic, nepotistic and morally bankrupt Conservative Government of 2019.

July's election brought the briefest respite before frustrations rose once again. This is the most disproportionate House of Commons in British history, with Labour MPs in 66% of seats but with the lowest vote share—some 34%—of any winning party since 1945, and 58% of UK voters did not get the MP they voted for. I have previously described first past the post as “barely democratic”, and these figures vindicate me.

Public apathy towards politics is reflected in a steady decline in general election turnouts since the 1950s, from over 80% to less than 60% in 2024. If we want to arrest this decline, people must feel that their vote matters. The only way to ensure that the next election returns a representative Parliament is to transition to a proportional representation electoral system.

I have occasionally been challenged by those who say that proportional representation would increasingly return hung Parliaments, and would lead to bickering and chaos, rather than functioning government. This challenge falters when those people are presented with the fact that the previous Government and their 80-seat majority were elected through first past the post. Never in the field of British politics was so little achieved by so many. They scrambled from controversy to controversy, fighting among themselves while undermining our institutions and allowing our public services to crumble.

Today, our friends in the United States are living with the inevitable result of their two-party system. Far-right populists have seized the previously conservative Republican party, neutered the media and dismantled many institutional safeguards. We must recognise that we face the same threat, as our Conservative party—the most successful election-winning machine on earth—continues its lurch to the right and brings fringe opinions into the mainstream. It can happen here, and we must have a fair electoral system to mitigate that.

Liberal Democrats were elected in record numbers in 2024 on a pledge to deliver proportional representation. Labour Members want proportional representation, and the public increasingly want proportional representation, so I say to the Government: let us come together and do something historic. Let us put aside our individual and party political interests for the many. Let us do the right thing. Let us change our country for the better and deliver proportional representation.

1.4 pm

**Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate on something that is fundamental to fixing the foundations of our country. It is worth repeating that public trust in our political system is in crisis. Fewer than one in three Britons believes that the UK is a well-functioning democracy. As has been said, we should be clear that this has not happened overnight. It is a consequence and reflection of a political system that is outdated, broken and in desperate need of reform, which has led to a steady decline in general election voter turnout. The election in 2024 was the second time in history—and the second time since 2000—that turnout fell below 60%, and it has not been above 75% since 1992. Even the Brexit referendum got only a 72% turnout. That is not a great endorsement of the system we have.

Even more concerningly, astoundingly, in a recent survey, 25% of people aged 16 to 25 stated a preference for a dictatorship in place of our current representative democracy, because they believe that the current system does not deliver and that their voices are not heard.

**Florence Eshalomi:** My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. I have long supported reducing the voting age to 16—a change for which there is cross-party support. Does he agree that if we give young people a say by giving them the vote, they will not have some of those views, because they will feel engaged and involved in the political process?

**Andrew Ranger:** I absolutely agree and will come on to that later. Young people believe that the system does not deliver, and that their voice is not heard. These statistics should be of concern to us all, regardless of political persuasion, and it is clear that the status quo has to go.

Of 43 countries across Europe, 40 have proportional representation of some kind, including in Scandinavia, where voter turnout regularly exceeds 80%, a level we have not achieved since 1950. Three of these 43 countries are found in the UK: Scotland, Northern Ireland and of course Wales have operated a form of PR since devolution in 1997, and in Wales, for our next set of elections next year, we will move to a full PR system, which I fully support and campaigned for. The Welsh system shows that rather than being something to be feared, PR enhances our democratic system. Voters can head to the ballot box knowing that their chosen party will receive fair representation, in accordance with how they perform. It is time for Westminster to follow suit. It cannot take two more decades for the Commons to catch up. Trust in politics and politicians is at one of its lowest ebbs; the introduction of proportional representation is a crucial step in rebuilding that relationship.

I welcome the measures that the Labour Government are taking to rebuild trust. They are making it easier than ever to register to vote; embarking on significant House of Lords reform; introducing a devolution revolution; and showing clear intent to clean up politics for good. This is fundamentally an argument about fairness. Everyone's vote should be equal, and should count. Surely for the Government, with their huge commanding majority, now is the time to be bold and brave, and to introduce proportional representation. The first stage would be to establish a national commission for electoral reform, so that the Government can get on the front foot and show that they are serious about addressing our unrepresentative voting system and stemming the rise of disengagement and distrust in politics. It would be an opportunity to bring the public, as well as experts, into a conversation about how voters can best be represented, and to propose a fair and equal voting system, fit for modern Britain, in which everyone's vote and voice counts.

1.8 pm

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): As we have heard in this Chamber, trust in politics is very important for a functioning democracy, but sadly the data shows that trust is collapsing. At the last general election, we faced the second lowest turnout in the last 100 years, with just six in 10 people voting. That tells us that far too many people do not think voting matters, whereas I hope we can all agree that every vote matters.

[Richard Tice]

That is why I pay tribute to the excellent lobbying group Make Votes Matter for proposing and promoting this issue. It is so important. How can we have a situation where only six in 10 people vote?

We have the most unrepresentative Parliament in living memory. The governing party has about 34% of the votes cast, but 63% of the seats in this great House. What sort of system is that? It is completely unrepresentative. My good party had 14% of votes cast, yet we do not have even a mere 1% of seats in the Chamber. As for the other smaller parties, the Green party had just under 7% of votes cast, but has about 0.5% of the seats in the Chamber. That is so damaging to trust in democracy.

We have 823,000 votes cast for every Reform seat; for the Labour party, it is a mere 23,000 votes for each seat. Voters still come up to me and say, “How does this work?”. People get confused, because as hon. Members have said, we have one system for the general election and another in the devolved nations. Why can we not have a single simple system that we know works, and that is used in so many democracies around the world—a variant of proportional representation? Not only does our system lead to misrepresentation when it comes to seats in the House, but its quirks mean that we have no representation on any Select Committee, despite having 4 million votes—14% of the votes cast. Trust in democracy collapses when something is as patently unfair as that.

This issue is so important, and we know we can do better. It is marvellous that Members from the Labour party recognise that. Indeed, at the Labour conference a couple of years back, its members passed a motion to that effect. Fairness is vital. If we do not have it, we have complete misrepresentation of the views of the people on critical issues, such as immigration and net zero, because we end up with a uni-party approach. It cannot be good for democracy if people feel that all their views cannot be represented. They think, “What is the point of bothering? I will carry on with my life.” We all know that more engagement from many people of all ages— young, medium and old—is vital for a functioning and true democracy.

1.12 pm

**Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Members who secured this important debate. I have been debating on this subject outside the House for, unbelievably, nearly 40 years, so I have had some time to assemble my thoughts on it. During that time, I have often heard people argue for or against proportional representation or first past the post based on the immediate advantage for their political party. I urge against such an approach to questions of democracy and electoral systems. One benefit of engaging in this debate for so long is that I have been able to see the political cycle change over time; an electoral system that might benefit a party at one point may work to its disadvantage later. The party that gets a massive boost in seats from first past the post in one election may get a disproportionate kicking from the electorate under another system. The volatility of the modern electorate makes that particularly pertinent.

The core bedrock of support for both major parties is a far smaller group of voters than it ever used to be, and demographic and political change is accelerating that. No party—mine included—should think that the current

coalition of voters that it has assembled is here to stay, and that it should design its preferred electoral system around maximising the number of seats that that coalition of voters can win.

**Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What is the hon. Member’s view on his Government’s proposal to reduce the voting age to 16, given that we were all elected by voters aged 18 and above?

**Luke Akehurst**: I think that is a different subject to the one we are debating. If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will proceed on the subject of proportional representation.

We do not know how voters would behave if they were confronted with a different voting system. We cannot say that because Labour got 34% of the vote in 2024 under first past the post, it would therefore have got 34% if the 2024 election had been run under a proportional representation system. Voters change their behaviour to fit the voting system. There might also be new parties that would grow under a different voting system.

With tactical voting in its current form, we do not know how many Labour-identifying voters back other parties for tactical reasons in particular seats—the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) mentioned voters who had spoken to her about doing so. We do not know how many supporters of other parties voted Labour for tactical reasons, or what the net impact of unwinding those factors might be on each party.

**Florence Eshalomi**: I thank my hon. Friend for his long campaign on this important issue. All of us have probably knocked on doors and spoken to voters who have said that they have never voted because their vote would not count. Does he believe that if we had a different voting system, people would be able to see that every single vote at the ballot box makes a big difference to who is elected on polling day? Does he share my concern on that?

**Luke Akehurst**: I do share my hon. Friend’s viewpoint, and I will come to that later in my remarks. We do not know how much turnout would increase in areas where it is now depressed because the outcome under first past the post appears to be a foregone conclusion. My hon. Friend anticipated the next thing I was going to say.

The current fracturing of the party system, with five parties getting more than 5% of the vote—the number is higher in Scotland and Wales—is probably here to stay. That means there are more marginal seats, more three or even four-cornered fights for marginal seats and more Members of Parliament elected on relatively low vote shares by historical standards. Ironically, that improves the range of viable choices for voters in many seats, and their chances of influencing the result in a meaningful way, because there are fewer safe seats. However, it is trying to pour a multi-party system into an electoral system designed for two parties, so it inevitably leads to more and more disproportional results, where the relationship between vote share and number of seats completely breaks down.

For instance, as has been mentioned, the Liberal Democrats got 72 MPs despite receiving more than half a million fewer votes than Reform, which got only five MPs. I do not blame the Liberal Democrats or my party

for seeking to maximise seats rather than votes—that is the game we are supposed to be playing with our current system—but it is difficult to go out to the public and objectively defend such surreal disproportionality. It increases public cynicism about their ability to influence politics.

My motivation for supporting a move to a more proportional voting system is therefore not that I think it will provide an immediate or long-term advantage to the party that I have dedicated my life to campaigning for, and I hope that Members of other parties would not be motivated by assuming that proportional representation will accrue immediate narrow party advantage at Labour's expense. On the contrary, as a social democrat, my approach to any critical question is based on the core principles of social justice, democracy and equality. That leads me to support a more proportional voting system, just as it leads me to egalitarian and redistributive answers to social and economic policy questions.

We should design an electoral system based not on whether it benefits us as individual politicians or our own parties at a specific moment, but on whether it delivers just and equitable outcomes that can logically be defended. In particular, we should apply the philosopher John Rawls' theory of justice and try to measure the impact of each electoral system on the most under-represented party and the most under-represented voter, and argue for a system that treats parties and voters as fairly and equitably as possible and that gives voters as equal influence as possible over who represents them and who governs the country.

**Mr Mohindra:** The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time and has made some valid points, although I may not agree with all of them. Does he believe that to ensure the electorate is fully represented, we need to go to the Australian model of forcing all constituents to go to the ballot box?

**Luke Akehurst:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention. I have looked at compulsory voting, which was advocated at one point by Lord Watson of Wyre Forest. I am open to the suggestion, but basically that is about forcing people to vote when we should be trying to enthuse them to vote through both how we do politics and how the system works.

All voters should have equal value wherever they live in the UK, but first past the post condemns millions of voters to living in electoral deserts where just one party dominates all Commons representation. There is no region or nation where that system reflects the diversity of the votes cast, and between different regions and nations it can benefit different parties. We need a system that sends to this place a mix of MPs from each region and nation who represent their political diversity and balance. First past the post privileges and makes powerful a relatively small number of swing voters in a small number of marginal seats, while giving little political power to the majority of voters in safer seats. That distorts our political process. Policies, campaign spending, where politicians visit, where activists travel to, messaging and advertising are all focused on swing voters in marginal seats, while elections in some safe seats can be quiet affairs.

When parties are in opposition, first past the post makes them narrower based. In recent Parliaments when Labour was down to a small parliamentary party, it

often appeared to be a sectional voice for big cities and university towns, which was unhealthy, even though we had millions of votes but few MPs in demographically different parts of the country. Now, the Conservative parliamentary party may appear to be dominated by rural interests as its votes in urban areas delivered few MPs. Both situations are unhealthy.

Support for proportional representation is now the consensus position at a grassroots level in the Labour party: polling says that 83% of grassroots members support it, and the vast majority of constituency Labour party members backed it when our annual conference voted in favour of electoral reform. In fact, I think it is the topic on which the largest number of local Labour parties has ever submitted motions.

Mixed Member systems used in places such as Germany and New Zealand prove that the undoubted merits of the constituency system, such as having a voice and champion for a specific geographical area in Parliament and giving voters greater access to us as local representatives, can be combined with a proportional element to produce stable and effective Governments—and, I would say, Governments who pursue the social democratic values that my party stands for. I hope that it will not be too long before the Labour Government align their stance on our voting systems with our guiding values of equality and democracy.

1.23 pm

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am a Liberal Democrat, a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections and a sponsor of the debate. It is a genuine delight to see hon. Members on both sides of the House talking about this issue, which is one of the founding principles of my party. I believe firmly, though, that we will bring about the change that our country needs only on a cross-party basis, which is why working on the APPG with the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), who opened the debate, and the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) is a delight. I look forward to working with them to deliver the change that we need.

The case for electoral reform is urgent and undeniable. First past the post is a system that no longer functions as a fair or effective mechanism for translating the will of the electorate into parliamentary representation. It is collapsing under its own weight. The time has come to take the first step in addressing this failure with the establishment of a national commission for electoral reform.

As colleagues across the House have mentioned, the 2024 general election was the most distorted in British history: Labour secured 63% of the seats with just 34% of the vote, while the Green party and Reform UK won almost 21% of the vote between them and received only nine seats. I will disagree with both those parties often and vigorously on different issues, but I defend their right to be represented when a number of people vote for them. Those results do not constitute fair representation; they represent a systemic failure.

The consequences of such an electoral mess are huge. The Electoral Reform Society has shown that 58% of those who voted in 2024 ended up with an MP they did not vote for, and that 85% of MPs were elected with under 50% of the vote, myself included. As others have mentioned, it now takes 24,000 votes to elect a Labour MP but 824,000 votes to elect a Reform UK MP.

[Lisa Smart]

Broader trends confirm the growing inadequacy of first past the post. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, voter turnout has fallen from 84% in 1950 to below 60% in 2024 and trust in politics is at an all-time low. A system that continues to distort electoral outcomes so significantly will only worsen this crisis.

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): We all recognise that trust is important in politics, and we are responsible for building that trust. One way in which we build trust is by being accountable, and the current system gives us accountability to our constituents within the defined area of our constituency. How would first past the post help build the accountability of a named person—a single MP—in that defined area?

**Lisa Smart:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for intervening. I think her question was probably about how PR would deliver accountability, not how first past the post would deliver accountability. I very much agree that accountability and the constituency link are really important. I am glad that the debate has not nerded out excessively on which is our favourite form of PR, but there are many systems operating in the different nations of the United Kingdom that deliver that constituency link. I very much agree that that is an important part of our democracy.

PR provides a clear alternative to what we are currently doing. It ensures that seats broadly match votes, that every voter has a meaningful say and that Governments represent the majority of the electorate. We already have proportional representation in the UK, just not here in Westminster. In Scotland's Parliament, 93% of voters have at least one representative they voted for, while in Westminster that figure stands at just 42% according to the Electoral Reform Society. PR in different forms is already used in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as in the vast majority of democracies worldwide, so why not here? Evidence shows that PR leads to higher voter turnout, more representative Governments and more stable policymaking.

For a long time, the question of electoral reform has been viewed as an abstract debate—indeed, with people arguing over d'Hondt versus single transferrable vote—rather than one that is integral to democratic legitimacy. It is neither sustainable nor responsible to continue governing under a system where a party can form a large majority on barely a third of the vote. It is reckless to maintain an electoral model that so consistently produces such wildly disproportionate groups of MPs and leaves millions of voters feeling ignored. If these trends are allowed to continue, it is not difficult to see how turnout will fall further, results will become even more distorted and political instability will grow.

I am a Lib Dem—I outed myself earlier—and I enjoy speaking with and listening to voters. I am also a fan of a bar chart on my leaflets.

**Mr Mohindra:** Are they accurate?

**Lisa Smart:** I am delighted to report that my bar charts have been measured and are accurate to the millimetre.

**Luke Akehurst** *rose*—

**Lisa Smart:** I would be delighted to give way on that subject.

**Luke Akehurst:** Does the hon. Lady accept that one of the great advantages of moving to a proportional voting system would be that there would be no need to put any bar charts on any leaflets—it would be highly misleading to do so—that there would be no “two-horse race” graphics or squeeze messaging, and everyone would be able to vote for the party they really wanted?

**Lisa Smart:** I could not have been more delighted to welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I wonder if he has been listening in to the Hazel Grove constituency Liberal Democrat executive meetings. I agree with the hon. Gentleman, though. When thinking about how to vote, I would much rather—as, I imagine, would a number of voters—talk about values, principles and policies, instead of a rather grim-looking canvasser pointing earnestly at a bar chart, worried about who might get in if the vote splits. PR would be better for our politics and better for our communities.

There is widespread and growing support for change, both in Parliament and across the country. A national commission for electoral reform would provide the necessary first step towards finally addressing the failures of first past the post—a step that must be taken well before the next general election. To ignore the urgency of this issue would be to further undermine our democracy.

Governments are not always known for doing things that they do not see as being in their best interest; however, like a number of colleagues across the House, I argue that proportional representation is in our whole country's interest, and that is why I urge the Government to act. The public are watching, and the demand for fair representation cannot be ignored forever—our democracy depends on it.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We have to get everybody in, so we are going to have a speaking limit of five minutes. I call Jas Athwal.

1.30 pm

**Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): Although I do not want to upset the camaraderie going back and forth across the Chamber, this is debate, and this is democracy. I am sure we can all agree that no voting system is perfect; we are choosing between imperfect systems. That is a fact. We must decide based on what works best for our country, and PR is not the panacea that everybody is talking about today.

In 2011, we put the question to the British people. They overwhelmingly rejected the alternative vote system, choosing to stick with first past the post.

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): On Monday morning, I visited the year 10 citizenship class at St Peter's school in Bournemouth, where I spoke with several young people, including Ozzie, who was only just born at the time of the last vote. He asked me whether I agreed that too many people feel their vote does not count, that too many younger people feel disconnected from democracy, and that the continuation of first past the post will leave more people—particularly younger people—disconnected from democracy.

**Jas Athwal:** I thank the hon. Member. The other thing I would like to say is that when we are over-reliant on statistics, it says something. I will come on to statistics as well, if I am allowed.

I have had the privilege of living in my constituency for half a century—more than 50 years. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities that Ilford has given to me. A staunch Conservative constituency has now become a staunch Labour constituency, although, over the years, I have seen many MPs from both parties. Of course, that is how the democratic process works.

Like hon. Members across the Chamber, I am devoted to my constituency. Each and every day, I serve my neighbours, fighting for investment in Ilford, representing their views and ensuring that I speak up on the issues that matter most to all of them. Only last week, in this Chamber, I raised the issue of democratic backsliding and human rights in Pakistan, a subject that is incredibly important to many of my neighbours, who have friends and families in the region.

I am accountable to the people of Ilford South, and I take my role and my relationship with my constituents seriously. Under a PR voting system, the personal and local links that I so value with my constituents would be lost. A PR system would make it harder for local concerns to be represented and addressed. It would take politicians away from our communities and hollow out the vital relationships between representative and constituent. The British Academy's analysis of closed PR systems suggests that under PR, politicians are not beholden to their constituents—the tie is loosened and accountability is degraded.

**Mr Mohindra:** Like the hon. Gentleman, I come from a local government background. Does he agree that when voting for a councillor, as he was, constituents are more likely to vote for individuals than parties and to do so based on the effectiveness of that individual rather than just the party branding?

**Jas Athwal:** I think it is about being pragmatic in our response, being pragmatic with our residents, and making the right decisions.

**Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Jas Athwal:** I will made some headway, because I can see the clock ticking.

Another key weakness of PR systems is that they almost inevitably create coalition Governments. We know what happens there. No one votes for coalition Governments. Instead, they are created by agreements hammered out in dark rooms, behind closed doors—they are Frankenstein Governments, which undermine the popular vote. When voters cannot predict the consequences of their votes, coalitions circumvent the will of the people, and when creating an effective Opposition becomes an impossibility, democracies fail. Colleagues should be careful what they wish for: they may get a better vote share and better representation, but they may not get better outcomes, which is what is important to our constituents.

It is our duty in this place to protect the democratic process. It is also our duty to effectively govern to the best of our ability, deliver the promises of our manifesto

and create the change that our constituents voted for. PR systems create unstable Governments with weak foundations and constant compromise.

We are all too aware of the consequences of Government instability and the impact that can have on people's lives—promises broken, legislation delayed, injustice prolonged. Look at our neighbours in Europe. In Belgium, the federal elections in 2019 paralysed their political system, leading to more than 500 days of deliberation, compromise and bartering before they finally formed a Government. It took almost two years of debate before a seven-party coalition was created—a coalition nobody voted for. The role of government is to change people's lives, to legislate and to act. Instead, PR systems grind Governments to a halt. Contrast that with the first 100 days of this Government, though hon. Members sitting on the other side of the Chamber may not like the decisions made.

Effective democratic systems ensure accountability and enable delivery. On those two tests, PR systems fail.

1.38 pm

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I associate myself with the comments of many other hon. Members today, and thank the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for introducing the debate.

This debate comes at a crucial time. We are in a world characterised by democratic decline and falling trust in institutions. Without public belief in making change through democratic debate, political pluralism and representation from people who listen to them, we have a society vulnerable to exploitation by populist division and tyranny. First past the post adds to these risks. Those who seek to distort our national conversation from outside, using money and influence to pursue their own agenda, can see dangled in front of them the huge prize of what is virtually absolute power if they can achieve the slimmest of margins to reach first place in a volatile system. A two-party system, which first past the post assumes, is, in fact, long out of date.

As other hon. Members have said, the most recent UK general election was the most disproportionate on record. Not only did 58% of voters not receive an elected official of their choosing, but the election was one of the most disproportionate elections to a primary chamber anywhere in the world. People are voting in historic numbers for parties other than the Conservatives and Labour, representing different views across the political spectrum and bringing in points of view from across our island's different nations, yet this Parliament does not come close to correctly reflecting that shift. We have a Parliament that is highly misrepresentative of the public's preferences and a Government with a huge majority but only 33.7% of people's preferences. That seems unbalanced and unrepresentative to me.

I am not here to make arguments that are only in my own self-interest. Proportionality is not the goal here; a better politics is. It is not just parties, but minority groups and the interests of groups who might be ignored, face discrimination or are geographically spread out, and whose interests do not often get a fair look-in when a large majority in this House is elected by only swing voters in marginal constituencies.

Like other Members from different parties, I was for many years a member of the London Assembly, elected under PR to scrutinise and hold to account a Mayor

[*Siân Berry*]

elected within a modified alternative vote system. I came here to this building to give evidence to the relevant all-party parliamentary group of the time in that capacity. I talked about how, as a London-wide member, working alongside constituency Members, my role was often to listen to groups who were not necessarily getting the ear of their constituency Member or the Mayor, and who were trying to highlight issues that were happening to people like them in pockets all around London.

**Mr Mohindra:** Will the hon. Member explain how constituency casework would be done? As constituency MPs, we all represent a defined area of the population. Is the hon. Member suggesting a two-tier system, where she will instead just sweep up from the constituency MP? Is she effectively asking for two tiers of MPs?

**Siân Berry:** Yes, exactly. I am describing the different kinds of work that different kinds of Members in the additional member system can do and how that benefits equality and representation. I am not making a party political point at all. I think members from other parties in the London Assembly can give examples of ways in which they have reached out and heard from people in different parts of London who have brought issues to prominence in the Assembly. In the case of the Green party, we can talk about council estate residents, private renters, young people, disabled people and older people, and the way that bringing their voices into the Assembly had a positive influence on the London Mayor's policies and made him a positive advocate for helping to reduce the number of demolitions, for rent controls, for toilets on the London tube, and for youth services. That is very positive.

**Paul Holmes:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Siân Berry:** I will press on, because I have one more point to make.

That shows a contrast with the current system for general elections, where people believe that the national politics conversation does not necessarily involve them. We find that millions of people around the country are never canvassed or courted on the doorstep at all. They are taken for granted, and that is really poor. As the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley said, the Members for those seats are called to other parts of the country, when they would prefer to be knocking on doors in their own.

On solutions, we urgently need an independent national commission on electoral reform. I want that done by the Government as soon as possible. The commission should look at how local councils and other bodies can be elected, too. We have an opportunity, presented by imminent local government reorganisation—the creation of combined authorities and potentially very large councils—to shift to a more proportional system, potentially using multi-member wards and the single transferable vote. That is the system used in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. It is incredibly simple for voters to cast their preferences. The election counts are extremely exciting—almost like the final stages of “Strictly”—and it delivers remarkably proportional results. It delivers candidates based on consensus, not division. Importantly, it delivers for many people: not only hardworking representatives in the administration but

people whose job it is to listen and represent them from opposition parties. That could help with the potential remoteness of the uber councils that are being talked about. That should be looked at by the commission as well. I will end there.

1.44 pm

**Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I want to start by putting on record that I am a long-standing advocate of a more proportional electoral system for our general elections. My belief is that any system to replace first past the post needs to balance two core features: to preserve the vital link between a Member of Parliament and a constituency; and to consider a top-up mechanism, whereby additional seats are allocated in direct proportion to votes cast.

No model is perfect. As my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race) said, there is a lot of merit in the additional member system used in Holyrood. I do not want to focus my remarks today on the intricacies of alternative systems, or even the principled argument for reform in too much detail. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) and others have already made that case with conviction and I suspect that others will do so later. I want to focus on how we could build consensus for electoral reform, and what timeframe is both desirable and realistic.

One thing we must avoid is the spectacle of a new Westminster Government winning power and then legislating quickly to change to the system if they believe it to be in their self-interest. We saw a version of that in the last Parliament. The Conservative Government had a minority of MPs in London, but legislated through the Elections Act of 2022 to change the London mayoral system back to first past the post, a system that they believed would suit them well. For Westminster elections, nothing would do more damage to trust than if something similar were to happen. Any suggestion that the winner gets to set the rules of the next contest would be dangerous.

Where does that lead us? I am afraid, inevitably, it leads to a referendum. Speaking as someone who voted yes to AV in 2011 and remain in 2016, it is fair to say that I make the case with some trepidation, but I believe it must be made. If we are to change an electoral system that has been in place for over 100 years, it would require a national conversation and a clear and direct mandate from the electorate. I do not believe there is a mandate for a referendum in this Parliament, but there is an opportunity to build consensus across multiple parties to be ready for the next Parliament. That could be the defining work of the independent commission which has been referenced.

The year 2031 is likely to be midway through the next Parliament. It would also be 20 years since everyone in the United Kingdom was last asked to endorse a change in the electoral system. That referendum was rushed. The alternative vote system proposed appeared to be the first choice of nobody and, I am afraid for those of us who supported it, its rejection by voters was emphatic. Much has changed in our politics since then, but all of us who support a fairer system need to learn from 2011 and seek to build a case for change in a much more considered way. I believe we have the time—the time to build consensus on the best proportional system for



Westminster; time to make the case within each of our parties that a referendum is the only way to earn a mandate for meaningful electoral reform; and time to propose a date and make the case for it. It might seem distant today, but 2031 is a generation on from the last referendum and that strikes me as a fair time to ask the question again.

**Paul Holmes:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is giving a typically brilliant speech—we used to talk to each other in the boardroom of Clarion Housing Group, where we worked together—and his idea of a referendum is interesting. If a referendum were held and the result was 52:48 to keep the current system, would he expect the Liberal Democrats to keep asking that the question be put again and again and again?

**Andrew Lewin:** That feels like more of a question for our in-office chats from a few years ago. I will not comment on the potential reaction of another party, but I will say that I would abide by all referendum results even though that would be three in three and a pretty bad track record for me.

It is time to propose a date and stick to it. First past the post has endured for more than 100 years. If we are to convince a majority of the public that a more proportional system will better serve their interests in Westminster, as I think it will, six years is not so long to wait. Despite my track record, I remain optimistic that, if we had a referendum, third time around I could finally be on the winning side.

1.49 pm

**Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank the hon. Members for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) and for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) for securing a debate on this important topic.

I will endeavour not to repeat the remarks that have been made so eloquently by other Members, but I must start by also thanking the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) for referring to the question that I asked the Deputy Prime Minister a few weeks ago: that is perhaps as close to fame as I will get in this Chamber. He was right to observe that the Deputy Prime Minister requires persuasion on this point, although hopefully the eloquent and articulate contributions of Members on both sides of the House will help to achieve that and gain her support for the APPG's request for a national commission on electoral reform.

For me, there are three key arguments in favour of proportional representation. First, there is currently a clear gap between how people vote and the outcome—namely the Parliament that they get, and thus the Government—and they do not necessarily feel invested in the result. Let me address the point made by the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst). The 2024 general election was, probably for the first time, quite a proportional one for the Liberal Democrats in its ratio of vote share to the number of MPs we have. Indeed, if I may be perfectly candid—at the risk of incurring the wrath of my colleagues—in parts of the country where we have more proportional systems, we do not always perform quite so well, so we are certainly not campaigning for this change on the basis of self-interest. It has, in

fact, been a very long-standing Liberal Democrat and, indeed, Liberal commitment, and I will say more about that shortly.

Secondly, the current system is not engaging people. As has already been mentioned, turnouts are declining. In 2024, a record low of 58% voted for the two largest parties, Labour and Conservative, while one in three said that they had voted tactically for someone other than their preferred candidate or party member. Indeed, when many voters were telling me on the doorstep that they would be voting tactically for me, I pledged to commit myself wholly, so that I would not have to ask them to do that again in the future, and that is partly why I am here today.

**Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): My hon. Friend speaks of low turnout. I would be grateful for his opinion on whether a switch to an electoral system of proportional representation would be to the deficit of any particular parties in the House, and whether that is reflected in their turnout at this debate.

**Olly Glover:** There is certainly a clear variation in the representation of parties in the House for this debate. However, I agree with other colleagues who have said that while we do not necessarily know how people will vote if they are given a more proportional voting system, that is all the more reason for us to have one, so that people can feel they can vote with their hearts and not with their heads or, indeed, on the basis of a bar chart of whatever level of accuracy—[*Interruption.*] I should emphasise that mine are always spot on.

Thirdly, proportional representation would deliver less adversarial and more inclusive and discursive politics, which has the potential to improve policy, governance and tone—things which many people find frustrating in our current system. Parties would no longer be able to govern alone with as little as a third of the vote, and would have to do so with others. That is not a problem but a benefit of moving to a proportional system, because Governments would represent a majority of voters and would have to work together to represent the various platforms of the parties concerned.

The United Kingdom is highly anomalous in retaining first past the post. Very few other European countries do so. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) made a point about coalitions. I hope he is equally condemnatory of coalitions that Labour has had with other parties—for example, the coalition with the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish Parliament in the late 1990s, and, in Wales, the need to rely on minority support from either the Liberal Democrats or Plaid Cymru at various times.

As for those who scaremonger or are worried about the stability of countries with proportional representation, let us consider some examples from Europe. The hon. Member for Ilford South cited Belgium. Well, Belgium has a better GDP per capita than we do, and, if I may defend a nation that is so often mocked, the only real crime of the Belgians is preferring mayonnaise to ketchup on their chips, rather than their electoral system. Let us consider Norway, a highly prosperous nation that has made wise decisions such as creating a sovereign wealth fund from its precious oil resources, something from which this country would have benefited had we done the same. Switzerland, which also has proportional representation and regular coalition Governments, has

[Olly Glover]

the most punctual railway in Europe, and 100% of it is electrified compared to our derisory percentage somewhere in the 30s. Poland, a new democracy with 30 years of the fastest economic growth in Europe, also has proportional representation and coalition Governments. I put it to the House that we have very little to fear, and a great deal to gain.

As I said earlier, the Liberal Democrats and the Liberal party have called for fair votes for a century, and we continue to lead the campaign for fundamental reform of the electoral system. I will go where my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove did not, and say that it is wrong to suggest that preferential and proportional systems prevent individual accountability. The single transferable vote system is highly proportional and also, critically, retains voters' ability to vote for individual candidates or not, if they choose. I agree with Conservative Members who have described that as an important principle. Reform is needed to address the need for fair representation in politics, and to improve the engagement of members of the public. Not to take action would further erode trust in politics and politicians, and would increase the risk of people voting for more extreme options next time out of frustration with the current system.

1.55 pm

**Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for opening the debate so eloquently, and I am grateful for the many excellent contributions that we have heard from Members on both sides of the House.

As a member of both the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform and the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections, I consider it a real privilege to be speaking in this debate. Back in 1996 I was a United Nations volunteer in Bosnia, which was holding its first elections after the Dayton peace agreement; I was there to make sure that those elections were free and fair. It was very moving to be involved in ensuring that the postal ballots of people whose lives had been so disrupted by ethnic cleansing were received and were counted. That underlined for me the importance of giving everyone the chance to vote, and to know that their vote counts.

It pains me that here we are, in Britain in 2025, and those things are not true. We have heard many other Members talk about the disengagement with politics today, which I think is reflected in turnouts—not everyone is voting—and we have seen some of that further undermined by the last Conservative Government, who denied people votes through the introduction of voter ID. Independent oversight is also important for free and fair elections, yet the Electoral Commission has again been weakened. Many aspects of our democracy have been undermined, with the result that people do not feel confident that their vote and their voice count. As we have heard, millions have found themselves unrepresented in this Parliament, with six out of 10 voters ending up with a local MP for whom they did not vote.

We have heard today about the extent of tactical voting. I was elected in a marginal seat up in Shipley. We have been told that across the country, one in three people voted tactically. Like the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), I spent a great deal of time on the doorstep trying to persuade people who would otherwise have voted Liberal Democrat, or indeed

Green, that we needed to join forces, and asking them please to lend me their vote. While I am extremely grateful to the many voters who did indeed lend me their votes, and whom I now stand here and represent—and, of course, I would love it if they voted for me again at the next general election—I would prefer them to vote for their first preference, as, indeed, would they.

That is true of marginal seats, but we have also heard today that in safe seats many people feel disenfranchised, concluding that it is not even worth voting for the party they would otherwise support because it will not make a difference. Even those who are voting for the party that is winning those safe seats feel that they are under-represented, because if there is a very large majority, many of those votes are still represented by only one person in this place. For all sorts of reasons, people do not feel that their vote counts, and this is breeding distrust in politics. Just 12% of people in this country trust political parties. We have to reverse that. People must feel that their voice counts, and it does not help when political parties campaign only in marginal seats.

I turn to the benefits of PR, for which I am a strong advocate. I saw as a young politics student in Germany how PR led to more stable government. In my work in health and social care, I saw Governments elected under PR in the Netherlands and Germany pursuing long-term strategic policies on key issues such as social care reform, on which there is much common ground between Members from across the House. It was consensual and collaborative politics.

We know that the public do not like the heckling and braying that is common in this place on a Wednesday lunchtime. Some of our best debates are those in which we are in some agreement—for example, on climate and nature, or on violence against women and girls. I hope that with a system of PR, we would have better politics, and that is why I support the establishment of a national commission for electoral reform. The Government could get on the front foot, show that they are serious about addressing our unrepresentative voting system, and stem the rise in disengagement and distrust in politics. We could bring the public with us and rebuild trust in our democracy.

2 pm

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): I thank the Members who secured this debate. They have brought to the House a very important issue that I and many of my constituents care deeply about.

The UK's history of electoral reform is one of slow, gradual change. There is much frustration now with our politics, and I am sure that soon it will lead to greater demand for electoral reform. British history is full of us taking the right and necessary steps, only for people on the wrong side of history to decry them as the end of the world as we know it. Examples of that are giving Catholics the vote in 1829, making the ballot private in 1872, and granting women suffrage in 1928. When we look upon the past, we laugh at how silly the country used to be. Who is to say that the way we view the past is not the way future generations will view us?

As a young teenager in the February 1974 general election, I was—and continue to be—filled with frustration and a sense of unfairness by our electoral system. The Liberal party won 19.3% of the vote—more than half the votes the Conservatives got—but it won only 14 seats,

versus the Tories' 297. Under proportional representation, the Liberals would have won 123 seats, the Labour party 236 and the Conservatives only 240. This obvious unfairness in our system still drives my personal politics today.

We need to fundamentally change our electoral system. It is undemocratic that under the UK's electoral system, not all votes count in the same way. First past the post feeds public disillusionment in politics because it leaves millions of people feeling that their votes are irrelevant, just like those in our past. Although the injustice may not seem as obvious as the injustice of withholding the right to vote on the basis of faith, wealth or gender, the system essentially withholds the right to vote based on geographic location. With so many voters now so disillusioned with the first-past-the-post system, will the Minister commit to being on the right side of history, and deliver the change in our electoral system that the nation really needs?

2.3 pm

**Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): I thank those who secured this debate on a really important issue. I hope all of us here are committed to the fundamental principle that we should have a functioning, representative democracy; and that elections should reflect the will of the people, and endow this place with the democratic legitimacy to make laws and form Governments that govern the country in the best interests of the people.

Principles are tough, but we have to stick to them. I am conscious, as I argue in favour of proportional representation and electoral reform, that had there been a different system in the election last year, the natural consequence would have been more Members in the mould of the hon. Members for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), and for Clacton (Nigel Farage). We have to take the rough with the smooth and accept that legitimacy is important, and that the will of the people should be reflected in the number of seats that parties secure in this place.

Members have very ably made the point that the system simply does not reflect the will of the people. At our most recent general election, 58% of people who voted ended up with an MP they did not vote for. Some 554 Members of this House were elected with less than 50% of the vote. The trajectory is that turnout is declining, and the legitimacy of this place will inevitably start to decline as well. Decades ago, parties used to need close to 50% of the vote to win a majority; last year, the Government secured 34% of the vote. It is possible that there will be Governments in the future who secure even less of the popular vote.

We have known that this system is failing for many, many years. It has been discussed historically a number of times—we had the Jenkins commission; there was a royal commission in 1910; and there was a Speaker's Conference in 1917. In fact, the Representation of the People Act 1918 was where we got closest to reform. Not only did it secure votes for women, but the initial draft of the Bill legislated for an alternative vote in single-Member constituencies and PR in multi-Member constituencies. Of course, single-Member constituencies are relatively new; for the majority of the history of this place, we had multi-Member constituencies.

As Members can tell, I was looking back through the history of how PR has advanced, or not, in this place. I was very taken with an argument made by Herbert

Fisher, a Liberal President of the Board of Education 100 years ago. He had a florid way of speaking, but I thought I would repeat his words:

"I see before me and around me prosperous and popular heroes of many a stricken electoral field, members who have entered into every home, subscribed to every fund, and by a thousand and one meritorious processes have acquired what is known as the 'intimate touch' with their constituencies. It is very natural that such hon. Members who have laboriously perfected themselves in the polite art of electoral intimacy should be unwilling to see any relaxation or change of system."—[*Official Report*, 13 May 1918; Vol. 106, c. 66.]

It is natural, when we have been put in this place by a system, to be reluctant to change it. We need to be bold and make the case for electoral reform, even though the system we want to replace is the one that got us here.

Sadly, a century on, we have made very little progress. I am glad that the debate is being held today, and I endorse the arguments made for a national commission. We are so behind other countries in this respect. It has been pointed out that we are in the minority of democratic countries in having a first-past-the-post system—130 other democracies use PR or a mixed-Member system. I hope that through this debate and the hard work of Members who continually raise the issue and call for a commission, we can eventually put a proposal to the people of this country, so that they can ultimately make a decision. I was very taken by the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), who talked constructively about how we get to that point. I hope that the decision will be taken to adopt PR—the system that is, in the words of Churchill, when it comes to addressing

"constitutional injustice... incomparably the fairest, the most scientific and, on the whole... in the public interest"—[*Official Report*, 2 June 1931; Vol. 253, c. 102.]

2.8 pm

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): How we vote and how we select who governs this country is, by nature, a topic of huge national significance, and one that is too often pushed to the sidelines. I have been a member of the Liberal party, now the Liberal Democrats, since I was 17. Fighting for a fairer system of electoral representation is key to my political mooring and my party's fight for a fairer democracy for the British people.

I am the mother of four children. I have one daughter. She is as clever as she is beautiful. Last year, she produced a report on voting systems across the world, including in Russia, South America, Africa, America, the European Union and here. Her analysis showed incontrovertibly that proportional systems are much fairer, including for women, those who are disabled and those from an ethnic minority. This is not just about the bar charts or the figures; it is about real fairness. In the most recent election, we saw a Government elected to power on the lowest vote share for over 20 years, with the lowest proportion of the electorate's support since 1918. Just 20% of registered voters cast their ballot for the Labour party. Four out of five voters either voted for somebody else or did not vote at all.

One of the so-called merits of the first-past-the-post system is that it is designed to deliver a clean winner, but this is illusory. Reaching back through the annals of British electoral history, we see that 1931 was the last time a governing party secured over 50% of the vote share. The towering majorities secured under our system

[Rachel Gilmour]

were delivered not on the basis of a representative vote, but through the quirks and idiocies of a flawed system. When first past the post does not deliver a towering majority, it delivers exactly the sort of instability that it is designed to avoid. Did the 2017 election produce a clear winner, leading to a strong and stable Government? The former Member for Maidenhead could answer that one for us.

For too long, the parties of red and blue have taken the British people for granted. In last summer's general election, Labour and the Conservatives returned their lowest combined vote share in the age of universal suffrage, yet their combined seats still dwarf those of all other parties in this place. Some 57.8% of voters had to settle for an MP they did not vote for, including my constituents. That hardly seems right or fair. The evidence of a broken system is clear for all to see. What on earth has happened to true majority rule?

Another argument in support of the first-past-the-post system relates to its simplicity. I agree that our democratic process should be simple, but what is simpler than people being able to vote for the party that they believe in, rather than feeling that they have to vote tactically? The system is not fair, and it is not proportional. I and my colleagues in my party will continue to fight hard to raise awareness about its unfairness, not because it is the politically expedient thing to do—as has been pointed out, we did rather well under first past the post at the last general election—but because it is the right thing to do.

If anyone's argument against a fairer electoral system is that they might disagree with whom the British people vote for, I would ask them to consider why they make such an argument—because it is not out of service to the British people.

2.12 pm

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), and the hon. Members for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) and for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns), for securing this debate.

As Members have mentioned, we met thousands of voters face to face in the general election campaign, and by far the most depressing conversations I had were with the many people who had lost trust in our Government institutions, our politicians and our democratic process. I absolutely do not think the voters are to blame for that loss of trust, which is partly due to the last decade, in which a chaotic Government lurched from crisis to crisis; to corruption scandals; and to the decline of local services. That drove a lot of people to opt out of the election, resulting in the poor turnout figures to which Members have referred—the lowest for 20 years. I do not think that is because of apathy; alienation from our political system is a fundamental threat to our democracy.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race) that we should not for one minute think that electoral reform alone will solve this issue. The central task of this Government is to deliver rising living standards, rising wages and improved public services. That will help restore the electorate's faith in politics, and faith that the Government will deliver on things that people care about.

**Mr Mohindra:** How does the hon. Gentleman think his party is doing on those criteria?

**Joe Powell:** We have record levels of investment, record rises in wages and the fastest-growing economy in Europe. The upgrades from the International Monetary Fund and the OECD speak for themselves.

The issue that we are focusing on today, fixing our democratic plumbing, matters too. The Prime Minister said that restoring trust in politics is the “battle that defines our age”,

and I believe that we can earn that trust by ensuring that people feel heard and have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

**Paul Holmes:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

**Joe Powell:** I will make a bit of progress.

We need to ensure that the voice of the people matters. That is the foundation of my belief in electoral reform: if done right, with appropriate models for different levels of government, it can help to rebuild faith in our democratic system so that we do not end up being more polarised, with more alienation, which leads to extreme politics and populism.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) that today is not the time to go into models, but I think we can retain the constituency link and expand choice, as in the Australian model, which gives local winners a degree of preference from a majority of the voters in their district through ranked choice voting. An excellent analysis from Lewis Baston on Sam Freedman's website explains how the Australian model could be appropriate for us. It is easily understood and encourages engagement across the spectrum, beyond the swing voters that otherwise become the predominant focus of elections.

Although I support electoral reform for Westminster elections, there is a straightforward policy change that the Government should consider immediately: restoring the ranked choice voting system for mayoral elections. That system worked perfectly well in London and other mayoralities, because it allows voters to express preferences and ensures that winners have broad support. Its removal was a regressive and self-interested step—it failed in London—by the previous Government, who actively tried to reduce voter choice and participation. I hope the Government will consider restoring that system in any future elections Bill that is being discussed.

Finally, I will briefly address another threat to our democracy that the APPG for fair elections is focusing on: the role of foreign billionaires in distorting political discourse, and the risk of overseas donations into our politics. There are still far too many loopholes in our electoral financing rules, leaving us vulnerable to foreign interference. I hope the Government will consider implementing reforms to address these serious issues in any future elections Bill, because if we are serious about defending democracy, we need transparency and safeguards against those with deep pockets who seek to warp our democratic institutions.

Our current system is failing to command public trust. That is the foundation of my belief in electoral reform. If we continue down this path, we risk losing something far greater than individual elections; we risk

losing people's faith in democracy itself. I am confident that our Government will deliver on their key missions, which will go a long way towards restoring the public's trust and confidence, but our democratic plumbing matters too, and it is time for an upgrade.

2.17 pm

**Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): As the Member of Parliament for St Austell and Newquay, I represent a constituency that exemplifies the rich diversity and complexity of political identity in Britain. I will use it as a geographical case study for today's debate.

From the fishing communities of Mevagissey and the supposed surfers' paradise of Newquay, which is actually quite a multifaceted town, to the clay country villages near St Austell, many of my constituents share a Cornish identity but are also shaped by a complex mix of cultural, social and economic factors. Such diversity should be reflected in our politics, but that is often not the case under first past the post. The current electoral system obscures the complexity, oversimplifies the intricate patchwork of overlapping political identities, and denies many voters the choice to express them.

Too often, our electoral system functions to maintain and reinforce rigid political boundaries that do not always reflect the nuanced and diverse beliefs of our communities, which entrenches social division rather than fostering the kind of constructive, consensus-building politics that we need in modern Britain, and which we in Cornwall are quite used to.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): May I put it to the hon. Gentleman that the opposite is the case? Our system requires coalitions to be formed. Political parties are broad coalitions in order to overcome that disadvantage and get over the electoral hurdle. In systems that are proportional, parties can secure electoral representation and be much more choosy about their ideological base, in the expectation that they will still get sufficient parliamentary representation. As a consequence, parties make their coalitions after an election, stitched up around a programme that nobody voted for.

**Noah Law:** The right hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point about the nature of coalition building, which takes place in both systems.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Following up on that point, does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in our current system, people vote for what can actually be very loose coalitions? Our electoral system forces us to have very large coalitions in order to form a Government, but voters do not know which parts of those coalitions they are going to get after an election.

**Noah Law:** Both the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) and the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) raise important points about the imperfections in all systems, and about being mindful that coalition building is a feature of all systems.

In St Austell and Newquay, my constituents are as diverse in their perspectives as they are in their daily lives. Many feel a deep-rooted connection to Cornish culture, heritage and even nationhood. Socially and economically, they navigate very different realities. Some

are tied to the rural economy, others are engaged in tourism and trade, and many have livelihoods shaped by the seasonal nature of coastal life. Others have stronger ties to the industrial economy, which is seeing a much-needed resurgence—in some ways, that means that having a Labour MP in the area is long overdue.

Although Cornwall is, in many ways, a conservative part of Britain, we have a shared belief in fairness, economic justice and the principle that hard work should be rewarded. These shared values must be reflected in our system. The consensus building we do through this patchwork should be the by-product of a system rather than simply the result of the good will and shared values we have in Cornwall.

Under the current system, many voters feel that their vote fails to express those nuances, which can lead to disengagement, disillusionment and a sense that the political system does not serve them. Moreover, the political boundaries fostered by the first-past-the-post system make social integration more difficult, often deepening ignorance, polarisation and division. Sadly, a winner-takes-all system does not encourage dialogue or co-operation, but entrenches an adversarial style of government in which short-term victories are prioritised over long-term solutions.

By contrast, a more proportionate system would ensure that political views are not distorted or diluted in the same way. It would allow for greater plurality, meaning that every vote carries more weight, no matter where in the country it is cast. Moving to such a system would enhance our democracy and ensure that Parliament better represents the broad spectrum of views held by the electorate.

Just because I deny the primacy of first past the post, it does not mean that I think change should come overnight, without serious discussion or without being the democratic will of the British people. The electoral reform we seek is a significant undertaking and must be done in a way that strengthens rather than undermines our democratic institutions. If we truly believe that every vote matters and that politics must reflect the diversity of this country, we must be willing to have that serious conversation.

The political identity and plurality of St Austell and Newquay deserve recognition in our electoral system. No matter their chosen industry, cultural identity or economic status, my constituents should have confidence that their votes are represented and included in our democracy—one that acknowledges the full spectrum of views in our community.

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

2.23 pm

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) and all members of the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections for securing this important debate.

It has been an exciting few months for the cause of fair votes in Parliament, and I am pleased to see Members of so many political parties advocating proportional representation in today's debate. At the end of last year, I was delighted that a Bill I had introduced to this

[Sarah Olney]

House, calling for the establishment of proportional representation, was voted through to Second Reading. I thank every single Member who backed that Bill. It was the first time that Parliament voted in favour of PR, and I am determined that we will achieve that goal in this Parliament.

But I must also express my disappointment. Despite the Bill receiving the House's express support on First Reading, it has not been given parliamentary time to allow it to progress through the legislative process.

**Paul Holmes:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Sarah Olney:** People across the country are fed up with first past the post. The 2024 election was the most disproportionate in history, with the Government winning two thirds of the seats on one third of the vote—the second biggest majority of seats for any Government since the second world war on the lowest share of the vote ever recorded for a winning party. I think we can all agree that such distorted results are not healthy for our democracy.

**Paul Holmes:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Sarah Olney:** It is no surprise that we are seeing record levels of disillusionment with the political process, with citizens becoming increasingly disengaged. This is reflected in the fact that turnout at the 2024 general election was the second lowest since 1918, at just under 60%. More than 40% of registered voters in the UK thought so little of the political process that they did not think it worth expressing a preference for one candidate over another.

Trust in politics will not improve if the public keep getting Parliaments that do not represent the balance of votes cast. This Parliament is the one that least represents how the country voted of any in history.

**Paul Holmes:** Will the hon. Lady now give way?

**Sarah Olney:** I will not give way.

**Paul Holmes:** Why?

**Sarah Olney:** There was no Back-Bench speech from any Member of your party, and you will have your opportunity in a minute.

**Paul Holmes:** Very democratic of you.

**Sarah Olney:** Your Back Benchers could have spoken in this debate.

There are many urgent and pressing challenges facing the UK today, but it is essential that the vast majority of its citizens actively support the mechanisms by which decisions are made to address them. Increasing levels of disengagement threaten our ability to respond both to immediate challenges and to long-term issues.

The Liberal Democrats believe, and have always believed, that a fair voting system is the essential bedrock of a functioning democracy. Democracy has proved to be the most effective and enduring of governing systems because it relies on a broad base of support across the population. A faulty voting system that delivers a majority

Government on a minority vote undermines democracy and its ability to deliver effective government. In the face of growing worldwide threats to democratic Governments and institutions, the UK urgently needs to reassert the value of participative democracy as an essential component of peaceful and prosperous societies.

I am glad to know that support for electoral reform comes not only from Liberal Democrat Members but from across the House. I am pleased that Labour Members, in particular, agree that we need proportional representation, after their conference voted overwhelmingly in favour of PR two years ago. More importantly, recent polling shows that a majority of the British public is now in favour of scrapping first past the post and moving to proportional representation.

I welcome the establishment and the work of the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections, which launched last year with the support of more than 100 MPs. Its report, "Free But Not Fair", highlights many of the structural issues that have led to the decline of public trust in politics and engagement with elections.

I thank everybody for their contributions. The hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) is not in her place, but she made some important interventions. This issue may come under her remit as Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, so I hope she will consider giving it more attention.

I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas), for Hazel Grove, for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) and for Wokingham (Clive Jones) for their excellent contributions. I was particularly struck when my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham talked about how, in the past, we discriminated by wealth, gender and religion in selecting who could vote, whereas we now discriminate by geography. That is one of the key things we would overcome by replacing our voting system.

The Liberal Democrats share the pain of the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice). In 2017, we won 12 seats with 7.5% of the vote; in 2019, we won 11 seats with 12% of the vote; and in 2024, we won 72 seats with 12.2% of the vote. Just because, by some miracle of first past the post, we now have a proportion of seats that represents our proportion of votes, it does not dilute in any way our support for a more proportional voting system. I am glad we have the support of the hon. Gentleman and his Reform UK colleagues.

We must take urgent action to protect democratic processes and institutions in the UK from threats both here and abroad. We need to listen to the warning bell sounded by the general election that the citizens we seek to serve, and who must abide by the laws we pass, are becoming disenchanted with the political process. If we want to continue to be a beacon of democracy across the world, we must ensure that it serves its purpose both in giving a voice to the people and in delivering prosperity and stability. We cannot do the latter if we fail at the former.

First past the post is a broken and unfair system. Last summer, the Labour party won a landslide election victory, securing 63% of seats in the House of Commons in return for just 34% of the vote. This system leaves millions of voices unheard and creates a divisive, adversarial

political climate, where collaboration is discouraged and accountability is often sidestepped. The Liberal Democrats have long championed proportional representation, advocating for a voting system where every vote truly counts. We must modernise our electoral system, creating a fairer process to engage voters, listen to the needs of constituents and rebuild trust in politics.

Winning a vote in Parliament for my Bill creates a historic precedent: for the first time, MPs have backed a proportional voting system in the Division Lobby. It would be an outrage were this Bill not given the opportunity to progress further through the House and to become law, so I urge the Minister to schedule an opportunity for the Bill to be read a Second time, in Government time, and to offer Labour MPs a free vote on the Bill.

2.30 pm

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): I am grateful to Members from all parties for their thoughtful and interesting contributions to the debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important discussion and the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for introducing the debate in the way that he did.

For us as a nation, this is an important discussion to have. We may not recognise that we should be proud of the peaceful and democratic way that we govern ourselves, despite our various, often heated, disagreements, as hon. Members might have seen earlier in the debate. Unlike the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), I am not afraid—

**Rachel Gilmour:** On that point, will the shadow Minister give way?

**Paul Holmes:** I will give way.

**Rachel Gilmour:** I thank the shadow Minister for giving way. It does at least show that he has some sense and knowledge of what democracy means.

**Paul Holmes:** I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) for that wonderful intervention. Members should know that she and I are very good friends.

Unlike the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, I am not afraid to stand up for the courage of my convictions and for the arguments that I will make. Unlike Members of the Liberal Democrat party, I am prepared to take interventions and have a genuine debate,

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** May I interrupt this community lovefest, and ask my hon. Friend to reflect on the experience of Israel, where tiny religious parties are perpetually in government, exercising disproportionate influence and influencing policy in a way that is at variance with the wishes of the majority?

**Paul Holmes:** My right hon. Friend is correct that there is a vast and quite radical system that elects the Israeli Government, where a number of extreme politicians on both sides of the aisle—

**Richard Tice:** On that point, will the shadow Minister give way?

**Paul Holmes:** No, I will not. I will finish responding to my right hon. Friend.

**Richard Tice:** I will make another intervention.

**Paul Holmes:** Well, I have not finished making my point yet and I intend to do so. The electoral system in Israel elects people from extreme wings, from both sides of the aisle, who have a disproportionate impact on the policies and outcomes of the Israeli Government.

**Luke Akehurst:** On that point, will the shadow Minister give way?

**Paul Holmes:** Not at the moment, as I will make some progress.

Over the past several hundred years, our country has undergone myriad complex and contentious reforms that have revolutionised our systems of governance. Those changes have often been made in a piecemeal fashion over many centuries, from Simon de Montfort's Parliament of 1265, in which representatives from towns and the shires were summoned together to discuss matters of national concern, to the great Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, permitting the expansion of suffrage, to the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928, which extended the franchise to all persons, male and female, over the age of 21. Those evolutionary changes have allowed us, as a country, to forgo frequent domestic upheaval and civil wars, which are a feature of other less stable systems.

I know I am in a minority of one this afternoon—apart from the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal)—but the Conservative party has long championed first past the post as the fairest and most effective way to elect representatives—[*Interruption.*]

**Sarah Olney:** Where are all the Conservative representatives?

**Paul Holmes:** I say to the hon. Lady, who intervenes from a sedentary position, that my colleagues in the Conservative parliamentary party are out in their constituencies, campaigning and standing up for their constituents, not focusing on a debate about an outdated system that will never last.

The Conservative party has championed first past the post as the fairest and most effective way to elect representatives, ensuring clear accountability, stable governance, and a direct link between elected officials and their constituents. Indeed, we continue to do that even after our historic and momentous defeats of 1997 and 2024. The party has continued to support first past the post, as evidenced by the submission to the Jenkins Commission in 1998, because we believe the way to win elections is to gain the trust of the public, not to gerrymander the system when things get tough.

Voters have already shown their preference for first past the post, as shown by the decision made by 13 million people who voted against the proposals set out in the 2011 voting system referendum. I know this is not popular among the parties in opposition, but I believe we should respect the results of referendums.

**Luke Akehurst:** On that point, will the shadow Minister give way?

**Paul Holmes:** Let me just finish this point. Some 68% of people voted no in that referendum, so the result should be respected for at least a generation, as the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) said in his thoughtful contribution. In 2011, the alternative vote was supported by a majority of voters in a mere 10 of the 440 local counting areas.

The debate raises some pertinent questions for other Members. Only seven months after they won a resounding and historical vote in a landslide victory under the first-past-the-post system, Labour MPs suddenly want to do away with the system that has provided them with their victory, and smaller parties want to gerrymander the system because they did not get as many seats as they wanted. Perhaps that is because Labour Members are already struggling at having to work directly for the constituents that put them in their places, because they are suffering from the biggest and most profound instance of buyer's remorse since this Government took office.

I say gently to the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry), who outlined the possibility of a two-tier system where members can pick and choose what they focus on for their constituents, Members of this House elected under this system take on every issue for their constituents. My constituents in Hamble Valley have a direct link to me, and I will not pick and choose what issues I take up. Members in this House generally do not do that; we stand up for our constituents on all the issues that they think are important in this country and in their constituencies.

In a debate about our electoral system, the Liberal Democrats have once again shown that they are not worthy of having the word "democrat" in their name. They once again outlined that they have an opposition to voter ID, which guarantees safe and fair voting systems in this country and stops people from being able to take votes from people who are genuinely entitled to vote in this country, and they outlined that they now want to gerrymander the system to get more votes themselves.

I gently say to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson that she said that a lack of turnout meant the results of the election were not as valid as they should be. She is entitled to that opinion, which is perfectly reasonable, but her Bill on proportional representation passed with the votes of 62 MPs in this House, out of a total electorate of 650 MPs, by a majority of two. Taking her proposition, does that mean her Bill is less entitled to pass than other Bills because of the turnout of MPs voting on that outdated proposition?

Under proportional representation, direct accountability is often lost in the complexities of coalitions and backroom deals. Advocates of PR stress the need for the party share of the legislature to mirror the share of the popular vote, but that is the wrong test. It is more important to look at the share of the vote and the share of executive power. Over time, PR leads to a highly disproportionate relationship between votes cast and the share of executive power, which is unhealthy for democracy. First past the post ensures the brutal and efficient removal of governments when a ruling administration loses popular support, and they are rightly booted out and replaced with a new government facilitated often by a clear mandate from voters.

**Richard Tice:** On that point, will the shadow Minister give way?

**Paul Holmes:** I will now.

**Richard Tice:** That is most generous of him. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that almost all other major democratic nations across the world use PR? Does that not prove that far from being outdated, it is contemporary?

**Paul Holmes:** If the hon. Gentleman is seriously suggesting to the House that just because other people do it, we should follow suit, then he needs to go away and think about his policy proposition again. This country —[*Interruption.*] Let me finish the point. This country has elected more stable Governments than most European nations have under proportional representation. That is a proud and long-standing convention of this country and of this House of Commons. I suggest to Members from across the House that that is why the Conservative party believes and this House should believe in keeping first past the post as we go forward in other general elections.

**Claire Young** *rose*—

**Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab) *rose*—

**Paul Holmes:** I am spoilt for choice and I do not have much time left. I will give way to the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) and then to the hon. Member for Shipley.

**Claire Young:** I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman remembers how many Prime Ministers there were between the last election and the one before, and whether voters knew what they were getting at the start of 2019.

**Paul Holmes:** I think that is a relatively lazy argument about the internal machinations of the Conservative party and is not concerned with our electoral system. I give the hon. Lady the point that it was not a good time within my party, within this country and that period of office, but it concerns the way parties elect leaders and not the electoral system for the public.

In relation to proportional representation not allowing parties from different wings to be elected, if we look at an example from 2009, in European elections under the PR system, the British National party won two European Parliament seats with 6% of the vote. In the rare cases in which the BNP won local government seats, such as in Barking and Dagenham in 2006, its support represented 35% to 50% of the popular vote in the winning wards. First past the post, by contrast, acts as a safeguard against extremism in ensuring that only candidates with broad support can win. That helps preserve the political stability and moderation that are hallmarks of our parliamentary democracy.

When coalition Governments are formed, it becomes difficult for voters to hold any one party accountable for their decisions. Blame for unpopular policies can easily be shifted between coalition partners, which, given how things are going for them, I know might be appealing for Labour Members. However, that erodes trust in politics, whereas first past the post provides clarity. Voters know exactly which party is in charge and can hold it to account at the next election.

It is also the case that under a party-list PR system, which was previously the European Parliament's system in Great Britain, there was no direct accountability, with representatives dependent on a party patronage



system. How many voters actually knew the name of their European Parliament Members when we were in the European Union? I would hazard that there were only one or two well known MEPs and one of them is still close by.

I think the choice for us is clear, although I know that I am undoubtedly in the minority this afternoon. First past the post ensures strong and stable governance, clear accountability and an electoral system that is easily understood by the public. It prevents small, unrepresentative parties from wielding disproportionate influence and upholds the direct link between MPs and their constituents. The British people have spoken in favour of first past the post and we should respect that decision. Members in other Opposition parties should learn and take it from us: we know that you cannot keep asking the same question over and over and expect a different response. The first-past-the-post system has served the UK well for generations. It delivers clear outcomes, stable Governments and a direct link between voters and their representatives. If we were to move to a PR regional-based system, that link would be lost and MPs would be scrambling and fighting to take on their constituents' casework. We can just imagine the mafioso-style turf wars such a system would generate. To scrap those sensible and time-honoured demarcations would be terrifically reckless and fundamentally unnecessary and would do our electors a disservice.

We should not trade a proven system for one that prioritises theoretical fairness over practical effectiveness. The challenges we face as a country demand strong leadership, clear accountability and a system that works for the people. Even though I do not like the result, the Labour Government won that mandate under the system we have. First past the post has provided that Government and we should stick to that, allowing the British people to have a system they fundamentally understand and fundamentally believe in.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) in his wide-ranging comments talked about the vote that was held on 3 December 2024 relating to the Elections (Proportional Representation) ten-minute rule motion. He mentioned rightly that the ayes won by two votes, but in fact, the number of votes cast were 138 ayes and 136 noes. He mentioned that only 62 votes were cast and I am sure he would like to correct the record.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins)**: That is a point of debate and not a point of order. I call the shadow Minister.

**Paul Holmes**: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am perfectly willing to correct the record and apologise to the House. However, that was still a minority of the 50% that would be required under the system that the Liberal Democrats are advocating.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: Order. I now call the Minister.

2.44 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali)**: I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds

Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for opening the debate and by congratulating the Backbench Business Committee and the key Members on securing this debate.

The UK's democratic system and institutions are strong and are rightly held the world over as a strong example of democracy. I know as someone who was born in another country that the UK's democratic system has provided inspiration, even though as we have heard many hon. Members believe more work needs to be done in some areas. In defence of our democratic system, I reiterate how much our system and our democracy is cherished. Whichever side of the argument Members are on, it is vital that we work tirelessly to protect our democracy, which faces different kinds of threats in the current climate. Indeed, I hope we will all work together in that endeavour to make sure that we protect the integrity of our system, our institutions and our precious democracy.

How we select our representatives in Parliament is of fundamental importance and Members quite rightly have strong views. The choice of voting system is central to that concern, as we have heard in the many speeches made today, and how votes are cast goes to the heart of our democracy. I, for one, am incredibly proud to have been the first person of British-Bangladeshi heritage to get a democratic mandate in our system in 2010. That democratic mandate must never be delegitimised, even if we believe that there should be a different system. Whatever Members' arguments, whichever side of the argument they are on, whichever system they believe we should adopt or whether they believe we should retain the current system, it is absolutely vital that we do not delegitimise the democratic mandate that this Government, or any other Government in the past, have been given to serve this country and the people who have voted for us.

**Mr Holden**: The Minister makes a broader important point about the mandate that individual MPs feel when they are elected to this place. Does she agree that that individual mandate—our names are on the ballot paper—is strengthened under the first-past-the-post system? Does she also agree that that means that our electorate can single out MPs, which could not happen under a party-list system, in order to remove them?

**Rushanara Ali**: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the importance of the constituency connection. Hon. Members have made important contributions about alternative systems, outlining their merits and limitations. Each of those systems has its pros and cons, and that has been strongly and powerfully debated by many hon. Members today. I respect those strongly held views on electoral reform.

I know that colleagues will be disappointed, and I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news when there has been a general love-in during the debate across the parties, bar some exceptions, but at this time the Government have no plans to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I am getting unlikely cheers; I am not used to being cheered by Conservative Members. As has been pointed out, the first-past-the-post system, while not perfect, provides for a direct relationship between Members of Parliament and their local constituency. A change would require a national conversation and referendum. The Government's focus and No. 1 priority, having won

[Rushanara Ali]

the general election and secured a mandate, is to kick-start our economy, create the growth that is desperately needed, and improve living standards, our NHS and public services, to serve the people of our country.

Members have put their arguments across eloquently, and I respect those arguments. As others have pointed out, we had an opportunity to change the voting system in the 2011 referendum. Unfortunately for those who are proponents of such a change, that referendum was lost. The processes that underpin our elections are of paramount importance and changes cannot be made lightly; however, I stress that we are not averse to changes to, and innovation in, our democracy. We must continue to monitor all aspects of our electoral system, and ensure that it runs effectively and adapts to the modern challenges that we face as a democracy.

As we set out in our manifesto, we are seeking to make changes, including our commitment to extend the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds. We are continuing to assess the voter identification policy in order to address any inconsistencies. I am pleased that we were able to add veteran cards to the list of accepted documents last year; our veterans community will be able to use them to vote in polling stations this May. We are continuing to consider whether further improvements to policy can be made. I am conscious of the contributions of some hon. Members about the exclusion of legitimate voters. It is crucial that we ensure that people are not disenfranchised, while ensuring that there are not abuses of our system.

As I mentioned, the Liberal Democrat party, in coalition with the Conservative party, secured a referendum on AV in 2011, with considerable cross-party support from Labour Members. The proposal was rejected by 67.9% of votes. While I recognise the strength of feeling, I have made the Government's position clear. Hon. Members asked whether the Government have any plans for a national commission on electoral reform. At present, we do—we do not. [*Laughter.*] That was not a Freudian slip. Some hon. Members asked about the London mayoral election and police and crime commissioners, following the changes in the Elections Act 2022. The Government currently have no plans to change the voting system for those polls. Like a number of policies, we will keep these matters under review.

A number of hon. Members suggested that the first-past-the-post system is contributing to a decrease in turnout, and pointed to the low turnout at the last election. It is on all of us to think carefully about the drivers of low turnout, which will be a range of factors. We all have a responsibility, as elected representatives, to work with our parties and communities to promote engagement, particularly among young people. We will work with colleagues to promote that democratic engagement, and ensure that young citizens are active citizens from an early age.

In order to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley enough time to wind up the debate, I will address just one other point. My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater

(Joe Powell) spoke about foreign interference in relation to funding. Foreign money has no place in UK politics, and it is vital that we protect our democracy from those who seek to interfere in UK elections through illegitimate political donations. That is why we committed in our manifesto to strengthening the rules around donations to political parties. We will work with Members across the House to ensure that we protect the integrity of our democracy.

**Cameron Thomas:** I invite the Minister to join the APPG for fair elections. She will see that there is a very clear correspondence between first past the post and the lack of engagement over time.

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank the hon. Member for his invitation, and welcome him to send us information. He knows that I cannot be a member of the all-party group, but I recognise and commend its work. Having been a member of and chaired many all-party groups during my 14 years in opposition, I recognise the importance of their work.

I thank hon. Members across the House for their important contributions to the debate, expressing strongly and deeply held views about a really important subject: the future and nature of our democracy. Whichever side of the argument we are on, it is vital that we always maintain our commitment to working together to protect our democracy, and that we work tirelessly to strengthen our democracy.

2.57 pm

**Alex Sobel:** I will be brief, because we have had a long and thorough debate. I thank everyone who took part in it, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), who cut a lonely figure in opposing a change to the voting system. I thank him for his bravery in the face of such opposition; it is a shame that we could not have had more Members speak against changing the voting system, as so many spoke in favour. I thank the Minister for committing to work with the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections, which I chair, and I will follow up on that.

Let me make just one substantive point, because I feel that there may be a lack of understanding about something. I am well aware that we had a referendum on the alternative vote system in 2011. The alternative vote system, which is used to elect the Australian Parliament, is a preferential system, not a proportional system, so we have had a referendum on preferential representation but we have never had a referendum on proportional representation. I do not see why we need to wait a generation, as has been suggested. I certainly do not think that we need to have another referendum on a preferential system, but we need to consider, as I laid out in the debate, a commission to look at the failures in our electoral system, and whether we should move to a more proportional system.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered proportional representation for general elections.

## Local Post Offices

2.59 pm

**Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of local Post Office services.

I am grateful to everyone for attending this debate on a Thursday afternoon on post offices and their vital role in all our communities across the country. Post offices have long been at the heart of our communities. They provide essential services, support local businesses and serve as vital socioeconomic lifelines, but in too many areas across the country, including my constituency, we face uncertainty over the future of those post offices and are already seeing the erosion of far too many.

Post offices contribute an estimated £4.7 billion annually to the UK economy. According to the Post Office, their presence generates an additional £3 billion in spending for the businesses that surround them. In a town like Wellington in my constituency, a post office could add around £1 million to the local economy. Small businesses across the country rely on post offices for banking, cash deposits and parcel services. Nearly a third of small and medium-sized businesses use the post office at least once a week.

Of course, the benefits of post offices are not just economic; they remain a lifeline for many, particularly older and more vulnerable people, who rely on post office services to access their pension, send mail and parcels, pay bills, and stay connected. I hear from many of my constituents how much they value our local post offices, and that those post offices provide far more than just postal services.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on bringing this important debate. My constituents are served by Crown post offices in Brixton and on Lordship Lane in east Dulwich. Both those town centres have effectively seen the withdrawal of high-street banks. Would he agree that the erosion of high-street banking services places an even greater emphasis on the role of post offices, and that the Government need to intervene to stop the further round of Crown post office closures if we are to see the banking hubs commitment met across the country?

**Gideon Amos:** The hon. Member is absolutely right, and I will emphasise that point later, because the destiny of banking hubs is wrapped up with that of post offices. Post offices are the nucleus of a town centre, and once they are gone, it undermines the town centre.

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Following on from the intervention of the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), I represent Tiverton and Minehead, a very rural constituency. Dulverton is a classic example of what we are talking about. The farmers used to come down from Cutcombe market, after they had sold their cattle and sheep, and deposit their money in a bank or post office in Dulverton. We just about have a post office there, but no banks. Does my hon. Friend agree that post offices and banks are two sides of the same coin?

**Gideon Amos:** I agree with my hon. Friend. I will comment on that aspect of banking later.

I pay tribute to the friendly and hard-working staff in my local post offices on Station Road and in Staplegrove, and in other post offices throughout the constituency. The North Curry post office, with its amazing postmistress, contributes every year to the “Christmas in the Square” event for the village charity and has raised £1,500. These are real community institutions. Their being in our villages and communities, where they offer a warm, friendly welcome and act as a community hub, is important to many people and must not be undervalued.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The hon. Member makes an excellent point, and I think the nub of his speech is that post offices are not just a banking facility or just a post office; they are a real community hub. I think about the ones in my constituency that I have visited recently—in Ramsden Bellhouse, on Whitmore Way in Basildon or the brand new one on Billericay high street. That is exactly what they are: places where the entire community comes together.

**Gideon Amos:** The right hon. Member is quite right. I know Billericay and its post office, and I certainly support his remarks. Post offices are simply too important to be lost, and we have to ensure that they are not lost in towns like Wellington and Taunton, and elsewhere across the country.

Too often, there are deep concerns about the future of local post offices. Today’s announcement about changes to the Royal Mail universal service obligation adds to that uncertainty, creating further pressure on an already fragile network. It is disappointing to see that obligation weakened, with potential knock-on effects on the viability of post offices. That makes it even more important that post offices continue to play a role all throughout the week, in selling stamps and providing postal services, even if deliveries are being cut back.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking my intervention and for the points that he is making. In response to a question I asked, the Government said that more than one in 10 post office services are not provided in what people would recognise as a post office. Some services are provided out the back of a van for a few hours a week, but they are still held up as complete post office services in the figures on post offices and how many people access them. Does he agree that we must provide complete post office services in all the communities that need them?

**Gideon Amos:** I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. There is a risk that the statistics are somewhat skewed by the fact that a parcel drop-off point or a van that visits occasionally may be considered post offices.

**Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way to a number of Members during his important speech. On the proposal to replace Crown post offices, does he agree that franchised post offices are no substitute? In fact, that is a huge risk. WHSmith, which often takes on the franchises, announced this week that it is closing 17 of its high street branches. The move to franchises could be one step away from the complete loss of post office facilities.

**Gideon Amos:** Indeed. I think the hon. Member had read the next sentence of my speech, which was about the post office branch housed in WHSmith on Fore Street in Taunton. That business is potentially up for sale, which poses risks. The loss of such post offices would leave a huge gap across the country, particularly in county towns like Taunton. In the course of his work, will the Minister get concrete assurances from WHSmith that post offices in its stores will be retained following the sale? It is important that the Government get assurances from WHSmith on that point.

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. The distinction between Crown post offices and franchised post offices cannot be drawn heavily enough. In my constituency, we lost Crown post offices in Newton Abbot and in Dawlish, and the one in Teignmouth—which I believe is the last in my constituency; all the rest are franchises—is now under threat. Does he agree that the franchise system can provide a useful service but is absolutely no substitute for the full Crown post office service, which must remain?

**Gideon Amos:** I agree. I am sure that the Government will say in due course that, whatever its exact business model, a viable post office is what matters, and there would be some truth in that, but a secure post office, established for the long term, is what really matters.

The worries we hear from across the House and the country are not without foundation. We have seen worrying closures across the country. Notably, as has been mentioned, there was a recent consultation on the closure of 150 post offices. The loss of branches means that fewer communities can access vital services. House of Commons data shows that the number of post offices is rising overall, but in the south-west, which has lost more post offices than any other region in England, it is falling.

Wellington in my constituency lost its post office in 2019, and we can see the damage caused by that loss. Wellington is not a small town; it has 15,000 residents and is growing fast. Its population has grown by a third over the past two decades according to census data, and around 1,500 new homes have been built there in recent years. It also has a proud history as the home of Fox Brothers & Co, which has been manufacturing the finest flannels and fabrics for over 250 years and also owned its own bank—the Fox bank on Fore Street was the last bank in the country to issue its own banknotes. It is unacceptable for such a town to have no main post office. Losing the post office in 2019 has been a real blow. One constituent told me that he finds it

“totally baffling why Wellington Post Office was ever closed”.

It is particularly difficult for those without access to a car to visit the nearest alternative at Rockwell Green, a village several miles away. If they do, residents often find that the sub-post office is oversubscribed, with queues out the door. As a small village post office, it was only intended to provide for small numbers, and when it is open, parking has become a bit of a nightmare.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I was very pleased to support the hon. Gentleman's application to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate. Does he agree that Crown post offices are one of the last bastions of the civil service in local

communities, as they are not centralised? They provide good jobs in places like Wellington in his constituency, and they give support to communities that often have an older population. They have an expertise that franchises simply cannot provide.

**Gideon Amos:** The hon. Lady makes a very good point, and I am extremely grateful to her for helping us to secure this debate. Post offices act as hubs for a whole range of services, and they could arrange for a range of other public services, and often do, which is why a secure, proper post office is so important.

As I say, the nearest post office to Wellington is some miles away and very difficult to access. As hon. Members can imagine, there was great relief when Wellington residents were told that they would be getting a new hub opened by an organisation called the Post Office, staffed by staff working for the Post Office, and that there was to be a logo outside the building with “Post Office” written on it, but they were disappointed to find, when they went inside the building, that it was a banking hub that does not provide any post office services. Frankly, people feel misled and let down. Will the Minister instruct the Post Office to review the case for granting Wellington post office the status of main post office? I am convinced from discussions with franchise holders that that would be enough to secure one for Wellington.

As we can all see, in this case, there is an obvious and straightforward solution: we should allow banking hubs to offer postal services. There is no fundamental reason why they cannot. They already have post office tills and post office systems. They are run by postmasters and postmistresses, and staffed by post office staff. The one in Wellington even has two banking desks and space for a third desk, presumably awaiting a post office counter. That would be a very good use of the remaining space in a building with “Post Office” written above the door. Perhaps most importantly, having spoken to post office staff, I know that they would be very keen to offer such services in banking hubs.

The issue lies simply in such arrangements not having been included in the agreement on banking hubs between the banks, which fund them, and the Post Office, which provides those services. It is not a hugely complex problem. With a bit of effort and ingenuity, which I am sure the Minister and the Government have, this could be overcome, and the system could be made hugely more efficient. There are 76 banking hubs in the UK, and in this way we could significantly increase the provision of post offices at very little cost. Will the Minister ask his Department to develop incentives for banking hubs to offer postal services, especially given that they all have the “Post Office” logo outside the door, even when they do not provide any postal services.

To conclude, post offices are vital hubs in communities throughout the country, particularly for those in need and at risk of exclusion. The loss of the post office in Wellington, such a significant market town, has really hit the town centre badly. I know hon. Members will have their own examples of the importance of their local post offices to their communities. I look forward to hearing their speeches, and maybe to intervening on them. It is vital to ensure that substantive towns and communities such as Wellington do not lose their post offices altogether. In short, post offices are too important to be left to uncertainty. The Government must act now to safeguard these vital institutions, ensuring that towns,

such as Wellington and so many more, do not remain without essential services. I urge the Minister to take tangible steps to secure the future of post offices before more communities are left without them.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. I am imposing an immediate six-minute time limit so that everyone can get in.

3.14 pm

**Alex Mayer** (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) on securing this important debate. I think that most Members and most people are pro-post office. After all, post offices are part of the fabric of our nation. Many Members of my age were brought up on Postman Pat and his black and white cat. It would not have been the same without Mrs Goggins at the local post office.

The Leighton Buzzard post office first opened its doors at its current location near All Saints church back in 1887. We all recognise that a lot has changed in the last 137 years, and since Postman Pat hit our screens in the 1980s. I used to queue at the post office to get my car tax. Emails have transformed how we communicate. TV licence sales have moved online or to phone or direct debit. What has not changed is the way that post offices foster a sense of community pride. Half of UK consumers say that their local post office creates a sense of belonging and community identity. An Association of Convenience Stores survey ranked the post office third for having a positive impact on local communities.

Post offices also drive footfall to our high streets because when someone goes to the post office in the town centre, they often spend money elsewhere. More and more, post offices support e-commerce, and they are important to small businesses, half of which use them at least once a month. Increasingly, they are a vital means of accessing cash.

Since 2015, my constituency has lost 60% of its bank branches. In recent months, two more high street banks, Lloyds and Halifax, have left Leighton Buzzard town centre. In September, when Halifax announced its closure, it was explicit that it expected the post office down the road to take up the slack. Whether that will be possible is a question I will turn to shortly.

I was proud to stand on a Labour manifesto that committed us to strengthening the post office network. I welcome the Government's £37 million investment to support post office branches, along with the £20 million boost to sub-postmasters' pay and the plans to publish a Green Paper seeking public views on the future of the Post Office. This all comes at a critical time.

The 100-plus-year-old Leighton Buzzard post office is a Crown post office. The desire of the Post Office to move to a fully franchised model is not new. It has been on the cards for some time, but it is causing understandable concern for local people who deeply value the service that their post office provides, for all of the reasons I have outlined. I welcome the expressions of interest in taking on those Crown branches. Although not all of those applications will be viable, it is encouraging that third-party operators are willing to step in, potentially integrating retail elements to make these branches more financially sustainable.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) mentioned, the recent announcement by WHSmith, which hosts around 200 post office counters, has raised concerns about whether third-party takeovers truly are a long-term solution. I would be grateful for the Minister's views on that. I would also be keen for him to explore with the Post Office whether there is merit in treating Crown branches where it owns the freehold of the building differently from those where it leases the premises.

Let me turn briefly to the related issue of postboxes. Some new developments simply do not have them. That means that someone who lives in Bidwell West would have to go on a half-hour hike to post a letter. The law states that residents should be within 500 metres of a post box, but that is simply not happening. Perhaps the Minister might raise that with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, to ensure that housing developments include post boxes as standard. After all, letters are vital for a thriving postal service.

The Post Office is a national institution. It brings essential services to countless communities, whether sending a parcel, withdrawing cash or topping up an electricity meter. It supports local businesses, high streets and local identity. Yes, it must change, but it must not wither. Local people must enjoy a first-class service.

3.19 pm

**Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): In September 2021, Plymstock post office closed. It was part of the collateral damage of the closure by Morrisons of more than 80 newsagents. It was a legitimate business decision no doubt, but it highlights the issue of the post office franchise model. Those businesses just disappeared from the high street. What followed was a public petition, which I started. There was huge public disappointment, as older populations are used to using cash. The postmistress of the next nearest post office wants to retire, which leaves just one bank with one cash machine. The next nearest cash machine is 10 or 15 minutes' walk away. Importantly, this was the loss of an anchor at a shopping centre that is vital for the local community.

Working closely with the Post Office and local businesses, we sought to secure a new post office, but it is a challenge to make the franchise business model work. That will be even harder now with the employer increased national insurance contributions that businesses face. I raised this matter with the Minister today and he gave me a helpful answer. He mentioned the increase in the sub-postmaster pay offer, but there remains the issue that we are not replacing closing post offices on a like-for-like basis.

Plymstock had a three-counter model, which the Post Office has offered to replace with a local franchise. It is offering just £15,000 to £18,000 a year to run that service within an existing or proposed business. We have to add on to that rent, business rates, staff, and set-up and running costs, because, at the moment, there are no businesses on the Broadway, where the post office was located, able to take on that service.

There is also a challenge with the franchise model, in that it is often not possible to tag on additional services at the beginning that would make the business more profitable. For example, passport processing is not always offered at the start, and those extra services can often be the difference between a business model that will work and one that is unsustainable.

[Rebecca Smith]

Ironically, on 22 May, the day the general election was called, I met again with the Post Office—some three years later—to discuss the issue. The Post Office raised with me the statistics on what was needed. It thought that the use of a post office in the area would increase over time, but it would not take into account the fact that a neighbouring postmistress was seeking to retire. Therefore, the data showed that the area did not need anything more than a post office local. All it took was a tiny bit of horizon scanning to realise that there would be that need and that demand shortly. We got stuck in a Catch-22 situation. The Post Office reassured me that it had further people interested in running the post office, but, nearly one year later, nothing has come to fruition. The fight continues.

As has been mentioned by other hon. Members, there is the option of banking hubs. The work of the Conservative Government to trailblaze this modern solution for communities has helped remarkably, and I am sure that we will hear lots about that this afternoon.

**David Mundell:** To reinforce the point that the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) made, there is a real concern that communities that are looking to have a banking hub do not have a functioning post office in the way that we would understand it. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the arrival of banking hubs is actually the opportunity to put a post office back into those communities as well?

**Rebecca Smith:** I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I think that all of us in this Chamber will agree that having a post office within these banking hubs is vital. We have seen 76 hubs open across the country in the last few years. Clearly, there is an appetite and a need for them, but it does not make sense to the public, as has been alluded to, that they can pitch up to these places with a post office sign outside, but they cannot even buy a stamp inside. I do hope that that can be rectified.

The other challenge is that an area cannot have a banking hub while a bank is still present. Perhaps that is the silver lining to yesterday's announcement that the Lloyds bank in the same location, on Plymstock Broadway, is closing in November. That will be a massive hit, as it has the only cash machine for the entire community. However, as I have been saying to my constituents, perhaps the silver lining is that we will see more banking available and, if the Government heed our calls today, that future post office as well. Perhaps we have to circumvent the system to get what we want. It would mean that we can now explore a banking hub and retain those banking services.

Clearly, there is a long way to go. I am sure that there are Members in the Chamber today who have secured banking hubs. I am told that it takes a big fight, but most of us are here because we are campaigners. Within an hour of the announcement of the closure of the Lloyds bank, we went out to the press, and we will do all we can to get a banking hub. However, I want to be able to reassure my constituents that this will solve the lack of a post office as well, so I do hope that we can see that policy change. There is a long way to go: we have to secure a venue, an operator and that policy change to see our post office services return.

Since I shared the idea yesterday, there has been huge local interest. People are really getting the idea of a banking hub—they are on board; it is what the community wants. I have had two conversations already with potential operators, one of whom I know runs a service in a neighbouring constituency and is doing a really good job there. So we have the interest; we have businessmen and women who want to do this. They have not been able to deliver it on the franchise model, but it seems that they can deliver it on the banking hub model.

We want to see this idea delivered, because even the shopping centre knows that, in order to get the footfall for all the other local businesses, having a bank and a post office for access to cash is vital. Even the local library needs that cash access, and if it is not available, there is going to be a problem. Local people need these vital services and amenities, and that is why we need to secure a banking hub.

I say to my constituents, particularly those in Plymstock, that they have my absolute commitment to fighting for this. I would add that we have some fabulous small community post offices in our villages; it is not all a bad news story. The Newton Ferrers shop, for example, has a fabulous post office counter, and attempts are made right across our constituencies to deliver these services for our constituents. However, where there is a problem like the one we are facing today, with closing banks and closing main branches, we do need to step up and take action.

To close, I will ask a few questions of the Minister. I have highlighted the reality of the current post office offer and, as I said, it is not all bad. He has kindly said that I can share some details about my constituency with him, which I will do, but I think it would be good to get the answers on the record in the Chamber. Does the Minister accept that downgrading a service from a main branch to a franchised local service hinders the replacement of post office services? Will he explore the fact that the current Post Office dataset does not allow for what will happen in the future? If a retirement is coming down the road, we should be able to business-plan around that and at the moment we cannot. Can the Minister reassure the House that he remains committed to delivering banking hubs, and say whether will they will incorporate postal facilities so that we can deliver for our constituents?

3.26 pm

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing today's debate. This is an important issue for constituencies across the UK, as has been highlighted by contributions from all parts of the House, but it is a particular concern to constituencies like South East Cornwall, which faces the potential closure of our Liskeard post office. If that were to go ahead, it would not just be the loss of a shop; it would be the loss of a vital service at the heart of our community. As the daughter of a postman, I know just what a hard and important job it is that they do.

For many people in rural areas like mine, the post office is more than a place to send letters; with the loss of high street banks leaving only one provider, the post office has become a financial lifeline, ensuring that residents—especially older residents or those without online banking—and small businesses can access cash

and essential services without having to travel for miles. Without a clear alternative in place, that represents a real challenge. For many in rural areas like mine, reaching the next nearest branch is simply not practical. If these closures continue, we must ensure that further banking hubs are established so that rural communities are not left behind.

Driving growth is a key aim of this Government and I welcomed the £28 million investment in Cornwall outlined in the Chancellor's statement yesterday. Long-term growth cannot happen without the basic services that underpin our local economies, and Labour was elected across the UK in rural, coastal and urban areas alike because people want practical solutions after 14 years of decline. They want to ensure that communities are not cut off from essential services, and I look forward to working with our Government to achieve that.

My goal is to make the lives of local residents in South East Cornwall easier and more prosperous. That means protecting local services, ensuring accountability and delivering real opportunities for growth in towns like Liskeard. I urge the Government to ensure that rural communities are not left stranded and to guarantee access to essential banking and post office services, as I am sure they will.

3.28 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) on taking the initiative to secure time for this debate and on the way in which he opened it.

We are all familiar with the old maxim, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." I have lost count of the number of post office debates I have taken part in over the years, and it seems to me that as far as post offices are concerned, the maxim that has governed the thinking of Governments of all colours is, "If it ain't broke, keep reforming it until it is."

The fundamental problem is that there has been an incoherence of approach within Departments. On the one hand, we have heard—I suspect we may hear similar things from the Minister today—Ministers stand at the Dispatch Box saying that the post office is a brilliant institution and it can be the front office or front desk for Government services in communities across the country. The next day, we will have another Minister standing at the Dispatch Box telling us that access to Government services will become digital by default. Unless we decide exactly what role we expect our post offices to perform in our communities, we cannot be surprised when they fail to thrive and then wither in the way that they are doing.

It is more than 20 years now since the Department for Work and Pensions thought it could save money by driving people away from getting pensions and other benefits from their local post office. Doubtless that was a saving for the Department for Work and Pensions, but it has just meant that the Department for Business and Trade or whatever we call it these days has had to put more money in through Government subsidies. I hesitate to predict the future in politics at all these days, but one day, when we have finally turned the key to lock the last post office in the country, some bright spark in Downing Street somewhere will come up with a policy paper saying that we should have a hub in every community where people can access Government services and meet

their postal needs, their banking needs and all the rest of it, and in that way we will end up reinventing what we have reformed to the point of destruction.

The Post Office and how it interacts with the sub-postmasters has not always helped in that respect, including the innovations that it has brought, such as the pick-up and drop-off initiatives. In my constituency, it is not the sub-post offices that are given the contract to do the pick-up and drop-off points. If the Post Office at the heart is not able to support sub-postmasters at the frontline, we frankly cannot be surprised if they start to fail.

In particular, I want to talk about the Post Office's approach to the closure of Crown branches. We see that in my constituency, where the last Crown post office in Kirkwall is listed for closure. The way that has been done by the Post Office has been nothing short of a disgrace. It has been totally lacking in respect for its employees and the communities that the post office is there to serve. At a time when we might have hoped that the Post Office would want to demonstrate a change of culture—for reasons we have debated often enough—we see it still behaving in this way in my community. It makes me think that all the fine words about changed culture at the top of the Post Office are simply meaningless weasel words.

I have seen similar situations before. We lost the Crown post office in Lerwick in Shetland a few years ago. It was taken out and folded into a local newsagent service. For all the promises given about maintaining services, in fact the community was left with a much inferior service at the end of the day, despite the best efforts of the newsagent who got the contract. If we are to see these changes in Kirkwall, we need to know first of all that the same range of services will still be available as there are from a Crown post office. That includes vehicle licensing, currency exchange and passport checking—all those things should still be available.

Just as important as the range of services is the question of the physical infrastructure. People want a stand-alone post office to offer a level of service of the sort they get with a Crown post office, especially when we are encouraging banking into them. That is a highly personal service for many people. They do not want to be doing that next to somebody buying a tin of beans and their weekly paper. The size and availability of any post office that is to replace the one that the Post Office wants to close in Kirkwall is critical. We do not want people queueing around the block at Christmas when the post office is at its busiest, standing in the rain, sleet and snow to get their postage done. The size, the range of services and the quality of service have to be at the heart of anything that comes from the Post Office by way of revision. That is the basis on which we in my community will be judging any proposals that it comes forward with.

3.34 pm

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I was pleased to support the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) in securing the debate. It was not the first time I helped him as, in a funny quirk of fate, I have sat for him more than 20 years ago—I think it was 22 years ago, but he is welcome to correct the record if I have got the dates wrong.

I thank my London Bridge post office manager Priya and her dedicated team, including Clive and the Communication Workers Union members whom I am

[Neil Coyle]

proud to serve. They in turn support and serve the London Bridge and Borough High Street community in extremely busy circumstances with massive footfall. That is why there is so much concern about the branch, as demonstrated by the petition to save the London Bridge post office started by London Bridge and West Bermondsey councillors Emily Hickson, Sam Dalton and Sunil Chopra. Hundreds of people have already signed that petition, which is on [change.org](https://change.org), should anyone want to add their signature.

I went to the branch two weeks ago to meet the team and saw for myself how busy and loved it was. My constituent Mary—a lovely older lady—was there paying her rent at the time, but it is not just old ladies using post offices. This post office demonstrates how a diverse range of post offices is affected across the country as this branch is hugely busy and serves a massive and vibrant business community at Borough Market and around London Bridge. Of course, it also has London's fourth-busiest train station right on its doorstep, providing commuter customers on Borough High Street.

I visited specifically because of the question mark over the branch's status. I thank the Post Office for answering some of my questions and for joining me on that visit, but it is disappointing that the branch is in that position, not least because we have a new ministerial team, Government Ministers have stated that there will be £50 million of additional funding and there remains a commitment from the Government to ensuring that every community has access to a post office branch, which is incredibly welcome.

I am proud to have stood and won last year on a manifesto that said Labour would look for ways to strengthen the network in consultation with sub-postmasters, trade unions and customers. I am glad that the Government formally recognise that

“The UK-wide Post Office branch network is an essential part of the UK's economic infrastructure, supporting high streets” and “businesses”. That is incredibly refreshing after years of mismanagement and mixed messages from mixed Ministers from two different parties since 2010.

It is really useful to see the Minister in his place. We may disagree on one issue during the six nations, but he has been a massive champion of post offices and has said on the record that the Post Office should do more when it comes to providing banking services. He has been a doughty champion for the Co-operative party and a champion of post offices having a broader banking and financial footfall, whether that be through a credit union or banking. I hope to hear more from him on those issues. Like posties, he now has to deliver in office as a Minister. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh.”] Thank you.

I hope that we will hear when the Green Paper will be published. I think the aim is by the end of July. I hope that it will cover Link and the access to cash campaign, which is already part of that discussion, and that there will be space to talk about the future of business rates for post offices and whether there could be a community interest exemption.

I want to flag up a couple of concerns about how the London Bridge branch has been handled by the Post Office. It has an incredibly small team of less than 10 full-time equivalent, and they are incredibly busy, but they have met every target set by the Post Office, including a currency

transfer increase last year of more than 20%—we are talking about millions of pounds there. The team have taken on additional services where possible, but those services they have lost have been the responsibility of the Post Office nationally and not the local branch. Sadly, they feel blamed for national Post Office failures.

Rent is also not the local branch's responsibility; it does not determine the rent that it pays for its prime Borough High Street location. It is disappointing that the Post Office did not seek a rent reduction in 2020. I saw how, during the covid crisis, rents for commercial and residential premises fell for the first time in the 20 years I have lived in the borough. However, the Post Office failed to negotiate or seek a reduction. That is not the responsibility of the individual staff, who feel they are now being held culpable for a failure that sits elsewhere. It is hard to imagine an equivalent site locally that would be cheaper. If the branch moved away from its high street location, it would lose business and commuter footfall, which could reduce turnover. Those making decisions need to be mindful of that.

As was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), there is a lack of respect shown to customers and the workforce in the handling of this. Specifically on this site, the Post Office website said that an alternative provider was available on Blackfriars Road. Well, the Post Office shut that post office two years ago this month. It was supposed to reopen—the Post Office said it had bidders for it last summer—but, since my visit two weeks ago, the Post Office has now stated that it will not reopen the Blackfriars Road site at all, which is a massive disappointment for many in SE1 and the local area. The failure to communicate that—again, not a local responsibility—shows a lack of respect. The Post Office is supposed to follow principles of community engagement in how it handles these issues, but that has not been the case in Blackfriars. It must not happen again.

For people worried about that specific site, I want to flag up that there is a lot of interest in running it with an alternative provider. However, that must not come at a loss of services or a loss of rights for the workforce that the state picks up down the line, and all costs must be taken into account. When more is known—we think that will be in April—I will organise a public meeting with local representatives of the Post Office, the CWU and others, which I will advertise as soon as I can for everyone worried about this great community asset.

3.40 pm

**Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) on securing this Backbench Business debate. I also thank Nik Frost and Emily Pidgeon from my office for doing the research for this and other speeches that I have made in recent days.

We all know that post offices are critically important assets to our communities. I know that your own post office in Romsey is under threat as a main hub, Madam Deputy Speaker; I know you do not have the ability to voice that, so I shall do so on your behalf.

I am lucky enough to represent seven post offices in South West Hertfordshire. In my first term as a Member of Parliament, Chorleywood port office was closed, having shut in 2019—not for reasons decided by headquarters; there was a local issue—and it took several



years before that post office was brought back online. I thank the retailer Lord's for incorporating the post office into its retail area to ensure that my community could continue to access the excellent services offered by the Post Office.

During the global pandemic, we saw how critical community assets and community spirit were to the health and wellbeing of our residents. They are the unsung heroes of our communities. Most post office staff will see their regulars on a frequent basis, and will quickly identify it if they have not been seen or do not look well; while not professionals like pharmacists, opticians or GPs, they are a set of eyes and ears on how their customers are doing.

Through various announcements, recently and over the past few years, we have seen the demise of high street banks. I am a former furniture retailer, and it still makes me sad that our high streets are not what they once were. Post offices are one of the few beacons left on high streets up and down our country; while there is an absolute draw to online retail, and I am a free marketeer, I know that if we do not continue to support our post offices, we will live to regret it. We must protect the assets that we really care about, and I include the post office in that.

I know that my community cares about this as well. When Croxley Green post office was under threat, I got a lot of correspondence asking me to be proactive. Fortunately, the Post Office decided to stop its plans to review that particular post office, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. I know from colleagues that their inboxes are filling up with concerns from constituents about what they value. It is the silent majority who will be adversely affected if we do not speak up and support our post offices.

I fully support the move towards banking hubs. It makes sense to ensure that communities are drawn to critical assets such as our post offices. It is my understanding that the agreement for the Post Office to provide banking hubs ends at the end of this year. I urge the Minister to reassure the House that if that is the case, he will look into it, and ensure that the Post Office quickly gets into negotiations with retail banks to ensure they are viable. With more and more people having less access to cash, the Post Office remains one of the few community hubs in areas where our constituents can always go and get cash out.

It is not all easy for the Post Office: I do not want to get party political, but post offices will now have a £45 million additional bill because of the national insurance jobs tax, and there has been a significant increase in business rates within the estate. While the drive for technology is important, the Government, in my view, need to look at how they can support places like our post offices to ensure that they remain commercially viable. I can assure the Minister that he will have my support if he is able to do so.

3.44 pm

**Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this timely debate. I was glad to have the opportunity to support him in doing so.

Hon. Members have described very powerfully the closures that are happening in their constituencies. In my constituency, the last remaining post office on the

historic King's Road is threatened. It is a long time since the King's Road heyday of the swinging '60s, when "Please Mr Postman" was first a hit. Unfortunately, since then the number of post office branches, on what is a very long road, has dwindled and there is now only one left. Shockingly, it is one of 108 directly managed branches across the country that the Post Office is planning to shut, 32 of which are in Greater London. The Post Office says that it is doing that to save money. I hope it is not doing it to pay for the costs of resolving the Horizon scandal. We will perhaps find out over time.

Meanwhile, we have a King's Road post office that offers a buzzing, full service to lots of customers. There are regular queues—every time I go in there I have to wait 10 minutes to be served—and people love the staff. They tell me how worried they are at the possibility of it closing and how incredulous they are that it could even be considered. They depend on it. There simply are no other options nearby. All sorts of people go there.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) mentioned, it is particularly older and disabled people who rely on post office services for bill payments and access to cash, and they are the most worried. Around the corner from the post office, there is a number of sheltered accommodation and retirement housing blocks. The people who live there will be disproportionately affected. On hearing what was planned, I immediately launched a petition and was not surprised to get 1,000 signatures in a very short space of time. Many other people have got in touch with me to express their disappointment, dismay and concern.

I met Post Office management in early December and left them in no doubt about the anger and shock in the community. They said that the King's Road post office was losing money. They also said that they might consider franchising it to a retail partner or an independent postmaster, but that no decision had yet been taken. Naturally, I asked to see a full, detailed analysis of the figures. They very kindly responded that they would let me have that in the new year, which we are now in. I will be seeing them again next week and pressing them to provide that analysis.

I expect to see not just the financial reasons for any decision to close the post office on the King's Road, but a detailed impact assessment on how the change would affect the community and what steps would be taken to mitigate it. The number of customers matters, of course, but so does the type of customer that the post office serves. I have touched on this, but we cannot just brush aside the needs of older and disabled people: people who do not feel comfortable banking online, people who prefer to use cash. We cannot let some people feel that they are seen as less important, because they are not less important. We cannot let them feel they are left behind. They must not be left behind. We need to find a solution that serves the needs of everyone. That is why it is so important to me that the Post Office consults genuinely and authentically with the local community about the change. I will be seeking clarity on that as well.

Finally, I will try in the meeting to get clarification on the Post Office's thinking on keeping the King's Road post office open by franchising it. I have heard the concerns that hon. Members have expressed about franchising, but if it proves to be the only option—we are a long way off that—I intend to pitch in and do all I can to make it a success for my constituents.

[Ben Coleman]

When we lost a major post office on North End Road in the Fulham part of my constituency, I worked very closely with the local council to support a new franchisee. I was delighted to open a new post office on North End Road last year. It is a franchise, yes, but it provides a seven-day-a-week service from 9 in the morning to 9 in the evening. It provides a full range of services—even newspaper delivery, which does not happen very much. I was there just last week. It is thriving and very popular. People feel well served. That is good news for the people of Fulham, but I cannot help wondering why the Post Office management have to go down the franchising route. Why are directly managed branches so much more expensive to run than locally franchised branches? Perhaps the Minister can shed some light on that; I will be asking the Post Office.

I am delighted by the work that the Government are doing, and their determination to revitalise our high streets. I welcome the money that has gone into the Post Office, and I welcome the proposed increase in postmasters' pay. I look forward to seeing, later this year, the Green Paper setting out options for the future of the Post Office, but it would be helpful at this stage to have clarity about the Government's long-term aims. Is one of them to maintain a thriving network of post offices? I do hope so. Will banking services feature in the Green Paper? Some interesting ideas have been raised here today.

I can reassure my residents in Chelsea that I will continue to work with them, with the Post Office and with the Government to fight the closure of the King's Road branch, and to ensure that no one is left behind.

3.50 pm

**Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I join others in thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing the debate, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for timetabling it.

As many Members have pointed out, post offices form a vital part of our local communities and high streets—millions of people depend on them—but in my Oxfordshire constituency, which contains many villages, they are under threat. These post offices are community hubs which play host to a number of services that are essential to local people and small businesses, particularly in rural areas. They provide vital human contact, and offer information and support for people who might otherwise be isolated, especially given suboptimal rural transport links. Just this week Karen Forman, a postmistress in Blewbury, told me that she had not only been contacted about many postal matters, but—this is relevant to what was said by the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer)—had been contacted about a lost cat and a lost bunch of keys, and had helped someone to locate a bank card.

As other Members have noted, many post offices are facing rising operating costs, and the services that they offer do not generate much revenue—an estimated 1.7p per transaction—which makes it hard to keep the lights on. We could do a great deal more to support our community branches. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), post offices can provide vital local services, but only if they are properly supported and invested in, and are staffed appropriately. Could we, for example, make

more use of post office hubs? Could they help people who are digitally excluded to book medical appointments on the internet, or provide services such as printing? Of course, we also need to secure justice for the wronged postmasters—and the flawed Horizon system is still being used—as well as giving more support to the people who have been neglected as a result of that scandal.

The post office network and the hard-working postmasters and postmistresses are in dire need of our support in villages such as Blewbury, and many more in my constituency and those of other Members.

3.52 pm

**Maureen Burke** (Glasgow North East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this very timely debate on the future of post offices. Sadly, few of us have come here today with positive experiences; instead, alongside our constituents, we are concerned about the declining presence of post offices in our communities. In recent times the Post Office has been in the news for all the wrong reasons, with no worse example than the Horizon IT scandal—a shameful, unforgivable wrong done to 900 postmasters, which undermined public faith in the service.

However, public faith in the Post Office has been betrayed in other ways too. The recent speculation on the future of directly managed branches has caused genuine panic and concern to my constituents. I appreciate efforts by the Post Office to reassure people that no formal decision has yet been made, but I fully understand why so many of my constituents believe that closure or service reduction is inevitable. So many post offices have already shut their doors across the UK as the directly managed branch model has been replaced, and that shift towards franchising has left many communities fearing that the post office is no longer a permanent fixture in their high streets or shopping centres. That is because what was once a simple public service has increasingly had its future decided by profitability, rather than the needs and demands of the community, and yet for my constituents, the post office is more than just a place to send parcels and letters; it represents a trusted and valued institution. That is why the Post Office has been around for nearly 400 years.

When Post Office officials emailed me to say that directly managed branches were flawed because they had “no retail offering”, it felt as though there was a disconnect between those who use the service and those who manage it. The No. 1 duty of the post office should be to provide a public service. Whether retail offerings are available in addition should be a secondary consideration, not something motivating the closure or outsourcing of these branches.

Given the news that WH Smith, which manages around 200 post offices, is looking to sell all its high street stores, the franchising model ought to be reviewed as a matter of urgency. I was already concerned about the future of our post offices, but this news only compounds my fears. As with the directly managed branches, my thoughts are with those employed in the WH Smith branches, who will be feeling anxious about what this news means for them. Post Office officials have confirmed that they are in talks with relevant trade unions regarding the ongoing consultation, but I sincerely hope that those are genuine discussions and that the concerns of the workforce are listened to carefully.

In an area such as Springburn, which already has a high unemployment rate, it would be unacceptable for local jobs to be lost. The Springburn Crown post office is the last directly managed branch in my constituency. It occupies a space in Springburn shopping centre, which is well connected and well used by people across the north-east of Glasgow. I recently met the community group Spirit of Springburn to discuss the future of the Crown post office. The community are rightly worried about what closure would mean and raised with me their concerns about the detrimental impact it would have on not just Springburn but the wider north-east of Glasgow. They reminded me that not long ago, the Springburn area had four bank branches. All those branches have now closed—a familiar story in constituencies across the UK, as the last Government presided over 9,500 bank branch closures. Those closures caused massive damage to our high streets and shopping centres and made banking much more difficult for too many. When those closures occurred, the post office was always designated as the place for people to continue to access their bank. In fact, when Lloyds bank announced yesterday plans to close its own high street stores, it said that people should go to the post office to continue using banking services, but how can people do that if there are no local post offices left?

The reality is that Springburn Crown post office really is the last bank in town, and now even that is at risk. It is profoundly unfair for my constituents to find themselves in this worrying situation, and they deserve urgent reassurance that Springburn post office will not close. That is the appeal I am making to the Government today, and it is also the case being made by the local community. Indeed, the vice-chair of Spirit of Springburn, Emma Porter, has written to the Secretary of State for Business and Trade to do just that—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. The hon. Lady will recognise that she was on a time limit, and in order to accommodate all the other Members who wish to speak, I am going to reduce it to five minutes. I call Matt Vickers.

3.58 pm

**Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con):** I thank the Members who brought this important debate forward. For generations, the local post office has been the beating heart of our towns and villages. That is certainly the case in Stockton and Thornaby. It has been more than just a place to send and receive mail; it has been a cornerstone of community life and a trusted space where people access essential services, stay connected with loved ones and support their businesses. Yet today, we stand at a crossroads. The pressure of modern technology, financial constraints and shifting consumer habits have placed our post offices under real threat, and all those challenges have been made so much worse by the Government's national insurance tax raid and the slashing of business rates relief.

There are threats to the future of the post offices in Stockton and Thornaby. In Stockton, our post office has changed location over the decades but has been ever present and ever valued. It was hoped that a franchise in a retailer could protect its future, but the impact of the national insurance tax raid and the slashing of business rates relief are forcing retailers across the country to

close stores and axe jobs. In Stockton and Yarm, the impact is compounded by the Labour council's introduction of short-stay parking charges.

Retail is one of the most important sectors in the country. It is the largest private sector employer in our economy and often sits at the very heart of our communities, and it is the biggest social mobility driver around. In the last few weeks, however, we have seen fantastic retail giants, including Sainsbury's and Tesco, axing jobs and killing opportunities. In Stockton, we have heard the sad news of WHSmith's closure. The store has hosted the post office, but it looks set to close its doors as a result of the Government's war on high streets. I have met representatives of the Post Office to share my concerns about the impact that the closure will have on so many of my residents, particularly the elderly. The current post office is not due to close until May, and it has committed to working with me to look at alternative franchisees and locations in the town. I am delighted that a number of potential operators have already shown an interest.

In Thornaby, the situation remains concerning but unclear. The local postmaster has a lease, but the community were recently shaken when a planning application went forward for a Pizza Hut to take the post office's place. The community spoke and put forward their objections, and the application was rejected. There are fears of an appeal. I have engaged with the post office and the town centre as recently as this morning, and hope remains that we can find a way forward.

The post offices in Stockton and Thornaby are essential. Their closure would not simply mean the loss of a building; it would mean the loss of convenience, social interaction, footfall in the town centre and economic stability for many. Given the recent announcement that NatWest is closing its Stockton branch, our post offices are absolutely vital to our local towns. I am determined and hopeful, and will do everything I can to keep our post offices' doors open in Stockton and Thornaby.

4.2 pm

**Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab):** I thank the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this debate, which, as is shown by the number of hon. Members wishing to participate, is incredibly timely—not least because later today, coincidentally, I will present a petition to the House about the potential closure of Chester-le-Street post office in my constituency of North Durham.

Chester-le-Street is one of the 115 Crown post offices at risk of closure following Post Office Ltd's announcement that it is reviewing the future of its directly managed branches. This is worrying not only for those who are employed in those branches, but for the many people who use post office services, and for the high street—in Chester-le-Street, we would say the "front street"—businesses that rely on the footfall and passing trade that post offices bring.

The post office in Chester-le-Street has been at the heart of the community in North Durham since 1936; indeed, it is one of only a tiny number of post offices that bear the cypher of King Edward VIII. Chester-le-Street has lost most of its high street banking branches in recent years, so it is more important than ever that this vital hub and delivery office remains open and accessible for my constituents. Over 650 people have signed the

[*Luke Akehurst*]

petition that I will present later, which calls on the Post Office to ensure that the Chester-le-Street branch remains open.

The Post Office's corporate website rightly describes the corporation as

"an anchor of UK communities for centuries",

and says that it is

"driven by a strong social purpose: to be here, in person, for the people who rely on us."

I could not agree more. We must ensure that in Chester-le-Street and the other places that hon. Members have mentioned this afternoon, post office branches remain open "in person"—to use the words on the Post Office's corporate website—on our high streets and in our town centres, so that they can provide the services that local people rely on.

4.4 pm

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Wherever we grew up in the United Kingdom, we all remember the post office and our parents imbuing us with the sense that it was one of the things that we could rely on and trust in a changing world. There are many reasons for that, one of which is the long-serving and always interested staff. In rural areas—Boston and Skegness has many rural areas—post office staff are important in helping people in villages, small towns and communities, particularly the elderly, the disabled and the vulnerable, to use certain services. When we were growing up, we did not have the digital devices we have now.

In the many brilliant contributions today, we have heard that post office staff know their customers. They know who is healthy and who might be struggling. If someone does not appear on their regular day, at their usual time, they might say, "Where is Mrs Smith?". That is massively important in our communities. This is not just about money; it is about the asset value of post offices in our communities. We and all the post offices on the frontline have been let down by decades of mismanagement.

In Boston, WHSmith has a post office franchise, and yes, it is closing, which has caused great consternation. Sadly, WHSmith has not been well managed as a retailer. People are concerned that the replacement will be much smaller, and they cannot understand why services are being withdrawn. If we are trying to make post offices more viable, surely they should have more services, not fewer. The operators and owners of the post office in Swineshead cannot understand why services such as the sale of premium bonds and fishing licences, or the payment of tax and national insurance to HMRC, have all been withdrawn. That makes the post office less viable.

All our communities, towns and tiny villages are different, so surely we need to be massively flexible, whether we have a stand-alone post office, or one in a franchise, a library or a village hall. I was delighted when there was a pub in the village hall; maybe we could have a post office in a pub. I digress, but Members can see my point.

Post offices are the most important part of communities, and it is the elderly and the vulnerable who need them most. That is why I hope that the Government, given all their challenges, remember that this is not about the money. It is about the asset—the community hub of the post office.

4.8 pm

**Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this debate. Members across the House have spoken eloquently about the importance of their local post office, particularly at a time when high streets across the country are suffering. Shops have closed, and banks have left or are leaving the high street. The post office is usually the remaining thriving hub of activity on the high street.

Last year, residents found out from media reports that the future of Westbourne post office was uncertain. There was no prior consultation, and no input from those who use it daily. Many of them wrote to me with their concerns about the loss of such an essential community asset, and I share their worries about the possible loss of such a popular and well-used service.

At the end of November, we launched a petition to save this much-loved post office. To date, more than 2,200 people in the area have signed it. As part of the petition, I asked people to share what they love so much about the post office and what it means to them, and I have been inundated with messages from local residents. It is essential to businesses that use its services, and to the disabled and elderly, who need it for banking, paying bills and accessing government services. It always has a queue coming out of the door. It has been described as a lifeline and the heart of the community. I will read out a few of the responses I received, to give the House a sense of the importance of our post office. One reads:

"It is an essential service for so many in the area. I am disabled and I can't travel further to deal with the things the Post Office helps with. It's nearly always busy, with queues out of the door. To remove it is sheer madness".

Another response reads:

"The Post Office has been open since 1910 and is an essential part of Westbourne village. It serves as a vital resource for elderly residents like me, who may not know how to use the internet and no longer have any banks in the area".

Another person said:

"As a manager of a local charity shop, the post office is integral to our day to day running as provides banking opportunities and enables us to send stock. We use it for stationery and supplies. It's a vital part of the community".

That is just a snapshot of the responses I have received from different sections of the community. They show that the post office is not simply a business; it is an essential for many people who use it.

I have heard from the Post Office that no decisions have been made yet about the future of the branch. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman), I have heard that the branch is losing money, but I have not seen any evidence of that. I know a franchise model is being explored, which may have benefits. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) for raising the issue of WHSmith. We are concerned locally about the franchise model because our branch of WHSmith has just closed in the town centre, not far from the post office branch. Understandably, there is scepticism locally about relying on that model, when we have just seen the loss of a post office, with no plan to replace it, despite the high demand for its services.

I welcome the Government's commitment to the Post Office, the financial support that has been outlined, and the forthcoming Green Paper. That shows that the

Government understand the importance of post offices to communities. In his closing remarks, I hope the Minister can reassure us that there will be no impact on the quality of services that communities get, and that he is exploring all options—for example, the possibility of providing services, including banking services, through hubs, or offering Government services in post offices to make them viable and keep them in communities. I reassure my constituents in Bournemouth West that I will continue to fight for the post office in Westbourne, and the ones in the town centre.

4.12 pm

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) on securing the debate. Having asked for a post office debate at business questions only two weeks ago, I was delighted when he secured this one.

In rural areas, such as my Thornbury and Yate constituency, post offices provide vital services that enable people to live their life. Since 2015, over 6,000 bank branches have closed across the country, making it harder for people to access their cash and use banking services. Many have been reassured that they can still access those core services through their post office, but now even that is at risk.

I agree with the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) on the importance of post offices to e-commerce. When I made my recent visit to my local sorting office, I was told that the Royal Mail is now a parcel delivery service with a sideline in delivering mail. Obviously, post offices play an important role in e-commerce and, in doing so, support local businesses.

The recent news that the Post Office was looking to close 115 Crown post offices was a huge blow; one of those post offices is in Yate. Residents tell me that it feels like a done deal, not a proposal open for discussion. When I met the area manager, although she said that no decisions had been made, there seemed to be a strong leaning towards moving all post offices to the franchising model, with all the risks that hon. Members have already mentioned.

**Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): Raynes Park has an important high street in my constituency. There are no banks in Raynes Park, so our solitary post office is a vital lifeline, allowing residents and businesses alike to access banking, bill payments and traditional postal services. However, it is one of 115 Crown branches at risk, and my constituents are very concerned about the uncertainty. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should be giving assurances now, to provide communities with peace of mind, particularly the old and digitally excluded?

**Claire Young**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, having seen the anxiety that the threat of closure is provoking in my constituents.

Yate post office is very busy; there are often significant queues of people waiting to access services. It is rather unusual, because it shares its space with the local sorting office, which operates from the second floor of the building. The quality of service would be negatively impacted if it were squeezed into another existing business. Yate and Chipping Sodbury have also lost several banks on the high street, with many people being told, as I said

earlier, that they could rely on the post office instead. Now, even that is at risk, with Yate listed by the Post Office as one branch it is seeking to close. Residents are rightly angry about that, with more than a thousand signing my petition to keep the post office open.

Sadly, it is not just the Crown post offices that are threatened with closure. We recently had confirmation that the post office in Cromhall is set to close, due to the closure of the village shop in which it is based. That means that the neighbouring outreach branch in Tytherington, which is overseen by the same sub-postmaster, is also at risk. The sub-postmaster told me how the post office at Tytherington is busier than the one in Cromhall, fuelled by the fact that nearly all the banks in nearby Thornbury have closed. Indeed, Lloyds has added itself to the list today. Tytherington post office also has strong support from customers using Royal Mail services for businesses, as it has a sizeable free car park, making it convenient for them to bring their parcels, letters and banking to the post office counter. Despite that, the Post Office refuses to allow the Tytherington branch to become a stand-alone site, and that is causing huge concern for residents.

The Tytherington branch is well supported and is an essential service for residents, many of whom do not have private cars. There is no public transport in the village, meaning that the loss of the post office would leave some people utterly cut off. The post office is based in the thriving community shop, which is run by volunteers and also provides a vital service to the local community. In the wake of the news, a grassroots petition supporting the post office in Tytherington has gained more than 800 signatures in just over a week. However, the Post Office said to me that it would not review its decision because,

“In the area there is a Main Post Office at Thornbury and a Local branch at Alveston—both are within 3 miles of Tytherington.” That is completely tone deaf and ignores the lack of public transport. What are those without cars meant to do?

The Post Office has said it is keen to explore a new outreach service and the possibility of a new branch, but all that will take time, especially as it is contingent upon finding a new sub-postmaster to do it. It even admits that it is likely the branch will close before an alternative can be found. That means that in just a few weeks' time, no immediate service will be available in the village. I will do all I can to make sure we secure a post office service at Tytherington and in Yate.

In closing, I ask the Minister: does he agree that relying solely on the franchising model of post offices carries risk and that there are benefits to preserving the stand-alone offices? Will he also commit to supporting community outreach post offices based in thriving community shops?

4.17 pm

**Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this debate. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) has already summarised a lot of the excellent contributions from the Government side.

It is clear from today's debate that we all know that post office branches are essential to our local communities and the local economy. It saddens me that this Government

[Mark Swards]

inherited a Post Office in such a precarious position. Having discussed the matter with senior Post Office staff and the Minister, I know that the organisation is facing serious financial challenges, and I am grateful for the engagement of the Government and the Minister on the issue. That forms the backdrop to the announcement that the Post Office is considering the future of the remaining 115 directly managed branches, which has been referenced countless times today, with a franchising model being considered for them.

I remain especially concerned about the future of the Morley post office on Queen Street. Morley sits in the heart of my constituency. It is a town of around 50,000 people and one of the key locations that people come to for financial services and shops. The directly managed branch is vital for my constituents and for those who rely on the services that it provides, and I have been looking for certainty that it will remain on the high street where it belongs. I know the strength of feeling from my constituents, as more than 2,500 people have signed my petition to keep the branch open. It is clear that after the closure of many bank branches across Morley, the post office is a lifeline for those who need it. The numbers back that up—it is not just my testimony. While other directly managed branches have seen a 34% drop in footfall since 2019 because of the pandemic, the Morley post office is only 3% down. We use our post office.

A word on bank branches and banking hubs: I have been actively pursuing a banking hub for Morley town centre, especially with the recent news that NatWest is due to pull out of the town this year. NatWest even pointed to the post office on its way out and said, “Don’t worry—you have that service there,” despite the threat of closure. I have been in touch with Link, one of the organisations that determines which areas gets banking hubs, and it tells me that Morley does not yet meet the criteria for a banking hub because we still have one branch left. While I have many questions about the criteria, we will have to save them for another debate and another time.

While Morley does not meet Link’s criteria, and while I continue to have those discussions with Link, we cannot have a situation where my post office closes. Thankfully, the continued operation of Morley’s post office will not prevent us from securing a banking hub in future, so there is no reason why we should not do everything in our power to keep the post office open, and that is exactly what I am doing. As I stated, the branch is very much in demand. It is used by local businesses that trade on our high street. Business owners such as Castlepoint, which owns and operates Morley market, have contacted me directly about their concerns about the branch closing.

Post Office research shows that three in 10 SMEs use a post office once a week, whether to post parcels to customers or deposit their cash takings. Losing this branch, which is surrounded by so many businesses in Morley, would make us all worse off. I know that the direction of travel for the Post Office is to move towards the franchising model that we have heard so much about today, and I remain hopeful that a suitable postmaster will be found to take over the branch, but I am also clear that the branch should remain on the high street. Having it in an accessible place in Morley town centre is

very important for both residents and businesses, and I will continue to make that case as strongly as I can. It is why I have requested that those interested in taking over the franchise in Morley contact me. I am keen to support their bids, assuming that they are in the best interests of Morley and the town centre.

Finally, I ask the Minister whether there is any threat to the number of services that a directly managed branch can offer if it transitions to a franchised branch. I reassure all my communities in Leeds South West and Morley that I will work tirelessly to ensure that this branch remains open. It is crucial that the services that the post office provides in Morley town centre remain there for many years to come.

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

4.22 pm

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) on securing the debate. The contributions throughout have been unified in highlighting that post offices are a focal point of our communities. They are a vital part of our society and our high streets, with millions of people depending on them every week. They are community hubs, providing access to communication, banking and other vital services. That is particularly important for those with restricted access, such as older people or those in more rural populations with little email connectivity. There are villages that fit that exact description in my constituency of Wokingham, such as Finchampstead, Swallowfield and Hurst. That is why I am deeply concerned about the news that 115 post office branches may be closed, with around 1,000 jobs at risk of being lost. It has the potential to increase social isolation for some of the most vulnerable groups in the UK.

I am especially concerned that the Post Office is reviewing proposals to replace existing branches. Specifically, it is looking for alternatives to its wholly owned branches, and considering franchise arrangements where a third party could take them on instead. That opens up lots of risks. In my constituency of Wokingham, the post office in Hurst was unexpectedly closed a few weeks ago. It was located in a shop that many considered a pillar of the community. Through no fault of the post office, the tenants running the shop had to close its doors. Losing a post office can really harm a small village such as Hurst, and the proposed solution that people should travel to Wokingham or Twyford to access services is simply not possible for all residents. Public transport links are limited, and those who rely on the post office are less likely to drive.

If the Post Office estate is reliant on third parties, it has no control, and there is the worrying potential that situations like that in Hurst will become increasingly commonplace. A future in which losing a local service once means that it is gone forever—very few are replaced once they are gone—with little chance of appeal is a failure of Government policy. That is especially relevant considering the potential loss of 500 WHSmith shops across the UK, many of which house post office branches, such as the one in Wokingham town centre.

The high street is struggling and the Government need to act urgently to turn things around. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the Post

Office is on a sustainable footing for the long term? Will the Minister commit to ensuring that none of the 115 post offices will close until a consultation with each local community has been undertaken? Has the Minister met representatives from the Post Office to draw up plans in case it loses hundreds of its sites due to WHSmith's financial issues?

The BBC reported today that Ofcom has proposed cutting the delivery of second-class letters to every other weekday and scrapping deliveries on Saturdays. That would harm services for millions of households and small businesses. Royal Mail executives should be working night and day to turn the company around and fix the postal service. The new owners agreed to the existing delivery targets when they took over the company, and they should stick to them. I would appreciate it if the Minister could address my points and offer reassurances that our communities will receive the great service they deserve.

Post office branches provide a place to do banking for millions of people across the country, and that is the case in Wokingham, but another area of concern is the lack of resilience in our local financial services. The WHSmith-located post office in Wokingham is too small and the staff are too busy with all their other tasks. One constituent had to wait about 45 minutes to withdraw £15. That is why I and local campaigners like Lynn Forbes hope that we can get a banking hub. However, our application has been declined. If the WHSmith in Wokingham town centre were to close, our already limited options would be reduced further.

Link, which provides the banking hubs, is encouraged within the current legislation to consider the protection of face-to-face banking, but it is not explicitly empowered to take that into account when making a final decision on whether to establish a banking hub. Instead, it just focuses on cash access. Will the Minister explain why the protection of face-to-face services is not considered, and will he introduce further legislation to require their protection?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

4.28 pm

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): This has been an excellent debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) on securing it and thank the Backbench Business Committee for awarding it. A consistent theme throughout the debate has been the important role the post office plays in communities across our land, providing what the hon. Member beautifully described as friendly access to key services that connect people, that service communities, particularly those without banks, and that help those unable to use the internet to connect to Government services. In West Worcestershire, we are fortunate enough to have 31 post offices, including some mobile services, and I put on record my thanks to all the friendly sub-postmasters and mistresses who provide those services.

Over the course of the debate we heard about places across the UK: Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard, South West Devon, South East Cornwall, Orkney and Shetland, Bermondsey and Old Southwark, South West Hertfordshire, Chelsea and Fulham, Didcot and Wantage, Glasgow North East, Stockton West, North Durham, Boston and Skegness, Bournemouth West, Thornbury and Yate, Leeds South West and Morley, and Wokingham, and in

interventions we heard about Newton Abbot, Dawlish, Teignmouth, Basildon and Billericay, Dulwich, and Tiverton and Minehead. And I dare say, Madam Deputy Speaker, you feel strongly about the post office in Romsey. We can see just how incredibly valuable that network of friendly institutions is across the country.

I am afraid to say, however—and I break it gently to the Minister—that Labour's Budget of broken promises is threatening that network. Through the national insurance jobs tax, the hike in business rates and the incoming employment regulations, Labour is hiking the cost of doing business, as swathes of post offices are facing tens of millions more in tax and red tape. Those pressures mean that the Post Office has been forced into assessing the future of more than 100 Crown post office branches. Rumours abound that when the Green Paper is published, it may include a consultation on the reduction in the number of post offices to below 11,500. Will the Minister put paid to that speculation by telling the House when the Green Paper will be published?

As the Post Office and its branch network are major employers, with more than 50,000 full-time equivalent workers, another impact is that the Post Office could face an extra £45 million bill as a result of the national insurance hike, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Post offices are often eligible for retail, hospitality and leisure business rates relief, and they face a huge increase in their business rates as the relief falls from 75% to 40%. According to the Government's own impact assessment, the Employment Rights Bill will cost businesses across the country £4.5 billion. Proportionately, given that Post Office has 50,000 employees, the Bill will cost the Post Office over £8 million. The House does not have to take that from me; I will quote the chairman of the Post Office, Nigel Railton:

"It almost goes without saying: we are a business in need of a fresh start – and urgently... And at the recent Budget, we saw... costs rise with National Insurance Contributions, National Living Wage and business rates."

**Neil Coyle:** Will the shadow Minister give way?

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** I will. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not like hearing that news.

**Neil Coyle:** It has nothing to do with hearing the news. I just wonder whether the shadow Minister can remind us how of many Crown post offices were lost while she was in government.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** I am just getting to that—the hon. Gentleman is absolutely on point with where I am going. Sadly, it was under the previous Labour Government that the network really shrank in a major way, when the number of post offices went into sharp decline, before it then stabilised in the 2010s. In fact, during the entire time that we were in coalition with our Liberal Democrat colleagues, and then in government ourselves, the network remained above that 11,500 figure. It takes action, as we have heard clearly this afternoon, to maintain that precious network.

**Neil Coyle:** Will the shadow Minister give way?

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman, thank you very much.

**Neil Coyle:** But you did not answer my question.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** I have given way.

The previous Government worked to enter into a new partnership with post offices and came up with the idea that people could confirm their identity in person. That is a way of using that valuable network across the land. We recognise that vulnerable people sometimes struggle to verify their identity online. We also began the initiative to help communities dealing with bank closures by setting up a network of banking hubs. I was pleased to hear the Minister confirm earlier today that he will continue backing banking hub delivery through the Post Office, but does he consider that the framework negotiations between the Post Office and the banks, which are in their final stages, are going well?

One year on from ITV's historic programme "Mr Bates vs the Post Office", I want to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for all he did to address the issues raised in that programme. Can the Minister detail the progress his Government are making on the compensation for sub-postmasters?

I want to raise the issue of Fujitsu, which designed the Horizon IT system that has destroyed so many lives and livelihoods. Under the previous Government, there were discussions with Fujitsu about providing a share of the compensation to the victims of the Horizon scandal, and Fujitsu confirmed that it will pause bids for Government contracts until the public inquiry is concluded. However, this month it was reported that the Government have awarded new contracts to Fujitsu. When Labour was in opposition, many Labour Members criticised awards made to Fujitsu, so can the Minister provide an update on the Government's current approach?

**Ben Coleman:** The hon. Lady mentions the Horizon scandal. Is she of the opinion that the previous Government's failure to address the Horizon scandal over such a long period of time and the billions of pounds that have had to be spent sorting out the mess since then have nothing to do with the financial problems that the Post Office now finds itself in?

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** I do not want to politicise this too much, because I think that had gone on for a long period of time, and the inquiry took a lot of evidence last year. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton played a remarkable role in exonerating so many people, and in setting up the public inquiry.

My next question to the Minister is: could he provide an update on what he is hearing through his channels about when the inquiry may publish its report. It finished taking public evidence at the end of last year, and I anticipate it may publish that later this year, but does he have an update on that for the House? Does he have any plans to compensate sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses who were victims of Horizon's predecessor systems—the Capture and ECCO systems that predated Horizon—and does he have plans to quash any convictions arising from those two systems?

In the spending review, how much public money is the Minister requesting to put in a replacement for the Horizon system? Can he tell us how many post offices currently benefit from small business rate relief, and what are the Government plans about continuing that

throughout this Parliament? Further to the question from the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) about today's worrying announcement from Ofcom that second class post may be delivered only every other weekday and not on Saturdays, what discussions is the Minister having with Ofcom to prevent this further attack on the demand for our precious postal services?

To conclude, we have heard how incredibly important this precious network of friendly people across our land is to this country, with those 11,500 post offices and the distance requirements that are in place. After hearing from so many colleagues, will the Minister reassure the House that he will sustain that network throughout the life of this Parliament. Prevention is so much better than cure. Let us all focus on supporting our much-loved post offices in any way we can to continue the wonderful work that they do up and down the country.

4.38 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** I echo the thanks to the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this important debate. There have been some very clear and consistent messages from across the House to the Government in this debate, and I pay tribute to the passion with which hon. Members on all sides of the House have raised key constituency concerns, as the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) said.

We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer), for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd), for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman), for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke), for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) and for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards). I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Withington (Jeff Smith) has particular concerns about Didsbury post office. We also heard from the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) and the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young), and I know you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have concerns in this space, too.

Post offices provide hugely important everyday services to millions of people across our country. Communities rightly expect to have access to those essential services, just as they would to a GP surgery, a primary school or neighbourhood police. That is because, as many Members made clear, post offices are the very beating heart of our towns and villages.

As our economy has modernised and evolved, so too have our local post offices. Today they are so much more than a place to send letters and parcels. They act as high street banks, as many have said, as access points for some Government services, and as community hubs for an array of different activities, generating crucial social capital. Indeed, after the unearthing of the Horizon



scandal, the nation's unanimous support for sub-postmasters and their campaign for redress and exoneration shows how revered the post office and its workers are by the British public—by all of us.

We are working as fast as we can to give sub-postmasters the compensation they deserve, and we are indeed exploring what further steps we can take. But since the end of June, in just the six months that we have been in office, more than 1,000 more sub-postmasters who are victims of the scandal have received compensation. The amount paid out in redress has increased by over £355 million, more than double the amount that had been paid out at the time of the general election. As of 3 January, almost £600 million had been paid to over 3,800 sub-postmasters across all four main compensation schemes. Also as of 3 January, the GLO—group litigation order—scheme had received 453 claims of which 370 are fully complete and the remaining 83 are being assessed for their completeness or undergoing a request for further information that would unlock a more generous offer of compensation. We expect then to have paid substantial redress, even if the claims are not fully settled, to the majority of GLO claimants by 31 March. But let me be clear: there are still complex cases to resolve and there is still much more to do in terms of compensation.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire, speaking for the Opposition, asked about Capture. We have identified a number of gaps in the compensation process. We published in particular the Kroll report into what had happened in terms of the Post Office use of the Capture software prior to the installation of the Horizon system. We are beginning to talk to sub-postmasters who used the Capture software about redress going forward so that we can design an effective redress scheme. The hon. Lady and the House may be aware that there are a number of cases where there were convictions that appear to relate to use of the Capture software by the Post Office that are with the Criminal Cases Review Commission at the moment.

The hon. Lady also asked about the timing of when we might hear the Sir Wyn Williams conclusions. As she will understand, we as the Government do not want in any way to be seen to be rushing Sir Wyn Williams. We have heard a similar timescale as her—sometime later this year—and we will all wait with considerable interest for the conclusions.

The hon. Lady also asked about the Ofcom consultation. I stress that it is still a consultation. Ofcom will be consulting for some 10 weeks and, as she would expect, we will be fully engaged in that process.

On the future of the post office, we all know that our high streets have faced huge challenges in recent years. In some cases, the presence of a post office on a high street has been a game changer in driving footfall and attracting custom to other businesses. The public—as many Members have alluded to, it is often the elderly, those who use cash and those who are digitally excluded—rely on the post office for essential services. It is therefore right that the Government hold the Post Office to account to ensure that there is enough postal service provision across the country, and I recognise my particular responsibility in that regard.

We protect the post office network by setting minimum access criteria. With a network of this size, we are likely to see fluctuation in the number of branches open at any one time, but crucially, the access criteria ensure that regardless of how the network changes, services

remain within local reach of people at all times. The Government recognise the key role that post offices play in their communities and how branches in rural areas in particular often act as community hubs. We are listening carefully to stakeholders to ensure that the whole network, including those branches, is sustainable.

**Mr Carmichael:** Does the Minister agree that the manner in which the Post Office allowed the information about the closure of directly managed branches to come into the public domain was unacceptable? What is he doing to ensure that the Post Office treats communities with better respect than that in the future?

**Gareth Thomas:** I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that we are where we are, and it is important that we move forward. I will come to the question of directly managed branches in a second.

To ensure that we are planning properly for the future, we will publish a Green Paper before the summer to seek the public's views, insights and experiences to help shape the future of the Post Office. In the meantime, we are taking steps to continue to support the network. Along with the annual £50 million subsidy, we have provided a further £37.5 million to support the Post Office network next year.

Our thinking on the future of the post office will also be influenced by Sir Wyn Williams's conclusions. We continue to support and encourage the chair of the Post Office, Nigel Railton, to shift the focus of the Post Office away from headquarters and towards postmasters. The Post Office, with our support, is reviewing its costs, as its financial position continues to be challenging. We are working with the senior leadership at the Post Office on future opportunities, beginning with banking, so that the company can increase its product offers and commercial revenue going forward. The Post Office has set up a new consultative council that will work with senior management on how these new plans are taken forward. It is a first, but none the less important step to change the culture of the Post Office.

Building a sustainable future for the Post Office is imperative. It has had many false new starts. Nearly half of its branches are not profitable or make only a small profit from post office business. Postmaster pay has not increased materially for a decade. Mr Railton is looking to deliver a reduction in the Post Office's costs and, as I have alluded to, an increase in its commercial revenues. He has also set out an intention to transform the service and the support that postmasters receive from the Post Office, which we have strongly encouraged. He has announced ambitions for a new deal for postmasters, and I am pleased that the Post Office recently made a £20 million immediate one-off payment to postmasters to increase their remuneration.

On the future of directly managed branches, I appreciate that it is challenging for communities that lose their post office service. I speak from experience, having had Harrow's directly managed branch close in 2016 and transfer to a franchise service instead. I am always happy to challenge the Post Office on specific concerns that Members have at constituency level. However, the Post Office operates as a commercial business, and the company has the freedom to deliver the branch network within the parameters we set.

[Gareth Thomas]

I know there is concern about the future of DMBs, and it is important to underline that no definitive decisions have been taken on the future of any individual directly managed branch. I have made clear to the Post Office that there must be discussions with unions and other key stakeholders. I am pleased to hear that the Post Office has seen positive engagement from independent postmasters and strategic partners, who have expressed their interest in taking on DMBs. It is encouraging that there continues to be such interest in the chance to run a post office.

**Neil Coyle:** I look forward to working with the Minister on the future of the franchise in my constituency. Is he aware that there were 373 Crown post offices in 2010 but that by 2024 that number had fallen to 115? The shadow Minister either did not know that figure or did not want to admit it.

**Gareth Thomas:** Funnily enough, I am aware of that statistic; my hon. Friend makes his point powerfully.

We were clear in our manifesto that that we would seek to strengthen the Post Office network in consultation with postmasters, trade unions and customers, and that remains very much our ambition. That is one of the reasons why we are working closely with the Post Office in providing funding to support the replacement of the Horizon computer system. The Post Office's future lies particularly in cash and banking. With the right support from the financial services industry and engagement with groups such as Cash Access UK, there is clearly more that the Post Office could offer on the high street through banking hubs and the Post Office network. We are beginning to work with the Post Office to improve its banking offer on the high street.

The Government are strongly committed to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Post Office. It is a national asset that provides an invaluable public service in all our constituencies. There are certainly challenges ahead, but we continue to work with the Post Office to ensure that it is fit for the future. We always welcome views on the network. I thank those hon. Members who secured the debate and all other hon. Members for their contributions.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Gideon Amos to wind up.

4.51 pm

**Gideon Amos:** I have learned today from the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) that Postman Pat is the model to follow, and just like Postman Pat himself, post office services may change, but they must not wither. We have also heard how much of a trusted institution our post offices are. The word "trust" came through several times from the hon. Members for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) and for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice). We should never forget that it is the staff in those post offices and, of course, the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses who were so horrendously treated by the Horizon scandal who make post offices what they are and why they are so important to our communities.

My hon. Friends and hon. Members across House are clearly great champions of their local post offices. My hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage

(Ollly Glover) mentioned his post office's lost cats service, which I was interested to hear about, and my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) mentioned the outreach service. To paraphrase my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), in Wellington in my constituency the postal service was fixed so many times it was definitely broken, and now we no longer have one at all for a town of 15,000 people.

Many other hon. Members highlighted the importance of post offices as hubs for their communities, including the hon. Members for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) and for Stockton West (Matt Vickers). I completely agree with the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) that the King's Road without a post office seems unimaginable. I wish him well in his campaign.

I was somewhat disappointed that the Minister did not comment on the fact that banking hubs, which are being created around the country, are not providing post office services despite having "Post Office" written on the outside of the building. I would very much like to follow that up with the Minister on another occasion; it seems an obvious solution. As the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire said, securing the next agreement for banking hubs is incredibly important, and we certainly support the Government in achieving that.

Finally, I congratulate the hon. Members for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale), for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Seward) and for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on their petitions. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark is also continuing his excellent house-sitting services by sitting in the House this afternoon and making sure that the debate went on as needed.

I will leave the House with a couple of quotations from my petition about the post office in Wellington. One petitioner said:

"I feel so sorry for those people without a car—particularly the frail and elderly. They have to trek in all winds and weather" to the next village several miles away. They continued:

"You see so many villages with their own post office, yet a growing town like Wellington doesn't—it's bizarre."

Mary said:

"Why was it not considered at the same time as the banking hub, as it's run by the post office?"

The first citizen of Wellington, our mayor, said that "since 2019 when the...Post Office closed, at least two business owners"

tried to operate postal services but found that the funding given did not make it a viable option. That is why we desperately need a main post office for the town of Wellington and its 15,000 people.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the future of local Post Office services.

## PETITIONS

### Chester-le-Street Post Office

4.54 pm

**Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab):** I wish to present a petition relating to the potential closure of the post office in Chester-le-Street, which has been at the heart of the community in North Durham since 1936.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of North Durham,

declares that Chester-le-Street Post Office, which provides vital services to local residents is at risk of closure; and notes that 658 people have signed a similar online petition on this matter.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage the Post Office to ensure that Chester-le-Street Post Office can remain open.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003039]

### Free 1-hour parking in Yarm

**Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the people of Stockton West. Yarm has the most beautiful high street in the country, with an amazing offer of retail and hospitality businesses. However, it faces a huge threat, as the Labour council is set to axe one-hour free parking, which poses a real risk to the high street, its businesses and jobs.

Supported by local councillors Andrew Sherris, John Coulson and Dan Fagan, more than 2,500 people have signed a similar petition online to protect Yarm's one-hour free parking. I welcome the opportunity to present the petition today.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of the residents of the constituency of Stockton West,*

*declares that Stockton Council must keep Yarm's free 1-hour parking; further declares that free parking is crucial for supporting local businesses, encouraging footfall, and helping Yarm's economy thrive; and further notes that the Council's changes to eliminate 1-hour free parking risks harming small businesses and deterring shoppers.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure that the high street in Yarm is supported with free 1-hour parking.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P003040]

### Doncaster Royal Infirmary

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)*

4.56 pm

**Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to make the case in this Chamber for the repair and refurbishment of Doncaster Royal Infirmary. This is not the first time I have raised this issue in this place, such is its importance to my constituents. Doncaster Royal Infirmary is at the heart of our community in Doncaster. For many of us, including myself, it is where we were born and rely on during some of the most difficult and painful moments of our lives. It is with great sadness that I come to this Chamber to say that after consistent underfunding, our hospital is in dire need of repair.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the NHS staff who have dedicated their careers to caring for the patients at the hospital. When I worked as a prison officer, I spent many hours on escorts at DRI and saw for myself the commitment of its staff. We live in a time where pressures on the NHS are immense, and staff across the country face unbearable conditions as they try to support patients in a system that desperately needs reform. I am pleased that this Government are committed to enacting change within our NHS for the benefit of both patients and the staff who treat them.

In Doncaster, our dedicated NHS staff face added pressure. Doncaster Royal Infirmary faces one of the highest repair backlogs in the country. The East Ward tower block, which houses some of the most vulnerable patients, faces critical infrastructure risks and safety concerns, and therefore is at the very top of the Doncaster and Bassetlaw teaching hospitals' list of priorities. Other areas with a backlog of repairs include operating theatres, the critical care department and the women and children's hospital.

**Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): As my hon. Friend will know, in April 2021 a leak occurred at the women's hospital at Doncaster Royal Infirmary. The water then flooded the area and went into the electrical systems, and a fire broke out. Some 60 patients were impacted and had to be evacuated, including premature babies. Thanks to the efforts of the amazing hospital staff, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, no one was hurt, but the damage was substantial, and it impacted larger parts of the hospital. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to learn from such incidents, and that it makes absolute sense, both financially and for people's safety, to proactively manage repairs and do the maintenance that is required?

**Sally Jameson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that incident showcased how desperate the situation is. It is a testament to the staff and the team at the trust that no one was hurt, and that the repair work that needed to be done happened immediately. Other areas where a backlog remains include the operating theatres. According to the Doncaster Royal Infirmary refurbishment plan, the operating theatres at the hospital do not meet modern standards for space.

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)*

**Sally Jameson:** Across the hospital, there remains infrastructure that dates back to the 1930s. Imagine all the advancements we have made in science, innovation, technology and medicine since then, yet Doncaster patients are treated in a building that has not been updated in line with any of that. Most worryingly, a recent report concluded that there would be an “increased risk to life” were a fire to occur in Doncaster and Bassetlaw teaching hospitals. That is due to the age and infrastructure of the buildings, and the electrical works, which do not meet the needs of a modern-day hospital.

In spite of the catalogue of urgently needed repairs, Doncaster was not successful in its bid to secure a new hospital under the previous Government. Despite promises made by a string of Health Ministers, our application for crucial funding from the new hospital programme was denied by the Conservatives. That was a bitter blow to the community. We now know that the funding promised for the programme never existed—it was a work of fiction. That does not just affect the hospitals included in the programme; the implications ripple across all hospitals that desperately need investment.

In Doncaster, we are doing all we can to improve health provision for residents. That includes the work that Mayor Ros Jones and the trust are doing to set up health on the high street, providing appropriate health provision in the city centre. That will not only improve and quicken the service, but increase footfall on the high street. The trust announced in December that as part of a wider £19.8 million investment project, some refurbishment works will be completed at Doncaster Royal Infirmary. That is welcome, but it is not the overall solution.

As a result of not being included in the new hospital programme, the Doncaster and Bassetlaw hospital trust has come up with a thorough and extensive on-site rebuild and refurbishment plan. The estimated cost in 2023 for the full refurbishment and a new building in front of the east ward tower block was up to £356 million, the cost for work on the theatres £35 million, and a refurbishment of the women’s and children’s hospital, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), would cost up to £87 million. That would also help to generate some extra capacity, which is much needed in the current climate.

This week, I visited Doncaster Royal Infirmary with my hon. Friend and the Minister to show her the extent of the repair backlog, and to demonstrate the urgency with which we need action. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for Health for meeting me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband) this week to talk through the DRI refurbishment plan, and the support we need to get the rebuild work done. That work is also supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey). The plan lays out the detail of proposed refurbishment works, not just to clear the repair backlog, but to ensure that core services are protected and a safe site can be ensured for a minimum of 20 years.

I now ask the Government for action. I ask them for capital investment to clear the repair backlog, and to support the refurbishment and building programme, so that the people of Doncaster can access good-quality secondary care in a safe hospital. I ask the Government to support the staff at Doncaster Royal Infirmary in doing their jobs safely and effectively. I ask the Government to make sure that our hospital is fit for the future.

5.3 pm

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson) on securing a debate on this really important issue for her constituents. Since her election, she has been a committed champion for Doncaster Royal Infirmary, and I thank her for her tireless efforts. She is absolutely right that the promises made by the previous Government were hollow and built on sand. Even for the hospitals that made it into the new hospital programme, the money simply was not there. They let down the people of Doncaster.

On Monday, I had the privilege of visiting Doncaster Royal Infirmary, along with my hon. Friend and our hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), and witnessed the outstanding care that staff are providing despite significant infrastructure challenges. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend’s comments about the situation, and about the pressure that the staff find themselves under. Staff and patients deserve better than a hospital prone to floods, fires and equipment failures, some of which I saw for myself on Monday. Doncaster Royal Infirmary now has a backlog-of-maintenance bill of approximately £114 million, and the constant need for critical repairs leaves scarce resources for developing and enhancing facilities.

That is the reality facing Doncaster Royal Infirmary and hospitals nationwide after years of under-investment by the previous Government. Reversing the trend and repairing and rebuilding our hospital estate is a vital part of our ambition to create an NHS fit for the future. That is why the Chancellor announced that health capital spending is set to increase to £13.6 billion in 2025-26, representing record levels of capital investment in healthcare. I am pleased that works to address some of the most pressing issues at Doncaster Royal Infirmary are under way, with £19.8 million confirmed for the refurbishment and relocation of the critical care unit. That will deliver a safer and more accessible environment for the most vulnerable patients. Supporting projects are already in progress, including the relocation of the surgical same-day emergency care department. While I accept that this by no means addresses all the issues raised today, it is nevertheless a project that will deliver much-needed safety improvements.

NHS planning guidance published today sets out the NHS’s operational capital envelopes, national capital programmes and allocation processes for 2025-26. I recognise that the guidance will be of interest to Members who wish to understand the impacts on their constituencies, but as we are here to discuss Doncaster Royal Infirmary, I will focus on the funding opportunities available for that hospital.

The Government are backing the NHS with over £4 billion in operational capital in 2025-26 to empower local systems and ensure that funds are allocated according to local priorities. NHS England confirmed today that South Yorkshire integrated care board, which is responsible for Doncaster Royal Infirmary, has been allocated £107 million in operational capital to spend on its capital priorities next year. In addition to the annual operational capital allocations, the Government have allocated £750 million to an estates safety fund for 2025-26, which will focus on the worst safety risks across the NHS estate. South Yorkshire ICB has been

allocated £19 million of that funding on the basis of need, critical infrastructure risk, estates incidents, and the recent maternity estates survey.

Systems have been asked to prioritise their estate safety allocations to deliver maximum safety benefits locally. Their plans will be reviewed by NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that national and regional priorities are addressed effectively and schemes represent value for money. In some cases, estates safety funding may also be used to initiate multi-year schemes when that represents the most effective approach. I strongly encourage the trust to discuss options with the ICB for allocating some of its operational capital and estates safety funding to repairs at Doncaster Royal Infirmary.

Let me also draw attention to the £1.35 billion of capital funding allocated for constitutional standards recovery in 2025-2026. Although it is not targeted directly at repairs, Doncaster Royal Infirmary may be able to benefit from some of the £24 million that has been allocated to South Yorkshire ICB to support its progress towards achieving constitutional standards for my hon. Friend's constituents. I encourage the trust to explore possible options with the ICB that could address constitutional standards recovery as well as critical repairs, maximising value for money and, crucially, benefiting patients who deserve much better.

The Government recognise that, like Doncaster Royal Infirmary, many hospitals across the country need funding to overhaul their digital infrastructure. That is why we are investing more than £2 billion in NHS technology

and digital in 2025-26 to run essential services, increase productivity, improve cyber-security, enhance patient access, and ensure that all trusts have electronic patient records. I thank Doncaster and Bassetlaw trust for its co-operation on the implementation of a system-wide electronic patient record, and I want to reassure the trust that this investment in digital and technology will be available for projects beyond electronic patient records.

The Government understand that long-term certainty about capital funding will be essential to addressing the critical infrastructure issues at hospitals such as Doncaster Royal Infirmary, and across the NHS estate. Capital budgets beyond 2025-26 will be determined through the current spending review, which concludes in June 2025.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central for raising this important issue, and for her continued support, and that of her colleagues, for Doncaster Royal Infirmary. I extend my thanks to the staff of Doncaster Royal Infirmary for hosting my insightful visit, and for their candour in explaining to me how they have got into this situation in recent years. I hope to return when the new critical care unit is open. The Government are committed to repairing and rebuilding our hospital estate. It will take time—we have inherited a shocking situation—and I look forward to working with colleagues on this vital issue across the country in the coming years.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.10 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

*Thursday 30 January 2025*

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Medicinal Cannabis

1.30 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered medicinal cannabis.

I invite Members to consider the benefits of medicinal cannabis, and I will address the challenges facing patients across the country. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey; I always appreciate the opportunity to do so, and it is good to see you in your place. It is also a pleasure to see other hon. Members in the Chamber for the debate. I look forward very much to the contribution from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), and particularly to hearing from the Minister. I know that this issue is not the Minister's responsibility, but she always does her best to answer our queries. I spoke to her before the debate, and there are some things I want to ask her for, if that is all right.

I have been interested in this issue for many years, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. Many Members will have been introduced to the issue of medicinal cannabis by constituents who got in contact with them. In a way, it is a bit of a niche debate, and those Members who are here have specific asks. The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) has been a stalwart on this issue over the years. I am pleased to see him here to provide support, and he will probably ask the more difficult questions, given his particular knowledge.

Many Members will have been told by their constituents about the real difference medicinal cannabis has made, or could make, to their lives or those of their families. I asked a former Conservative Minister, Nick Hurd, for a meeting about a constituent some years ago, which he very kindly granted. I asked, "Would it be okay if I brought over the mother of Sophia, the young girl we are trying to help?" I knew that if I brought Danielle over—formidable lady that she is—she would be much more able to push the case, and of course she did. In all fairness to the Minister, he was impressed by her commitment on behalf of Sophia.

In my office, I have a picture of that wee girl when she was a five or six-year-old. At that age, she was having multiple seizures, but through the Minister here and back home, she was allocated medicinal cannabis. Her seizures, which happened multiple times every day, have been reduced to either none in a day or just one. If that is not an evidential base to prove the case for medicinal cannabis, I would like to know what is. That campaign is one that I have been wholeheartedly behind. Sophia Gibson's mum and dad told me about the needs of their beautiful daughter, and I was absolutely won over to the fight for medicinal cannabis for very defined purposes. I have fought hard for Sophia and those like her.

Sophia's mum and dad have sent me some information that is relevant to this issue, which I will quote for the record. Sophia was six when we first met, but she is now 13, and everyone involved in her care agrees that "this is the most stable she has ever been"—

that is what her neurologist and paediatrician said at the last appointment Sophia had just before Christmas. Her school principal described the change Sophia has experienced since receiving this medicine, saying:

"I remember the times poor Sophia had a seizure and we were waiting on ambulances"—

that was when she was five or six, and I remember that. But her principal went on to say:

"what a change it has been for her in school since the medicine."

Sophia's mum says:

"with less seizures Sophia's skills are growing and even her speech therapist and physio have said she's doing really well all thanks to wholeplant medicinal cannabis."

Now Sophia has reached her 13th birthday, and I put on my record my thanks to the former Minister for that. He got that medication prescribed for my constituent Sophia—Danielle and Darren's young girl.

The legislation on medicinal cannabis in 2018 was a significant step forward for patients, as it ended the potential criminalisation of those living with, or just trying to manage, chronic conditions, but access to medicinal cannabis remains limited. There is compelling evidence that it can improve the quality of life of individuals with chronic conditions, including neurological disorders such as Parkinson's, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, epilepsy and multiple sclerosis.

However, since medicinal cannabis was made legal, only five patients have been prescribed it on the NHS. I was pleased that young Sophia was one of them, and although she is undoubtedly not a well child, her parents believe that medicinal cannabis has played a part in her still being with them to brighten their days with her smile and her infectious joy. I know young Sophia personally, and I can vouch for the difference I have seen between her at the age of five or six and the 13-year-old she is today. Her improvement has brought joy to her parents, and indeed to every one of us who knows her. Her epileptic fits are down to zero, or one and no more, so that treatment really is important.

I also wish to bring the case of Ben to hon. Members' attention. Joanne, his mum, is here on his behalf, and their MP, the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster), would have been here, but unfortunately he had other engagements. I spoke to the Minister beforehand, so she knows what I am going to ask. The hon. Gentleman is very supportive of Ben, Joanne and her husband, and is keen to help.

Young Ben's story is also incredible, and his mum can vouch for his problems. He was having up to 300 seizures per day. Can you imagine that? That wee boy was having seizures almost every other minute of the day. His parents are providing the medication themselves, but the NHS should be playing that role. It costs the family £2,000 a month, but they love their child and will do anything to help him.

To get the correct medication, people have to go through trials, and Joanne told me that Ben had failed 14 medications. The NHS says that if someone fails seven medications, they go directly on to medicinal

[Jim Shannon]

cannabis. For the life of me, I cannot understand why that has not happened for young Ben. I ask the Minister whether it would be possible for her to meet Joanne and her MP, so that Joanne can put forward her case and find out why medicinal cannabis has not been approved for that wee boy.

Today, I saw a quick video of Ben when he was having all those problems and showing what he can do when he has access to medicinal cannabis. If ever we needed straightforward evidence that looks us straight in the eye, it is that. These exceptional circumstances require exceptional assistance.

Ben has now had a 98% reduction in seizures, because his mum and dad are paying for the medicinal cannabis, even though they should qualify for it. There seem to be some problems, so I ask the Minister to please meet the parents and their MP, so that they can make that case. I want to put that on the record for Joanne.

There is compelling evidence that medicinal cannabis can improve quality of life. The state of legality, but inaccessibility, is incredibly difficult for clinicians, who believe that their patients merit additional help. Subsequently, patients are not being given the proper care, because of challenges including a lack of awareness of the legislation and poor signposting of the treatments. It is incredibly hard to comprehend why we cannot get everyone on a pathway to better care. But when you meet the mums and dads and some of the children that I and other Members have met, you can understand the alternative and what it means.

A recent survey of 250 practising doctors by Alternaleaf—some of its staff are here in the audience today as well—found overwhelming support for widening the accessibility of medicinal cannabis to treat chronic pain. It found that 84% of UK doctors—the figures are massive—said they would be open to prescribing medicinal cannabis to manage chronic pain if it were part of the NHS toolkit.

I welcome the commitment from the Government and the Secretary of State, who told us in the main Chamber that £26 billion will be available for the NHS over the next few years. That is a good plan, and everybody, no matter their political persuasion, will welcome it, but we need to see some of that going towards this critical issue.

Alternaleaf patients rated the effectiveness of medicinal cannabis to be 8.5 out of 10, versus only 4.5 out of 10 for traditional medication prescribed on the NHS. We are not being critical, but we are pointing to the facts—the evidence is there. If it is better to have medicinal cannabis, let us have it if the alternative is not as effective.

Unlike many conventional painkillers, medicinal cannabis offers relief from symptoms without the high risk of dependency, overdose or debilitating side effects. Only 17% of Alternaleaf patients reported side effects from medicinal cannabis that affected their personal or work life, versus 88% for medication prescribed by the NHS. So there is a case to be made, and there are answers to be given.

Although private specialist clinics and pharmacies such as Alternaleaf support thousands of patients across the UK, they often receive conflicting guidance from

regulators on product labelling, which can impact the availability of medicines for the patients who may benefit the most. We are here to raise awareness of that and to put the case for all those patients who might benefit most.

The UK has one of the strictest regulatory regimes in the world for the prescribing of medicinal cannabis, and I agree that that must be the case—that is not an issue. But if there is evidence that medicinal cannabis can do good, then let us act on it.

The regime includes a prohibition against prescriptions being issued electronically to patients. However, we must allow doctors to access medicinal cannabis for their patients in the same way that we allow them to access opioids for them—under strict and certain circumstances. There are rules in place, and I understand that.

I challenge the suggestion that electronic prescribing is always unsafe; it is not. Physical prescriptions are understandably at risk of being lost, damaged or destroyed, whereas electronic records can permit greater real-time oversight and control of prescribing practices, both by private clinics and by regulatory bodies such as the Care Quality Commission. The reason I believe that that could be done electronically is that controlled drugs such as morphine are routinely prescribed electronically on the NHS. If we can do it for morphine, we can do it for medicinal cannabis. That is my point. And it can work as well, which is more important.

However, there must be strict measures in place to ensure that electronic prescription can never be a route to simply legalising cannabis in general. I am not pro drugs in any way, but I see the goodness and benefits of medicinal cannabis. That is why we are here: to prove that case and to put forward the evidential base. Although the benefit of medicinal cannabis to individuals and their families, as well as the economic benefit that is starting to arise, is reason enough to review the current approach and address the challenges, this is absolutely not a call to legalise cannabis wholesale, in the same way that we could never consider wholesale opioid legalisation.

Medicinal cannabis has offered a lifeline to another of constituents, Richard Barber. He spent years struggling with chronic conditions. Initially, an injury led to a misdiagnosed shoulder condition, which resulted in prescribed painkillers that not only proved ineffective, but caused distressing side effects, such as night terrors. Those things cannot be ignored either.

After extensive research, Richard discussed medicinal cannabis with his GP. After trying three different pain medications without success, his GP suggested exploring medicinal cannabis as an alternative treatment approach. Richard was prescribed medicinal cannabis through Alternaleaf and the results have been transformative for his condition. He has regained the ability to do the little things that people take for granted, such as going to the shops and walking his dogs, which he was unable to do in the past due to mobility issues, pain and seizures.

Richard's story highlights some of the challenges that patients across the UK are facing. When Richard was first prescribed medicinal cannabis, he got in touch with his local police force—that is the right thing to do—to ensure that it was aware of the legality, yet the officers had never been informed about legal medicinal cannabis prescriptions. In fact, one in five police officers does not know that medicinal cannabis is legal and 89%



of police officers say that they would benefit from more training on medicinal cannabis. That is not the Minister's responsibility, but there is a role for another Government Department to look at that. That lack of awareness can manifest in patients being challenged in public when using legal products to manage their conditions, causing unnecessary distress to those in receipt of medicinal cannabis for a medical reason.

Patients are also finding that their landlords are unaware that medicinal cannabis is legal, when the Equality Act 2010 mandates that landlords, housing associations and property managers make reasonable adjustments to accommodate tenants' medical needs, including the use of prescribed medicinal cannabis where appropriate. There are lots of issues, including the need for better awareness among the police and more accessibility for all our constituents across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

This debate is not new. The End Our Pain campaign has presented ways forward, and I ask the Minister once again to consider its trials; I am ever mindful that she will be conveying what we are asking for to another Minister. In 2019, the Health and Social Care Committee recommended initiating observational trials for patients already using cannabis-based medicines who cannot enter the randomised controlled trials. That recommendation initially had support from the Government, but that was retracted during the covid-19 pandemic.

In 2023, the Home Affairs Committee reaffirmed the need for increased access to these vital treatments. We all understand that there were pressures from all sides during covid-19, but that unfortunate suspension of support threw the trials back a few years. If the Home Affairs Committee reaffirmed that need for increased access in 2023, however, we need to make sure that that happens, and fully.

There is a notable precedent from 2013, when the Government granted a licence to GW Pharmaceuticals to supply Epidyolex to a child given only six months to live. These are true stories; I am not making any of them up. That decision not only saved that child's life, but provided valuable evidence to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, highlighting the need for similar decisive action today. The treatments make lives better—they save lives—contribute to easing the pain and suffering of children and adults and give peace of mind to families.

End Our Pain proposes two observational trials. The operative word is trial—if they are not suitable, they can and should be shut down. Observational trial 1 would support individuals who are already prescribed medicinal cannabis and cannot undergo a dangerous washout period to enter a traditional RCT trial. Those patients could be funded to provide crucial data on the long-term use of their current and previous cannabis oil medicines. That was the original plan. Observational trial 2 would focus on children in desperate need—just like Sophia, Darren and Danielle's wee girl, and Ben, the son of Joanne, who is in the Public Gallery. Many families are resorting to the black market due to insufficient private paediatric prescribers and wish to find a regulated, safer option for their children while maintaining their anonymity.

EOP has engaged with Melissa Sturgess, the CEO of Ananda Developments, which is willing to supply trial medicines early to those in urgent need—patients who

may not survive the wait for trial recruitment to begin in 12 months. I have heard stories of people who are waiting for medicinal cannabis and whose health has been quite severely affected. Perhaps I view things too simply, but if I see a way of doing things, I think that we should just do those things and make a difference. There are patients who may not survive for the trial recruitment to begin in 12 months, for instance. Where will they be in 12 months? Where will their health be in 12 months? It will be worse, so we should be doing something right now.

EOP also believes that the data from current full extract prescriptions can be a significant aid in developing future treatments and improving long-term outcomes. It is estimated that the observational trial for those who are currently prescribed cannabis-based medicines but who cannot participate in other trials would cost approximately £2.7 million annually. That figure is based on an estimate of 150 children and young adults participating, with an average cost of £1,500 per patient per month. Given the good that that treatment could do and the difference it could make to people's lives, that is a small price to pay for improved health for all those children and adults who could have a better life as a result.

It is imperative that the commitments to families are honoured, as the consequences of inaction could be devastating for those children. Many of their parents can no longer afford the cost of medication. I have given Members an idea about Joanne, who is here in the Public Gallery on behalf of her boy Ben, and what it costs her to provide the medication each month to ensure that Ben's life-threatening seizures can be managed. It is really important that we get this matter right.

This debate will help to highlight the real impact that medicinal cannabis can have not only on patients and their families but on economic growth and how we can better spend the £26 billion that the Government have allocated for the NHS. It will also highlight how we can ensure that medicinal cannabis can make a difference for young people in my constituency and in Scotland, Wales and England. The Minister is a compassionate and understanding lady and, by her very nature, she wants to make lives better—that is what we are all here for. We beseech our Government and our Minister to make decisions that we can all support.

The hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, told me before the debate that she will also talk about some personal experiences. We express such experiences on behalf of our constituents and others who, when we meet them, make us suddenly realise, "Yes, there is a simple way forward. There is a way that we can do it."

We are also asking for consistency; it should not just be about the postcode that people live in. There has been an allocation of medicinal cannabis, and my constituent is one of those who benefited from that; I believe that others who could benefit should also be allowed to. We need consistency and coherence for the industry and to enable wider access to medicinal cannabis for those who could benefit in certain medically defined circumstances. We need the signposting of treatments, and we need to break down the persistent stigma and discrimination that patients face—perhaps from police, and from employers and landlords.

[Jim Shannon]

I have taken up enough time, and I am keen to hear the helpful contributions from other hon. Members who are here to back my plea on behalf of my constituents and others. Collectively, the parties can come together and act. We look beseechingly to the Minister and the Government to ensure that the offer of medicinal cannabis can be available for every child and adult in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland who can benefit from it. If we have a goal and a way of achieving it, the Government might consider that it is cheaper to have medicinal cannabis available on prescription under very strict conditions to make sure that people's lives are better. If we do that, we will have done a lot.

**Esther McVey (in the Chair):** I remind Members that they need to bob if they wish to be called. I also remind Members that, if they wish to speak, they need to be here for both the opening and closing speeches.

1.54 pm

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this debate on an important issue.

On the number of Members present, the Thursday afternoon slot in Westminster Hall is challenging because Members often have to return to their constituencies. For people outside who have an interest in this matter, it is very important to convey that there are a large number of Members on both sides of the House who are focused and interested in this subject. I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group for medical cannabis on or under prescription, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi). I contributed—as did the hon. Member for Strangford and the Minister as the then Opposition spokesperson—to the last debate that took place on this in Westminster Hall.

The hon. Member for Strangford, as is often the case, delivered a tour de force on the issues and concerns, with the appropriate level of compassion and empathy for those who are caught up in this issue and affected by it. I do not want to overly dwell on the issues that he set out, because he did that very well.

Medical cannabis is demonstrably a cost-effective way to treat an array of conditions, including childhood epilepsy, to ease the impact of chemotherapy, or to alleviate the stiffness and spasms of multiple sclerosis. There is a strong body of evidence that it could be used for even more conditions, and the hon. Gentleman highlighted the continuing and ongoing need for trials.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman touches on something that piqued my interest in this subject 20 years ago, when my constituent the late Biz Ivol, who was a sufferer from multiple sclerosis, told me that the only relief she got from multiple sclerosis was by her own—shall we say—non-prescribed use of cannabis. She described multiple sclerosis to me as being not just stiffness and spasms, but like somebody was pulling barbed wire down inside her spine. When somebody is feeling that sort of pain and discomfort, surely it is incumbent on us all to find a way, through medicine, to give them some relief if we possibly can.

**David Mundell:** The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Indeed, over time, I think all of us who have taken an interest in this issue have heard from multiple sclerosis sufferers about the pain and difficulties that they have encountered. It is incumbent on us, those in Government and those in the medical world to do what we can to make sure that that is no longer the case.

I want to focus my remarks on the economic case for medical cannabis. I will talk about the contribution that a different and more progressive approach could make to the economies of rural constituencies such as mine—those were some of the points that I touched on in the previous debate—because, at its core, the nascent medical cannabis sector is horticultural in character and is situated in rural and agricultural communities such as the one I represent.

In my constituency, I see Hilltop Leaf develop growing and processing facilities that are pristine and equipped with high-tech quantum sensors, microscopes or leaf barometers. It is a stark contrast to the damp tinfoil-wrapped rooms of illegal production, referred to earlier. It is certainly a marked contrast to the circumstances in which some people feel forced to acquire cannabis and the dangers and difficulties that they place themselves in through doing that. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, they do that because they love the person who is suffering. They do not want to see them suffer, and they are willing to take risks and do things that they would not otherwise consider.

In that context, it is all the more important that we see the industry—a modern, progressive industry—as a step forward. I enormously support the investment in my constituency. I particularly hope that good horticultural, administrative, managerial and logistics jobs, which will anchor the young people in the constituency, will flow from it; young people all too often feel the need to leave such communities for the want of opportunities.

The facilities at Hilltop should also be able to provide some 10% of the UK's medical cannabis needs. I have hopes that Hilltop can go further still, because the medical cannabis sector could potentially bring more than £1 billion to the UK economy. I do not wish to divert into the Chancellor's remarks about economic growth, Dame Esther, because we have heard a lot about that in the Chamber. But this industry is there and ready to grow—ready to create wealth and jobs, particularly in some of the most difficult rural environments in the UK. It has been estimated that tens of thousands of good quality jobs could be created if the UK's regulatory, legal and medical frameworks were in line with norms elsewhere.

Sadly, byzantine rules on prescribing and overlapping and onerous regulations are holding the sector back. Medical cannabis was legalised in 2018 by my former colleague Sajid Javid, then the Home Secretary, but it remains unduly difficult to prescribe on the NHS across every part of the United Kingdom. Those in need—we should be clear that this is a matter of need—turn to private medical services, with the huge costs that they bring; the hon. Member for Strangford also highlighted that. They turn to criminals as well. It is absurd to make something of medicinal benefit legal, but for it to be put out of the reach of so many people who need it.

The situation has a knock-on effect on the sector. In recent years, we exported 213 tonnes of medical and scientific cannabis of the 329 tonnes produced in the UK.

The sector could meet domestic patients' needs and international demands, but incoherence in regulation and approach is hindering that. That also extends to cannabidiol or CBD, which has many benefits too. It is readily available to purchase on the high street, so much so that the CBD market in the UK is the second largest globally. However, hemp licensing laws mean that the flowers and leaves where CBD is found must be destroyed. Overseas imports then fulfil the needs of the domestic CBD market, and British supply chains do not benefit. Because of that approach, growers have to forsake the opportunity of a crop yielding £10,000 per acre, compared to £400 for wheat. At a time when rural Britain is struggling, such yields would be a real boon and bring income into the pockets of farmers.

Patients, producers, taxpayers and even the police, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, could all benefit from unblocking the bottlenecks in prescription and production. As I have said on many occasions, for that to happen the various strands of Government need to be stitched together. Instead of keeping the strange patchwork of overlapping and clashing components, there needs to be a clear policy of supporting the prescription of medical cannabis, and the necessary regulation and official approach that would allow that to happen. The UK Government and, where appropriate, the devolved Administrations should review the prescription process, medical guidelines, acceptable technical levels and the overlapping regulatory and legal regimes.

We have debated and discussed this issue many times. I hope that we will see some progress and that we do not have to repeatedly debate an issue to which we should have a common-sense approach. It benefits patients and our economy. It has an adverse effect on criminals. Why would we not do it?

2.6 pm

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey. Do not worry, I have not defected. I just sat here, rather than where Conservatives would normally sit, because I did not want to interrupt the flow of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) while he was making his speech. I am grateful to him for securing this debate.

I am here because of one of my constituents, Matt Hughes, and particularly on behalf of his son, Charlie, who has severe treatment-resistant epilepsy. Mr Hughes has been to see me on a number of occasions. I am in the thick of a correspondence battle with the Department—the latest was in December last year—trying to deal with some of the problems that have arisen out of the 2018 NICE guideline change, which was brought in by Sajid Javid.

Somebody looking at the NICE guidelines would think, "Problem solved—wonderful! We can get access to these very important treatments for severely epileptic children." But we are here today because that access is simply not available in practice. It is no good for us, as policymakers, to think that we have done the job because the policy has changed: if it is not working in practice, there was no point in changing the guidance.

There are a huge number of problems. There are licensing issues, to which I will return in more detail. There was the very unhelpful advice given by the British Paediatric Neurology Association in 2021, which seems to directly contravene the advice of NICE from 2018.

There are many examples in which general practitioners have thought, after clinical assessment, that this kind of treatment, particularly second-generation drugs, should be supplied and yet local hospital advice was against it. Finally, there is the failure of the funding pathway. We have already heard about individual funding requests, but one problem is that the general application for many children to benefit from this kind of drug means that it fails the exceptionality test, so requests for individual funding are being refused on the grounds that the impact of the drug on the particular patient is insufficiently exceptional.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for coming along. I mentioned Joanne's son Ben, who has failed 14 medications—the NHS says seven, so it is clear that there are failures in the system. We would think that the NHS should automatically respond, but it has not. That underlines the issue that the hon. Gentleman is raising.

**Jerome Mayhew:** That is the purpose of this debate: to encourage the Minister to get the NHS to change practice in this area. She could usefully start with the difficulty in licensing because second-generation medication is personalised. It does not have one or two active ingredients, but up to 20—that is probably not the right terminology but I hope we all understand—and the amounts of each of those active ingredients are personalised, in a patient-centric way. Yet we persist in applying a randomised controlled trial approach simply not appropriate for personalised medication. As a result, there is a failure to adopt licensing for medication that, anecdotally, is hugely effective, and has been hugely effective in supporting my constituent Charlie.

It is not beyond the wit of man to design an appropriate licensing system for this kind of medication because it has been done effectively elsewhere. We could look at the examples of Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Italy and even some states in the United States of America. If they can do it, why can't we? I would be grateful if the Minister addressed that question specifically. Why do we persist with randomised control trials when we know that that acts against the adoption of this kind of modern medicine? Why does the Minister think that the licensing approach in all those first-world countries is in some way dangerous or inadequate?

Rather than repeating current policy, what change are the Government proposing to make to provide access through licensing for multiple active ingredient patient-centric dosing? What change are they proposing in relation to individual funding requests? Are they prepared to fix the problem of exceptionality, given that these drugs are routinely refused because they help too many children?

This is a huge issue. An estimated 35,000 children are affected. I hope the Minister will not dole out sympathy alone in her response, but set out the active change that the Government intend to make.

2.11 pm

**Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. It is undeniable that the United Kingdom's relationship with cannabis remains fundamentally flawed. For too long, our prohibitionist stance has shaped public perception, linking cannabis with criminality instead of recognising

[Susan Murray]

its significant therapeutic value. Sometimes those who do recognise its therapeutic value are pushed into criminality. In reality, for many people across the UK, access to cannabis-based medicines can represent the difference between enduring chronic pain or multiple fits and leading a fulfilling life. That discrepancy is central to this debate.

Although, in principle, current regulations permit cannabis prescriptions for severe epilepsy, chemotherapy-induced nausea, muscle stiffness or spasms related to multiple sclerosis, genuine accessibility remains elusive. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has already mentioned, between 2018 and 2022 fewer than five NHS prescriptions for unlicensed medical cannabis, with the resulting funding issues, were issued, while private providers supplied nearly 90,000.

The stark contrast highlights the vast gulf between existing policy intentions and the lived experiences of patients seeking relief. Not only is this situation profoundly unjust for individuals who rely on cannabis to manage debilitating symptoms and have found no alternative, but it also entrenches an inherently two-tier healthcare system. Those with the financial means to travel for specialised appointments and cover private clinical expenses can access treatments that are virtually unobtainable for those who depend entirely on the NHS. While opinions on medical cannabis differ, I am sure we all agree that no one in Britain should be forced to pay exorbitant fees simply to secure a legally sanctioned and potentially life-changing medication.

The situation is further compounded by the fact that our outdated perspective on cannabis continues to hold back domestic medical innovation and economic growth. At a time when the Government project a modern vision for the nation, Britain lags behind international counterparts who have embraced a more progressive approach to cannabis-based treatments. By clinging to outdated stigmas, we not only fail our patients but also forgo opportunities to develop a robust medical cannabis sector, stifling both financial potential and essential healthcare advantages.

In the light of those realities, we must adopt a more compassionate and patient-centred strategy that does not penalise individuals for their economic circumstances. It is with this in mind that we must launch an investigation into the feasibility of GP prescribing of cannabis-based products, so that crucial treatments reach those who need them quickly. Such measures would reduce reliance on expensive private options, remove inequality and the push towards criminality, and alleviate unnecessary suffering of thousands of people nationwide.

Given the clear shortcomings of the current system, my colleagues in the Liberal Democrats and I urge the Government to reform policy in practice around medicinal cannabis across the UK. By doing so, we can ensure that patients receive the care they deserve while fostering a modern healthcare environment that truly reflects Britain's commitment to innovation, compassion and equity.

2.16 pm

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I am grateful for the honour of responding for His Majesty's Opposition in this debate, Ms McVey.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his tireless dedication to health issues—not just this one, but many others. In my short career on the Front Bench, I think this is already the fourth time in the space of six weeks that I have responded to a debate that he has secured; I congratulate him on his success in doing so. He never ceases to amaze me, because not only does he represent his own constituents—he has told us so passionately about Danielle, Sophia and their story—but he even represents others' constituents as well, bringing forward and championing their issues. His ability to step forward and raise those issues is a true testament to the parliamentarian he is, and he has my full admiration and respect for doing so.

Today we have heard some moving stories about the difficulties faced by patients who are suffering, and about the plethora of conditions that could benefit from having these medications. I thank Medcan Family Foundation and the Medical Cannabis Clinicians Society for their advocacy on the issue, and for repeatedly bringing that information to the fore so that this country can debate such an important topic.

The debate has focused on the challenges that many children and adults face with accessing medical cannabis, but we appear to be in a new phase when it comes to managing the fact that such prescribing is becoming more prevalent. It is worth recognising, as we have done, that there was no legal route for such treatment only seven years ago. It was Sir Sajid Javid, who, as the Home Secretary, listened to the families and commissioned a review into that area to allow the creation of legal routes for accessing those medications. That decision has led to significantly more people being able to access licensed cannabis-based medicines.

Between January 2018 and September 2024, written answers show that 24,395 NHS prescriptions for licensed cannabis-based medications such as nabilone, Sativex and—even as a doctor, I am struggling to say it—Epidyolex were dispensed across the community in England. However, it must be recognised that that is dwarfed by the number of private prescriptions currently being issued. Where there have been challenges with access to licensed medications, as with Sativex, the last Government worked with the NHS to take steps to increase uptake of prescribing. On 6 September 2021, the NHS wrote to local trusts and integrated care boards reminding them about NICE's guidance relating to that medication, and their responsibilities to prescribe in line with NICE recommendations. My understanding is that the letter contributed to an increase of prescriptions of Sativex.

However, challenges remain with access to unlicensed cannabis-based medications. We have heard that those medicines must be accessed through individual funding requests, but clinicians are wary of prescribing them, because of concerns about both the evidence base and the legal responsibilities involved. I can attest to the fact that, as a doctor who prescribes unlicensed medications, one looks for guidance on the best way to do so safely. The law was changed in part to encourage more research and clinical trials so that robust evidence can be collected, potentially leading to marketing authorisation and licensing. In the meantime, it is notable that NICE guidance does not prohibit healthcare professionals from considering unlicensed medications. In 2021, NICE stated:

“The fact that NICE made no such population-wide recommendation should not however be interpreted by healthcare professionals as meaning that they are prevented from considering the use of

unlicensed cannabis-based medicinal products where that is clinically appropriate in an individual case. Patients in this population can be prescribed cannabis-based medicinal products if a tertiary paediatric epilepsy specialist considers that that would be appropriate on a balance of benefit and risk, and in consultation with the patient, and their families and carers or guardian.”

However, a recent report by Medcan Family Foundation has highlighted that more restricted prescribing in some areas may be leading to serious or unintended consequences. It is concerning to see, when reviewing their research, that three online forums identified 382 families in the UK who are giving their child illegal cannabis products specifically to manage epilepsy. Given the nature of that research, it could be argued that the figure may be significantly higher nationwide. Is that just the tip of the iceberg?

It is worth reflecting on some of the debates that have taken place in this House that have been mentioned previously. I think it was Mark Twain who said, “The past doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme,” which I feel is apt in this case. To that end, it is always wise to try and learn from previous experiences. After all, advice from the wise is like the torch in the dark; it does not walk the path for us but it does light the path. So I looked at *Hansard* for the last debate and noted a particularly strong contribution from the then shadow Health Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who is now the Minister with the power at her disposal. I think it is fair to ask her the questions she posed to the then Minister:

“It would be helpful if the Minister could set out what steps he is taking to empower and accelerate research in this space. I hope he will not dodge the question by saying that the issue is simply one for clinicians. The Government have a responsibility—the Minister is nodding, and we await his reply with interest, but there seems to be a lack of urgency on the issue, which is concerning. People are suffering right now. We have heard again this afternoon about children who are fitting, sometimes 100 times or more. Accessing care is, in some cases, pushing families to the brink of destitution. We should do everything we can to support those people.

If research is needed before clinicians feel comfortable prescribing, then it is incumbent on the Government to support clinicians. We need more streamlined clinical trials and better engagement with clinicians. We do not want to be back here in another two years, having a rerun of this debate. In 2020-21, the then Minister said:

‘It will take time to generate further evidence and see the results of clinical trials. The Health Secretary and I are committed to doing everything in our power to accelerate this work.’

If the Minister could update us on where this work has got to, and whether the Government are any closer to finding a solution, that would be welcomed by people tuning in today, and to the families present.

Finally, I would be grateful if the Minister set out what action he has taken to support people in the system right now—those living in extreme pain who are paying thousands of pounds to access treatment. There is consensus on this issue, as we have heard. The debate has been had and a decision has been made, but we can and should do better. In that spirit of consensus, we would all like to see some progress from the Minister.”—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 223WH.]

The Minister is clearly a strong advocate, and she is now in a position of power. She has been in post for over half a year, so what steps has she taken to empower and accelerate research in that area? What action has she taken to streamline clinical trials? Since taking office, what steps has she taken to empower clinicians to prescribe and to feel more comfortable? Since being in post, what action have her Government taken to support people in the system now?

It seems to me that the debate has moved on, but it is still rhyming. We are two years on and progress has been made. More than 24,000 prescriptions clearly represent an improvement. As has been said today, however, there is more to do, and we have new problems. The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) talked about the legal farming industry, the Hilltop Leaf situation and trying to create a virgin industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) talked about the clinical pathways and how they need to be specifically looked at. The hon. Member for Strangford highlighted policing, given that there is a growth in use. I will not tempt the Minister to stray into the Home Office brief, but I want to ask what conversations she is having with her Home Office counterparts about legal medical cannabis.

I hope the Government will continue to progress in this space as the issue evolves. They will have the Opposition’s support as they continue to research, educate and raise awareness. I hope the Minister will agree to meet Medcan and the Medical Cannabis Clinicians Society, if she has not done so already. Given the concerns that have been raised today, perhaps as a first step she will write to trusts and ICBs again to highlight the guidance on prescribing these medications. After all, we all want the safest, most effective medications to treat patients as soon as they are needed, and they should be uniformly accessible. I believe that noble aim is distinctly achievable, and I hope the Minister does too.

2.25 pm

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. As he said, there are many hon. Members from both sides of the House representing constituents affected by the issue across the United Kingdom who would have liked to be here today. Obviously, health is a devolved matter. The hon. Gentleman spoke movingly about his constituents, and other colleagues talked about theirs. I agree with him. My words have been repeated back to me, so I do not need to say them again. This is an important issue for everyone in the Chamber and those who are listening in, as we all want to support people who are in very difficult circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman raised some key issues, which I will address. He said that landlords and the police are unaware of the legality surrounding prescribed medicinal cannabis. I encourage him to take that up with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. I understand that the Home Office has notified all police forces about the change to the law, and guidance has been issued to summarise what that means.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned electronic prescribing, which has been in operation for schedule 2 and 3 controlled drugs in NHS primary care settings since 2019. I am afraid there are no current plans to extend that to private clinics at this time.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about an observational study with a small patient cohort. I am afraid that it would not produce results as robust as a randomised control trial, which is the gold standard for clinical trials, nor would it add to the current evidence base. It would not provide results suitable to inform routine clinical or

[Karin Smyth]

NHS commissioning decisions, because there would be no way to compare the findings with what would have happened in the absence of the intervention. I will come on to clinical trials in more detail, but let us be clear about the problem we face, the challenge faced by all of us involved in this debate and the challenge faced by children, many of whom have been mentioned today.

Of course, we listen to Members of this House, and to patients, parents and families, who say that these medicines are safe and should be available. We must ensure the safety and effectiveness of all medicines. The benefits should outweigh any potential harm and, as the hon. Gentleman outlined, clinicians must have that assurance and clarity, too.

There are currently only two cannabis-based medicines in the world with marketing authorisations or licence. They are—I hope I do not stumble over them too—Sativex, for the treatment of muscle spasms in multiple sclerosis, and Epidyolex, for treatment related to two rare forms of epilepsy and tuberous sclerosis complex. Those medicines show that it is possible to develop cannabis-based treatments that have been assessed for safety, quality and efficacy. The evidence generated on their clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness can enable the National Institute for Care and Health Excellence to recommend them for use in the NHS.

The medicines we are talking about today are unlicensed, which means that they have not been assessed by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Indeed, they have not been assessed or granted market authorisations by any medicines regulator anywhere in the world. However, as has been noted, in 2018 the then Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, enabled the prescription of unlicensed cannabis-based products for medicinal use. That provided a lawful route to these medicines for prescriptions for individual patients who were not benefiting from standard treatments and were not part of clinical trials, while limiting the ability to prescribe to specialist doctors. That came on the heels of the review by Professor Dame Sally Davies, then the chief medical officer, which found enough evidence of benefit to recommend that cannabis-based medicine should be moved out of schedule 1 to the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001.

For epilepsy, that evidence was mainly in relation to cannabidiol, also known as CBD, rather than products containing the psychoactive compound tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC. The review did not provide evidence to support routine prescribing or funding of those medicines on the NHS, which the previous Government should have made clear at the time. Before we see routine prescribing of these unlicensed medicines, the NHS must have greater assurance on their clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness at a population level. I am not a clinician—we are all here as politicians—and it is right that prescribing any medicine or treatment is a clinical decision, whether it is done on the NHS or privately. It is not for us to influence those decisions, so I cannot comment on individual cases.

We want to see more medicines approved by the MHRA and available on the NHS. We inherited a broken system, and it will take time to fix that failure, but the Chancellor has made an in-year investment in the NHS to fill the black hole that we inherited and prevent our having to cut back on services. That means that,

more than ever, the NHS must account for every penny that it spends and make difficult decisions on what treatments are made available.

The NHS must get the best possible value for its investment in medicines and consider the cost-effectiveness of treatments to ensure that resources are used efficiently. For that to be fair, medicines or treatments initiated privately would not routinely be prescribed by the NHS unless the requested treatment was already approved under existing policies, which unlicensed medicinal cannabis is not, or when there are individual, exceptional circumstances. That remains the case even if privately funded treatment has been shown to have clinical benefit for an individual patient. This is the current NHS policy for all treatment initiated and prescribed privately, and it is not specific to medicinal cannabis.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. A constituent of her colleague, the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster), is in the Gallery today. Her young boy, Ben, is receiving Bedrolite and Bedica, which are both proven to assist him in having a 98% reduction in fits. The same thing happens to my young constituent, wee Sophia, and to many others as well, including Charlie, the constituent of the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew). If there is a proven evidential base, which there quite clearly is, should it not be part of the evidential base for NICE to ensure that all these medications are taken on board?

**Karin Smyth:** I will come on to the research.

As we have heard, and as I recognise, fewer than five patients have accessed these medicines on the NHS, so access is truly exceptional. The testimony of the children and families accessing these treatments privately—often at great personal cost, as we have heard this afternoon—is truly heartbreaking. I am sure we can all agree that all Government spending on health must be evidence-based, and colleagues are seeking to ensure that that is the case.

If we are to see more cannabis-based medicines routinely available on the NHS, we need more research. The National Institute for Health and Care Research, also known as the NIHR, and the MHRA are there to support manufacturers and researchers to develop new medicines and design quality studies. I strongly encourage the manufacturers of those products to invest in research to prove that they are safe and effective and meet the rigorous standards that we rightly expect for all medicines. They should engage with the NIHR and the MHRA on clinical research and medicines licensing processes. That is key in providing doctors with the confidence to prescribe cannabis-based products in the same way that they use any other licensed medicines recommended for use on the NHS, but we are not waiting for industry to respond to patient voices.

The NIHR and NHS England have recently confirmed more than £8.5 million in funding for clinical trials to investigate whether cannabis-based medicines are effective in the treatment of drug-related epilepsies. As I said when we were in opposition, and as has been highlighted today, action in this space is vital. Epilepsy is a terrible disease, and it can be life-limiting in the most serious cases.

We also know that although epilepsy is a fairly common neurological condition, affecting 1% to 2% of the population, about 30% of cases will sadly have seizures

that are resistant to current treatments, so it is absolutely right that the NIHR and NHS England are pioneering truly world-first trials that will investigate the safety and effectiveness of CBD and THC in adults and children with treatment-resistant epilepsy. The trials will be co-led by experts from University College London and Great Ormond Street hospital and will look to recruit around 480 patients from across the UK. The study details are published on the NIHR website, and I understand that it will publish further details soon.

Further funding has also been awarded to the University of Edinburgh to investigate the efficacy of CBD in patients with neuropathic pain due to chemotherapy. Those are two examples of the type of research that we desperately need in this area of medicine, and a further 28 studies looking at cannabis-based medicines have been approved by the MHRA since 2018. It is an emotive and complex debate, but the clinical trials give me encouragement that there is a way forward. If the evidence supports it, we will see more cannabis-based medicines approved by the regulators and recommended by NICE. That is the only way we will see the evidence base improved and give clinicians the confidence to prescribe.

To conclude, the hon. Member for Strangford has brought this debate forward with his customary good faith and compassion.

**Jim Shannon:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Karin Smyth:** I will take another intervention.

**Jim Shannon:** I am sorry. I am not intervening just for the heck of it; I just want a wee bit of clarification. I welcome the fact that the Minister is referring to the trials, and how long they are. I ask the Minister, very quickly: how long will it be before they are complete? Also, I asked the Minister beforehand if she would agree to a meeting with the hon. Member for South Ribble and his constituent just to clarify the matter and take forward the case for a wee bairn. Those are my two asks.

**Karin Smyth:** I cannot answer the question about trials and research directly because, obviously, trials are run by the specialists at NIHR, in the usual way, and I am sure that the request for meeting has been heard. It would probably not be with me, but I am sure the officials have heard it and that the hon. Gentleman will have a response.

I thank the Opposition spokesperson for reading out my contribution and highlighting how proactive we are being, only seven months since forming the new Government. I am proud that the trials that we are looking to do are world firsts. No other country in the world is taking the same action to prove that the medicines are safe and effective. I know it will not come as much consolation to those families who are at the end of their tether with talk of processes, debates and regulations. I also know it may not feel like it, based on some of the things I have said today, but I think there is a way forward. There may be some light at the end of the tunnel, and this Government will do what we can to support NHS England and the NIHR to get the trials done.

2.37 pm

**Jim Shannon:** I thank all hon. Members who contributed. The debate has been very helpful—indeed, more helpful than most. The Minister is right that it is unfortunate

that a number of hon. Members who wished to be here just could not attend, including the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster), as an example.

I thank, first of all, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell). I thank him for all his knowledge on the subject. It is always a pleasure to come and hear him make a contribution based on his knowledge and expertise. He also referred to the framework that is in place; he says it is “absurd”. That was the word that he used for the way that we do not have a system that seems to embrace the benefits of medicinal cannabis. He referred to the economic case, which is part of the issue. It cannot be ignored, because it is really important. The right hon. Gentleman has the knowledge to bring something forward that can work and I thank him for his contribution.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), in his intervention, referred to people resorting, as they do sometimes, to finding the capacity to source medicinal cannabis when the system does not work for them.

The hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) also referred to his constituent and his constituent’s son, Charlie. Nothing ever tells a story better than an example, and his wee Charlie and my wee Sophia—if I may refer to a constituent of mine like that—do very clearly illustrate the case. He also referred to the trial, which is perhaps not working. I think the Minister, in a way, tried to answer that question, to be fair, but our impatience is one of the issues. The hon. Member also raised exceptionality issues, and he referred to clinical pathways. A process that responds quickly is important.

The hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) brought forward her personal knowledge on the subject and it was helpful to have that contribution. As she said, no one in the UK should have to pay large fees when there is a product available to help that is evidentially proven. It is essential that we provide care and advantages for a better life, and that is what we are all trying to achieve.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), always brings his personal knowledge from his previous occupation—I do not say that to give him a big head. He referred to the NICE process. There is a way forward but, as he said, we need to empower and accelerate that process. The fact is that the 24,000 prescriptions in the UK are only part of the process, and there is much more to address.

I thank the Minister very much. Her final words were that there is light at the end of the tunnel. We have always got to be optimistic for our constituents and I think the Minister wants that to happen as well—I do not think it, I know that she wants that to happen. She also said she wants to support those who need help and the timescale for treatment is part of that. A message from the Gallery tells me that Bedrocan asked about trials and was told that a company had been found. I know that the Minister is not able to respond now, but perhaps she or her officials will come back to me and confirm where that is in the process.

Our whole objective in being here is to represent our constituents—to do our job the best we can on their behalf and to give them hope and solutions. Whether it is economic life or the personal or emotional help that people need, the debate has been used to raise awareness,

*[Jim Shannon]*

which we all wish to do. On behalf of my constituents and other constituents across this whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, who we love and represent each day we are here, we ask that the Government move with urgency to provide the medicinal cannabis that we need.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered medicinal cannabis.

2.41 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 30 January 2025

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### Horizon Shortfall Scheme Appeals Process

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** In September 2024 the Secretary of State announced that the Government would be introducing an independent Horizon shortfall scheme appeals process. This will help ensure that all HSS claimants have the full opportunity to receive fair compensation and reflects a recommendation from the Horizon compensation advisory board.

During my December statement to the House, I promised that I would provide an update in the new year.

First, I can confirm that my Department is in the final stages of procuring a contract for its legal advisors on appeals cases, which will include an initial assessment of each postmaster's case. We will also be appointing a separate firm as secretariat for the scheme's independent panel and reviewer shortly, once the procurement process is complete.

My officials will shortly send to both appellants' representatives and the advisory board a draft of detailed principles and guidance. These will ensure that the HSS appeals scheme is fit for purpose and provides a satisfactory outcome for affected postmasters, in line with the advisory board's recommendation. They will also establish the eligibility criteria. We will continue to engage both groups on all aspects of the scheme.

I can also announce that this Government are committed to covering the reasonable costs of postmasters obtaining legal advice at each stage of the appeals process. As with appeals under the group litigation order and horizon convictions redress schemes, we will do this using a legal tariff. We strongly encourage potential appellants to take up this offer and only seek the advice of firms who have signed up to these tariffs. We are working with appellants' legal representatives so that we can establish these tariffs as soon as possible.

Clarity about the principles of the scheme and our support for appellants' legal costs will mean that legal representatives can begin to produce cases for appeal. We expect that the first cases will be ready for submission in the spring.

Eligible postmasters within Post Office's HSS dispute resolution procedure will receive a letter in spring inviting them to transfer their case to HSS appeals. I will provide a further update to the House nearer to that time.

[HCWS399]

## CABINET OFFICE

### Humanitarian Medal: Eligibility

**The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds):** I have today placed in the Libraries of both Houses a copy of the Command

Paper setting out updated eligibility for the Humanitarian Medal. The Humanitarian Medal will be awarded to those in public service, and members of organisations such as charities, who respond in support of human welfare during or in the aftermath of a crisis. The updated criteria ensure that individuals who assist with His Majesty's Government's response to humanitarian responses overseas are able to receive the medal, as was its original intention.

In addition, I am also announcing the first three eligible humanitarian incidents:

- the earthquake in Morocco in September 2023;
- the flooding in Libya in September 2023; and
- the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

Eligible individuals who assisted with His Majesty's Government's response to each of these humanitarian responses will receive the medal. My ministerial colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will be responsible for determining which individuals will be eligible.

[HCWS402]

## EDUCATION

### Higher Education Partnership Delivery: Strengthening Oversight

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** My right hon. Friend, the Minister of State, Minister for Skills (Baroness Smith of Malvern) has made the following statement.

I am today announcing the publication of a consultation which sets out the Government proposals to strengthen oversight of partnership delivery in higher education. This consultation is one of the actions the Government are taking to protect public money. It was developed in response to the recommendations made by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee last year about the regulatory oversight of student loan funding for study at franchised providers.

English higher education providers are amongst the most highly regarded in the world, supporting learners to succeed for themselves, their communities and our country, and driving the economic growth we need. They also play a key role in this Government's missions to break down barriers to opportunity and to drive economic growth. Higher education can open the door to opportunity for many, but only where that education is good quality and subject to effective management and governance.

The Office for Students (OfS) is the regulator responsible for higher education in England. Higher education providers must register with the OfS for their courses to be designated for publicly funded student finance. Some registered providers subcontract or "franchise" delivery of courses to partners that are not subject to the same regulatory requirements. Whilst there are many good examples of franchised provision being used to expand access and participation and deliver high quality provision, franchised higher education is one area where we have seen too many examples of abuse of public money in recent years and some concerning indicators of poor quality.

Students make a significant investment in higher education and they deserve to have confidence that in return they will receive excellent teaching, strong support and value for money. Taxpayers too deserve to know that the public money invested in student loans to help students access higher education is properly protected from fraud and misuse.

The proposals we are consulting on aim to bring franchised providers under greater scrutiny to help safeguard against the risks of misuse of public money and low-quality provision. This consultation proposes a requirement that franchised

providers with 300 or more students should be directly regulated by the Office for Students if they want their students to access student loan funding.

The Government are committed to supporting innovation and competition. We recognise that franchising can provide smaller, innovative providers with the opportunity to enter the higher education sector. Setting a size threshold will still allow new and smaller providers who may find registration disproportionately burdensome to access the higher education market.

Whilst the OfS has currently paused registration of new higher education providers to support the sector with financial sustainability concerns, we expect this pause to cease before the Department's proposed changes would come into effect.

The Office for Students announced last September that it had opened formal investigations into some universities' and colleges' subcontractual arrangements and that their next cycle of quality assessments would largely focus on the academic experiences of students studying through subcontractual arrangements. The Office for Students is consulting on proposals to strengthen expectations on providers wishing to join its register. This includes strengthening requirements that protect student interests and ensure effective governance and management of higher education. It has also communicated plans to publish student outcomes for all subcontractual partnerships on an annual basis from this year.

As a whole, I believe that these proposals will bring about the changes that are necessary to ensure that student loan funding is protected from misuse and students studying at franchised providers can have confidence that their courses are subject to rigorous quality requirements.

[HCWS403]

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### UNFCCC: UK's 2035 Nationally Determined Contribution Target

**The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband):** Under the Paris agreement, all parties are required to communicate their nationally determined contributions to the United Nations framework convention on climate change every 5 years, nine to 12 months prior to the relevant COP. NDCs covering the period 2031 to 2035 are due by 10 February 2025, ahead of COP30 in Brazil.

The Prime Minister announced on 12 November 2024 at COP29, three months ahead of the deadline, the UK's 2035 NDC target to reduce all greenhouse gas emissions by at least 81% by 2035, compared with 1990 levels, excluding emissions from international aviation and shipping. The 2035 NDC is based on advice from the independent Climate Change Committee. It is a clear progression on the UK's previous NDC pledging to reduce emissions by at least 68% by 2030, which remains in place. It is informed by the outcomes of the global stocktake from COP28 and is aligned with limiting global warming to 1.5°C. It is also aligned with the level of ambition in carbon budget 6 (2033 to 2037) on the pathway to net zero by 2050.

Today, the UK has submitted to the UNFCCC the information to facilitate clarity, transparency and understanding of the 2035 NDC, to aid interpretation of the headline emissions reduction target. The ICTU contains information about the scope, timing, sectors and greenhouse gases covered by the target, as well as some high-level information on policies and measures involved in delivering the NDC. It also includes information on how the NDC was created, how the NDC is considered

fair and ambitious and informed by the aims of the Paris agreement, the convention, and the outcomes of the global stocktake.

Making Britain a clean-energy superpower is one of the five national missions of this Government. We will deliver an updated cross-economy plan to meet our climate targets in due course, with full detail of policy packages for all sectors. This will outline the policies and proposals needed to deliver carbon budgets 4 to 6 and the 2030 and 2035 NDCs on the pathway to net zero by 2050.

The UK's early and ambitious NDC will help restore our global climate leadership and encourage greater ambition from other countries. It is one important part of the UK's overall contribution to global emissions reductions, alongside our international climate finance and other support.

[HCWS404]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### NHS England and NHS Operational Planning Guidance 2025-26

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** I am today laying in Parliament the Government mandate for NHS England, and NHS England is publishing the operational planning guidance for the NHS.

This Government won the election to deliver change. The mandate and operational planning guidance mark a significant step on a long journey to get the NHS back on its feet, and drive the reform that is needed to make it fit for the future.

The mandate and operational planning guidance address the urgent challenges facing the NHS, as highlighted by the Darzi investigation. They put the NHS on the road to recovery and reflect patient priorities: cutting waiting times, improving access to primary care and improving urgent and emergency care. They reflect the need for the NHS to live within its means, and ensure that investment in the NHS, against a challenging economic and fiscal backdrop, is matched with reform to the operating model and a sharp focus on improving efficiency and productivity.

Patients need high-quality elective care delivered in a timely fashion, and should have choice and control over their care. I am re-focusing the NHS on making progress towards the 18-week standard, and the steps to achieve this were set out in our elective reform plan. This mandate supports the modernisation of primary and community care that will help patients get timely access to a GP appointment. The mandate is the start of us delivering our manifesto commitment to provide 700,000 urgent dental appointments to address our dentistry crisis.

Right now, patients are not receiving urgent and emergency care when they need it. Today's changes will put patients at the centre of delivery, focusing on safety, experience and outcomes, and we will tackle variation in services delivered across the country, bringing the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS. These changes come ahead of publishing, in 2025, our strategy to fix urgent and emergency care.

Patients' priorities will be delivered through a new operating model, which will devolve power closer to the frontline and allow the best performing providers and integrated care boards to earn more autonomy to provide services needed by their local communities—all while ensuring a focus on efficiency and productivity to support the NHS to live within its means.

This year's operational planning guidance puts these objectives into practice with fewer targets, giving local systems greater control and flexibility over how local funding is deployed to best meet the needs of the people they serve. I am instructing the NHS to focus on the fundamentals and get back to basics. We are giving local leaders clear directions to prioritise cutting elective care waiting lists, improve A&E and ambulance wait times, improve access to GPs and urgent dental care, and solve the mental health crisis.

2025-26 must be a year of financial reset for the NHS. The budget settlement for the NHS is welcome and we will ensure it is spent wisely, through financial rigour, to deliver services for patients. NHS providers are being asked to undertake a 1 % reduction in cost base, while raising their productivity and efficiency by 4%.

Making decisions like these are never easy, but when I joined the Department, I pledged to make sure that every penny was spent in a way that provides the best value for the patients. Together we will bring reform to the NHS and get it back on its feet.

[HCWS400]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper):** The Government have today introduced the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill in the House of Commons.

Border security is fundamental to both national and economic security. Threats to the UK from serious and organised crime, including organised immigration crime, and from terrorism and hostile state actors are rapidly evolving. The first duty of a Government is to protect their citizens, and to not only keep up with but stay ahead of these threats. This requires a whole of state and legislative response.

The international and cross-border nature of these threats and challenges means that border security is an essential part of keeping our country safe. This is why strengthening our border security is one of the foundations of the Government plan for change.

Small boat crossings put these threats and challenges into sharp relief, they undermine our border security and put lives at risk. Organised by criminal smuggler and trafficking gangs, they are extremely dangerous with 78 reported deaths at sea last year, with people crowded into flimsy dinghies. Over the last six years, criminal gangs have been allowed to build a network of illegal and dangerous smuggling operations, taking hold along our border and across the continent, involving illegal supply chains, logistics, false advertising and illicit finance, underpinned by serious violence and exploitation.

The establishment of the Border Security Command in July 2024 spearheads the significant shift in strategy that this Government are taking, adopting a transformative approach to deliver stronger border security through strong leadership, effective partnerships and a long-term vision. Its initial focus is on dismantling smuggling networks, but its broader aims are to enable smarter, faster and more effective interventions across the entire system to strengthen the UK border.

Introduced today, the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill delivers on the manifesto commitment to provide law enforcement with the powers it needs to protect the integrity of the UK border, including earlier intervention to detect, prevent and prosecute people smugglers, thereby disrupting their ability to carry out small boat crossings.

The measures, which have the strong support of law enforcement agencies like the National Crime Agency, Immigration Enforcement and police, include:

*Placing the Border Security Command on a statutory footing*

The Bill places the Border Security Command on to a statutory footing so that the commander has the authority to be an effective system leader, cohering and driving cross-Government systems to improve the collective response to cross border threats. This will give the commander the power they need to drive changes across different agencies and departments, and to be able to work internationally as we draw up new agreements with neighbouring, transit and upstream countries to tackle organised immigration crime and to co-operate on strengthening border security.

*New and enhanced powers to strengthen border security, including new powers and offences*

The Bill sets out new, transformative measures to provide law enforcement agencies with stronger powers to pursue, disrupt and deter organised immigration crime, including:

Creating new offences for supplying, offering to supply or handling items suspected of being for use in immigration crime, for example the buying, selling and transporting of small boat parts, as well as for the possession and supply of articles for use in serious crime.

Creating a new preparatory acts offence for collecting information to be used by organised immigration criminals to prepare for boat crossings. This includes arranging departure points, dates and times, with clear links back to the gangs facilitating the dangerous crossings.

Creating new powers to enable the search for and the seizure of electronic devices to identify links with organised immigration crime. This will enable the review of any information relevant to facilitation offences and to gather intelligence linked to smuggler and trafficking gangs.

The Bill makes it an offence to endanger another life at sea, to act as a deterrent to boat overcrowding and reduce further tragic loss of life among those making the perilous channel crossings. Those involved in physical aggression, intimidation or coercive behaviour, including preventing offers of rescue while at sea, will face prosecution. This stricter law sends a clear message that we are ready to take action against all those who are complicit in fatalities in the channel.

The Bill introduces new interim serious crime prevention orders to place severe curbs and restrictions on people involved in activities related to organised immigration crime, before they are arrested, ensuring that court

delays do not mean a gap in our agencies taking action. Alongside this, two new criminal offences have been introduced which criminalise the making, adapting, importing, suppling, offering to supply and possession of a specified list of articles for use in serious crime.

The Bill also amends the counter-terrorism port powers to allow the police to take DNA samples and fingerprints at a port in Scotland, strengthening border security by bringing Scotland into alignment with the position across the rest of the UK.

*Expanded data-sharing capabilities to assist in the development of the intelligence picture of organised immigration crime*

The Bill strengthens information sharing which will allow law enforcement to access Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency data on UK registered trailers in real time, enhancing the detection of illegal entrants via lorry both in the UK and upstream.

A new, simplified and clearer provision for HMRC to share certain entire datasets it holds for custom functions with the Home Office and other Government Departments will be introduced, subject to data protection legislation. This will enable the identification of suspicious patterns, activity, or intelligence that would not be apparent if each dataset was considered in isolation.

*Measures to support and strengthen the asylum and immigration system*

Among other measures to support and strengthen the asylum and immigration system, the Bill repeals the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024, delivering on the manifesto commitment to end the migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda which cost the taxpayer £700 million and sent four volunteers to Rwanda. The Government will be withdrawing separately from the UK-Rwanda treaty that underpinned that partnership.

The Bill also removes from the statute unworkable and counterproductive provisions from the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which allowed people to enter the asylum system but prevented asylum decision making, increased the backlog and put impossible pressure on asylum accommodation, driving up hotel use and costs. Many of those provisions were never enacted exactly because they were not workable.

Other measures in the Bill which seek to support the asylum and immigration system include introducing greater flexibility when taking biometric information, extending the trained cohort of those who can do so and creating a new power to take biometrics from foreign nationals outside of a visa process. The Bill also supports the disruption of professional enablers of abuse by amending governance structures to ensure the Immigration Services Commissioner can be an effective and more flexible regulator of immigration advice. Amendments to detention powers and creating the retrospective legal basis for fees to be collected in relation to the recognition of qualifications obtained overseas also work towards bolstering the immigration system.

*Next steps*

The Government are determined to strengthen UK border security and to tackle organised immigration crime. For too long the individuals behind this nefarious trade have been allowed to go unchecked. This legislation gives our law enforcement stronger tools than ever

before to dismantle the gangs and provides the structure within which the full weight of the border security system can be brought to bear. These powers, alongside our work to ramp up returns, deportations, illegal working visits and action with the international community, transform the response to these threats and enable the step change needed.

[HCWS406]

### Police Funding Settlement 2025-26

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today laid before the House the “Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2025-26” (HC 621). The report sets out the Home Secretary’s determination for 2025-26 of the aggregate amounts of grants that she proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996. Copies of the report are available from the Vote Office.

With this additional funding, overall funding for policing will total up to £19.6 billion in 2025-26, an increase of up to £1.1 billion when compared to the 2024-25 settlement. Of this amount, funding available to police and crime commissioners (PCCs) for their local police force will be up to £17.5 billion—an increase of up to an additional £1.1 billion in 2025-26, a 6.6% cash increase and 4.1% real-terms increase. This includes an additional £100 million for neighbourhood policing above that announced at the provisional police funding settlement. This assumes PCCs make use of the full precept flexibility of £14 for English forces.

This settlement demonstrates the Government continued commitment to putting officers back on the beat in communities across the country, and giving forces the resources to keep the public safe. We look forward to working with officers and police staff across the country on our shared ambition to make our streets safer.

The tables document funding to PCCs for 2025-26, including precept can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2025-01-30/HCWS407/>

[HCWS407]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Integrated Settlements

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** Today, I am pleased to announce that the Government have published details of the integrated settlements for Greater Manchester combined authority and West Midlands combined authority for the period covering the financial year 2025-26.

The Government’s primary mission is to drive economic growth and raise living standards. This can only happen if local leaders have the right tools to deliver for their residents and businesses. As set out in the English Devolution White Paper, we must rewire England and

end the hoarding in Whitehall by devolving power and money from central Government to those with skin in the game. Above all we need to free mayors to direct funding to where it delivers the best outcomes and value for money.

These historic integrated settlements are the first of their kind and will consolidate funding across more than 20 different funding streams covering housing, regeneration, local growth, local transport, adult skills, retrofit, and employment support. This will give mayors greater flexibility when spending devolved funding and empower them to make the strategic policy decisions necessary to foster growth and deliver better value for money and outcomes for their residents.

Over the coming weeks, we will work with Greater Manchester and West Midlands to agree the outcomes that they will use these settlements to deliver, and which will form the basis of the single accountability framework, replacing the complex and fragmented reporting processes that have existed to date. As part of this framework, these authorities will have flexibility to move funding between policy areas, helping to deliver better value for money and improved outcomes for citizens.

The English Devolution White Paper set out our intention to extend the benefits of the integrated settlement to more areas. The Government are already working rapidly to bring these settlements forward for mayors in the North East, Liverpool City region, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire mayoral combined authorities from the '26-27 financial year. The Government are also exploring how the settlement policy could be applied to the Greater London Authority.

[HCWS405]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme Levy 2024-25

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** The Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme (Levy) Regulations 2014 require active employers' liability insurers to pay an annual levy, based on their relative market share, for the purpose of meeting the costs of the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme. This is in line with the insurance industry's commitment to fund a scheme of last resort for persons diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma who have been unable to trace their employer or their employer's insurer.

Today I can announce that the total amount of the levy to be charged for 2024-25, the 11th year of the DMPS, is £28.6 million. The amount will be payable by active insurers by the end of March 2025.

Individual active insurers will be notified in writing of their share of the levy, together with how the amount was calculated and the payment arrangements. Insurers should be aware that it is a legal requirement to pay the levy within the set timescales.

I am pleased that the DMPS has seen 10 successful years of operation, assisting many hundreds of people who have been diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma. The ninth annual report for the scheme, along with the annual statistics, was published on 27 November 2024 and is available on the gov.uk website. I hope that members of both Houses will welcome this announcement and give the DMPS their continued support.

[HCWS401]



# Petition

Thursday 30 January 2025

## OBSERVATIONS

### TRANSPORT

#### **W12 and W14 Bus Service in North-east London**

*The petition of residents of the constituency of Leyton and Wanstead,*

Declares that recent changes to the W12 and W14 bus service in north-east London have had negative impacts which must be addressed.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Transport for London to immediately reconsider the changes made to ensure that the negative impacts caused by these changes to the W12 and W14 bus service in north-east London are addressed urgently.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Calvin Bailey, *Official Report*, 21 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 978.]

[P003032]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):*

Transport in London is devolved and is the responsibility of the Mayor of London and Transport for London. TfL conducted a public consultation on proposed changes to bus routes for the W12, W13, W14 and 549, which concluded in July 2023. Feedback received from members of the public and other stakeholders informed its decision to implement these proposals. The bus network and operations are under constant review and TfL monitor these changes in collaboration with local stakeholders.

The Government will continue to engage with TfL on a range of issues. However, the operation of TfL London bus services is a matter solely for TfL.





# Written Corrections

*Thursday 30 January 2025*

## Ministerial Corrections

### DEFENCE

#### Defence Procurement: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

*The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Defence Procurement: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises on 28 January 2025.*

**Maria Eagle:** My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) was passionate in making his points about late payment; this is not the first time that he has raised that issue in parliamentary settings. The Government do recognise the importance of fair payment practices. Direct suppliers to the MOD are required to sign up to the prompt payment code to be eligible for MOD contracts. The Director General Commercial recently wrote to large suppliers to remind them of that responsibility because some are better at complying than others.

[*Official Report*, 28 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 105WH.]

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry, the right hon. Member for Liverpool Garston (Maria Eagle):*

**Maria Eagle:** My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) was passionate in making his points about late payment; this is not the first time that he has raised that issue in parliamentary settings. The Government do recognise the importance of fair payment practices. Direct suppliers to the MOD are required to **comply with the Government's prompt payment policy** to be eligible

for MOD contracts. The Director General Commercial **has written** to large suppliers to remind them of that responsibility because some are better at complying than others.

### EDUCATION

#### Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

*The following extract is from the Public Bill Committee debate on Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill on 23 January 2025.*

**Catherine McKinnell:** On reunification specifically, "Working together to safeguard children 2023" was updated to ask local authorities to consider

"whether family group decision-making would support the child's transition home from care, and the role the family network could play in supporting this."

It made it clear that family group decision making cannot be conducted before a child becomes looked after, but that it should still be considered as an option later.

[*Official Report, Children's Wellbeing and Schools Public Bill Committee*, 23 January 2025; c. 126.]

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell):*

**Catherine McKinnell:** On reunification specifically, "Working together to safeguard children 2023" was updated to ask local authorities to consider

"whether family group decision-making would support the child's transition home from care, and the role the family network could play in supporting this."

It made it clear that **if family group decision making cannot be conducted** before a child becomes looked after, **it should still be considered** as an option later.

# ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than  
Thursday 6 February 2025**

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