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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 4 March 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Saving

1. **Alex Mayer** (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to encourage saving. [902973]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): The Government are committed to supporting people to save and invest, and we want to build a better investment culture. Currently, 85% of people with savings income do not pay tax on it. As we announced at the Budget from next month, we will expand the help to save scheme to all universal credit claimants in work.

Alex Mayer: The nation's favourite way to save is through premium bonds. Does the Minister think that they are good for the country and a valuable way of encouraging saving? For everyone who has them, they are quite exciting every month.

Emma Reynolds: I think that premium bonds do provide excitement, not least in my parents' household, where they are very popular. They are already well promoted and popular, and we have seen annual investments in premium bonds increase by more than 50% since March 2019. The funds raised through them go towards supporting vital public services.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to extend the help to save scheme, which has been running for seven years. Martin Lewis describes it as

“a very clever scheme and one that will work for many people.”

May I urge the Minister to look at what needs to be done to raise awareness of it, because the actual uptake is very low, given that the Government have been giving £1,200 over four years? It is critical that the right investment in promoting it happens, because it is such a brilliant scheme.

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree with one of my predecessors more. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. It is a great scheme and now that we are expanding it, we will take that opportunity to promote it better.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We all know how important it is to encourage savings, because so many people are a paycheque away from poverty, but there has been a lot of discussion about lazy capital in cash-only ISAs, for example, and other savings accounts. I know there is a drive by Government to see greater investment. Would the Minister like to expand on the Government's thoughts on that? In particular, can she make any comments about the security of the cash ISA?

Emma Reynolds: Cash savings provide a vital source of savings for a rainy day, and we recognise that. Equally, we want to build a better investment culture in our society, so that it is not just the 8% of people who can afford financial advice who can have the opportunity of better rewards by investing in British companies and others in our economy.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): On that point, it has been widely reported that the Chancellor is planning to slash the amount of cash that savers can save in ISAs from £20,000 to £4,000 a year. Will the Chancellor rule out this punitive measure, which will see savings drop and push even more people into income tax?

Emma Reynolds: We are committed to promoting savings and investment, as I said in an earlier answer. One measure we are looking at is the Financial Conduct Authority's review of the advice guidance boundary. As I said in a previous answer, I do not want it just to be the 8% of people who can afford financial advice who reap the rewards of investing in our economy. We keep all taxes under review.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The City of London has been a leader of innovation in the world of finance and savings for a few hundred years now, and it has been successful because it has always seized opportunities and innovation when presented. In that spirit, we are pleased that the Chancellor in her Mansion House speech embraced the concept of securities tokenisation, but we now find that the catalyst for this innovation in the UK—a pilot for the digital gilt instrument known as DIGIT—has found itself in a two-year black hole. Innovation is not something that can hang around for two years, so will the Minister give assurances that she will do everything she can to deliver DIGIT as soon as possible?

Emma Reynolds: That sounds like a criticism of the previous Government. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are committed to innovation and to DIGIT.

Economic Growth: East Midlands

2. **Louise Jones** (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in the east midlands. [902974]

18. **Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in the east of England. [902992]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Economic growth is the No. 1 mission of this Government. Putting more money in people's pockets and ensuring growth is felt in all regions of the UK is a core part of our mission. The Government have a clear focus on investing in the infrastructure needed to support cities and regions to grow and thrive. In January, the Government announced a partnership between East Midlands airport and Prologis to build a new advanced manufacturing and logistics park, unlocking up to £1 billion of private investment and 2,000 jobs at the airport site.

Louise Jones: The town of Staveley in my constituency of North East Derbyshire hosts one of the three sites for the east midlands investment zone, which is a fantastic opportunity for us. The Chesterfield-Staveley regeneration route is, however, vital to making the most of the site and it has been long campaigned for by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins). It is a huge priority for my constituents. Will the Treasury work with us and our excellent Mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward, to bring this hugely beneficial project to fruition?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she does alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield in campaigning for developments that will boost growth in both North East Derbyshire and Chesterfield. The Department for Transport is considering the scheme for the Chesterfield Staveley regeneration route, and I will suggest to the Roads Minister that he meet the relevant Members as well as the Mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward.

Jen Craft: The Government's decision to increase defence spending is not only an ironclad commitment to national security in the face of generational challenges but an investment in British industry, able to unlock new jobs and opportunities across the country. Industry in the east of England has a significant defence sector, which received £1.5 billion of Government investment last year. Can the Chancellor explain how the additional defence funding has the potential to benefit my constituents in Thurrock as well as those in the wider region?

Rachel Reeves: As my hon. Friend says, defence has an important role to play in the growth mission as well as keeping our country safe and secure, and on Friday the Defence Secretary and I hosted a roundtable at RAF Waddington in Lincoln to announce a new defence innovation hub to harness that potential. Defence has a strong presence in many of our constituencies—indeed, according to the most recent data, Ministry of Defence spending in the east of England accounted for £1.5 billion—and down the road from my hon. Friend's constituency is the historic MOD Shoeburyness range, which, along with other sites, is operated by the MOD and QinetiQ as part of a long-term partnership worth more than £5 billion. In the years to come, there will be more investment in defence from both the public and the private sector.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): As part of their pursuit of the ever-elusive goal of economic growth, the Government have rebranded the UK Infrastructure Bank as the National Wealth Fund. Even the Office for Budget Responsibility has cast doubt on the effectiveness of that as a driver of economic growth. Can the Chancellor tell the House how much the rebrand has cost?

Rachel Reeves: The National Wealth Fund is doing important work in enabling us to leverage in private sector investment. The most recent of those investments include mining in Cornwall and energy charging points in our roads. At the end of last week, I announced that the fund would play a more important role in funding and supporting investments in the defence sector, which will become even more important in the years ahead.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): I recently visited a business in Kirkby-in-Ashfield in the east midlands—funnily enough, I did not see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) there—where I was told that the increase in national insurance contributions would cost the business £240 a year, which will prevent it from recruiting people and giving its employees a pay rise next year. Does the Chancellor agree that it is time to reverse this ridiculous decision and help to drive growth in the east midlands?

Rachel Reeves: In the Budget in October I had to fill the £22 billion black hole left by the previous Government, but there are huge opportunities to grow the economy in the east midlands. We recently agreed the £9 billion Unity deal with Rolls-Royce to support the Royal Navy submarine fleet, which will provide a major boost for economic growth in the east midlands, creating and maintaining 5,000 long-term jobs. That is good for our country's security, and good for the people of the east midlands.

NICs Increase: Impact on Economic Growth

3. **Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD):** What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the planned increase in employer national insurance contributions on economic growth. [902975]

20. **Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD):** What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the planned increase in employer national insurance contributions on economic growth. [902994]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government have taken difficult decisions to repair the public finances, fund public services and restore economic stability. The Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that the employer national insurance contribution changes

“will reduce the level of potential output by 0.1 per cent at the forecast horizon”.

It also predicts that growth will pick up next year and that living standards will rise faster during this Parliament than during the last, and in the long term it expects the autumn Budget policies, if sustained, to increase the size of the economy permanently.

Monica Harding: My constituent Alison runs Stepping Stones nursery school, which has been operating in my constituency for 30 years, offering wraparound care to busy families. The increase in employers' national insurance contributions alone will cost it £16,000 a year and it is still struggling with an increase in utility costs, while other nurseries in the area are also struggling and, indeed, closing. Headmasters, a hairdresser in Walton, is struggling with £15,000 of extra costs, owing primarily to this tax rise. Can the Minister explain to businesses in Esher and Walton how the Government's national insurance policy will deliver growth or higher living standards, given that it seems to be doing neither?

James Murray: The Government's decision to increase employer national insurance contributions was one of the toughest decisions that we took at the Budget, but it was necessary to restore stability to the public finances. It is only on the basis of having stable public finances and fiscal responsibility that we can boost the investment and growth that will make people across Britain better off.

Munira Wilson: As the poor growth figures show, the Chancellor's jobs tax is really hurting businesses, not least in our hospitality sector. In my constituency, pubs such as the Eel Pie and the King's Head, as well as the family-run restaurant Shambles, are really struggling with soaring costs and putting off hiring people. If the Chancellor will not reverse her jobs tax, will she at the very least consider extending the current 75% business rates relief for hospitality until the new system that she has announced is in place?

James Murray: The hon. Member speaks about business rates relief. We have to remember that the business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure was due to end entirely in April 2025 under the plans we inherited from the Conservative party. Despite the toughest of contexts, we decided to extend the 40% relief for another year before the permanently lower rates for retail, hospitality and leisure come in from April 2026.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that planning reform is essential for higher growth and lower taxes? Is he, like me, concerned that the anti-growth Opposition we see before us in this House will vote against the forthcoming planning and infrastructure Bill, which is possibly the most significant piece of pro-growth legislation that this Parliament will see in decades?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the centrality of planning reform to getting the economy growing. Indeed, one of the first actions that the Chancellor announced on taking office was to scrap the ban on onshore wind turbines in the planning system, which had been holding back our clean energy transition. I hope that some Opposition Members might take the opportunity during today's questions to confirm that they will support our reforms to the planning system, because they are indeed vital to growth in this country.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it is in the interests of business to see waiting lists in the NHS reduced, roads repaired and the public finances fixed? Does he agree that if Opposition parties do not agree with Labour's plans, they should set out how they would pay for such improvements?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that stability in the public finances is crucial to ensure that we boost investment and growth across the country. He is also right to point out that having public services back on their feet, after years of decline under the Conservative party in government, is essential not only to making people in this country healthier, more able to get around and better off, but to getting our economy growing, because it is on that basis that businesses will invest.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Even before Labour's jobs tax comes into force, we can see the damage that it is doing. Three quarters of a million jobs in hospitality will be subject to employer national insurance for the first time, costing £1 billion. Given that major hospitality and retail businesses are warning that lower-paid and part-time workers will suffer most, will the Chancellor think again? Can the Minister at least commit that there will be no further increases during this Parliament?

James Murray: The businesses to which the hon. Gentleman refers, like businesses in all sectors of the economy, benefit from the stability that this Government have brought to the economy. He wants to talk about unemployment and the rate of jobs. We recognise that making changes to employer national insurance contributions was a tough decision that will have consequences, but the unemployment rate will fall to 4.1% next year and remain low until 2029. When taken together, the Budget measures mean that the employment level in this country will increase from 33.1 million in 2024 to 34.3 million in 2029.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Health and wealth are two sides of the same coin, and we will not get economic growth without a healthy population. But as a result of the national insurance contribution changes, the Care Provider Alliance reports that 73% of social care providers will have to refuse new care packages from local authorities or the NHS, and that 57% will have to hand back existing contracts. What assurances can the Government provide to the huge number of people who are very scared that they will have to go without care and see their lives deteriorate?

James Murray: The hon. Lady makes an important point, but it is also important to point out that tough decisions on taxation must be made to fund the very services she is keen to support. On her specific point about these pressures, we announced at the provisional local government settlement a further £200 million for adult and children's social care to support authorities in delivering key services. This will be allocated through the social care grant, which will bring the total increase in this grant in 2025-26 to £880 million, meaning that up to £3.7 billion of additional funding will be provided to social care authorities in 2025-26.

Daisy Cooper: Ministers will be aware of analysis from the Nuffield Trust showing that that additional grant is being dwarfed by the additional costs that the Government are introducing.

On the great British high street, we know that our high streets are beautiful features of our cities, market towns and villages, but hospitality, retail, beauty and other service sectors are saying that the combination of national insurance and other changes will be a real hammer blow. If high street shops start to close, that is bad for economic growth and bad for confidence. What mechanisms will Ministers put in place to monitor the impact of the national insurance contributions changes on the vibrancy and resilience of our high streets?

James Murray: All measures in the Budget were of course analysed by the Treasury and the Office for Budget Responsibility ahead of their announcement, and we keep in constant contact with industry representatives to see how policies are working in practice. I draw her attention to my earlier remarks to her hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) about our business rates reform, which is a vital ask from the retail, hospitality and leisure sector. After years of chopping and changing from the Conservative party—changing reliefs from one year to the next, and offering no stability whatever to people in that sector—we are introducing permanently lower rates for the retail, hospitality and leisure sector from April 2026, and avoiding the complete end of relief that the Conservative party left in the in-tray when we arrived in office.

Economic Growth: New Transport Infrastructure

4. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to increase economic growth through new transport infrastructure. [902976]

5. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to increase economic growth through new transport infrastructure. [902977]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): The growth mission is the central mission of this Government, and transport is an important enabler of that growth. The spending review delivered a £1.1 billion cash increase to the transport budget in 2025-26 compared with 2024-25, representing 1.5% real-terms growth with record spending. Further announcements will be made in the spending review.

Kevin Bonavia: In my constituency, Stevenage borough council is working to secure jobs and opportunity, with town centre regeneration under way and over 590 council homes delivered, but outdated infrastructure is holding back growth. Businesses have been clear with me that upgrading Stevenage station gateway would unlock growth, with the prospect of 15,000 jobs being delivered and a £1.5 billion benefit to the economy each year. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can make the most of this opportunity to unlock economic growth through more infrastructure investment?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that investing in infrastructure will enable growth in cities, towns and villages across the whole of our United Kingdom. We will set out further detail alongside the spending review in our 10-year infrastructure strategy in June. No doubt Stevenage, being sited between London and the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, will benefit enormously from announcements already made, but decisions on specific schemes will be taken by the Department for Transport following the spending review.

Dave Robertson: The midlands rail hub project would represent major investment in rail infrastructure across the west midlands. Crucially, it would mean more frequent trains on the cross-city line, which serves Lichfield. Before the pandemic, that was the busiest commuter line in the country outside London. What assurances can Ministers give me and my constituents that more trains will be coming on this line, and coming soon?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a strong champion for his constituency, for raising this rail project. In relation to such projects, the case that he has made will be an important part of our consideration in the months ahead as part of the spending review. I will arrange for him to meet the appropriate Transport Minister as we make those considerations.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The great university cities of York and Hull are unusual in that they do not have a direct rail line between them. The whole region—Labour MPs, Liberal Democrat councillors, Conservatives—is united in believing that reopening the Beverley to York line, so that the two great minsters of Hull and York can be reconnected, would bring economic growth and a brighter future for the area. Will the Minister agree to meet me and colleagues to discuss this project and how it could help unlock the growth that we all seek across the House?

Darren Jones: I am sorry to hear that the right hon. Gentleman failed to persuade his party, when in government for 14 years, to open that line. I can reassure him that this Government take rail infrastructure seriously, and I will happily consider any detail that he wishes to write to me about.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Economic growth through infrastructure development could be helped in Scotland and Northern Ireland with more money going to Cairnryan port and the road infrastructure to it. Allied to that, any help that the Department, the Minister and the Chancellor could give in resolving EU-related trading issues would considerably help Northern Ireland business as well as Scottish business.

Darren Jones: The hon. Member will know that the Government have entered negotiations with our counterparts in the European Commission to improve trade between the UK and the European Union. I had a great meeting to discuss these issues last week in Cardiff with Finance Ministers from the Northern Ireland Executive as well as from Scotland and Wales, and noted that we have given a record-breaking increase in funding to the devolved Governments, so that they can get on with such projects, working in partnership with us where we still have responsibility.

Regional Growth: England

6. **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): What steps she has taken to increase regional growth in England. [902978]

16. **Michelle Scrogg** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): What fiscal reforms she has made to help increase economic growth in Cumbria. [902988]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): At autumn Budget 2024, we set out the first major steps in our approach to regional growth through devolution, investment and reform. The January growth speech regional investment package built on that. We have made clear the Government's focus on attracting inward investment across the country and to investing in infrastructure needed to support cities and regions to grow. We have made it clear that the importance of investing in major city regions across the UK will play

an important part in that endeavour. For example, if we improve the productivity gap in Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds, we estimate we can deliver an extra £33 billion in economic output.

Mr Speaker: I call Graham Stringer. *[Interruption.]*

Graham Stringer: Sorry, Mr Speaker. I was nearly as shocked when you called me as I was when listening to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Radio 4 talking about economic growth. She said there had not been a new runway built in this country since 1945. Manchester airport would be very surprised to hear that, because its new runway has been operating for nearly 25 years. I was shocked by that but not really surprised, because I think many officials in the Treasury who advise her show a startling ignorance of the English regions, and that leads to a certain prejudice in the formula they use to calculate whether a scheme should go ahead. Can the Minister and the rest of the Treasury team provide coaches to send Treasury officials around the English regions to talk to people who know about growth? Secondly, will he look at the formulas that decide where economic growth happens, which are biased against the regions?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions; I will do my best to answer them. I can confirm that Treasury officials routinely engage with local and regional officials across the country, including frequently in Manchester with Mayor Burnham and his team. I would point my hon. Friend gently to some of the announcements made by the Chancellor, including support for the Old Trafford development in Manchester. I congratulate the operators of Manchester airport on running a successful business, which we will continue to support in the normal way.

Michelle Scrogam: At the autumn Budget, the Government announced a range of support measures for small businesses, including vital support for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. Will the Minister confirm the measures being taken to support the independent and important craft brewing and distillery sector in Cumbria?

Darren Jones: As the House has already heard today from my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, we have made permanent decisions to give businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors certainty that their discounts will apply to business rates relief for the long term, not just on a one-year rolling temporary basis, as was the case for years under the previous Government. I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Michelle Scrogam) that the likes of Shed One gin, Wolftown and Kin vodka in Cumbria will benefit enormously from the Government's policy. I look forward to visiting those establishments with her in due course.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Golden Valley development in Cheltenham will bring significant growth to the west. It will also back our national security by supporting GCHQ. Now that the Chancellor has approved an extra 0.1% of defence spending for intelligence and cyber, will she work with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Cabinet Office to agree more funding

for this nationally significant development? If the defence point is not good enough, we could point out that the development will unlock a lot of nice new houses too.

Darren Jones: I visited Airbus in Newport last week to look at some of the advanced technologies we have in this space. I was told about the important connections between Newport and the hon. Gentleman's region, with GCHQ and the industrial impact that it has on the supply chain in the UK. The increased spending on defence announced by the Prime Minister will have a significant, positive impact for businesses such as those and for his region. We look forward to setting out further details of that spending in the spending review.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The Marches region, of which North Shropshire is a significant part, is held back by the A483 road running between Llanymynech and Oswestry, which is very dangerous. There are frequent crashes and hold-ups on it, which both hinders local growth and, obviously, is a danger to life for people living in the area. Will the Minister work with his colleagues in the Department for Transport to ensure that if we cannot get a bypass, we at least get vital improvements on that road?

Darren Jones: I can commit to working with DFT colleagues on projects such as that and others around the country as we make decisions in the upcoming spending review. I would make an observation that it is not just about the decisions on spending; there have been problems in the past where decisions have been made and U-turned, and then made and U-turned again. That is difficult for the supply chain and difficult for investors and local communities. In our multi-year capital budgets and our 10-year infrastructure strategy, which are coming in the months ahead, we will give stability to the UK economy so that we can get on and deliver projects such as the one the hon. Lady mentions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): The Chancellor has lauded the new National Wealth Fund as a key part of the Government's regional growth ambitions. The trouble is, it is not actually new; it is just the UK Infrastructure Bank with a new colour scheme and £7 billion it did not need. The Prime Minister announced at a recent Labour party political conference that he will allocate £200 million from the National Wealth Fund for Grangemouth, but it is supposed to be operationally independent. Will the Minister therefore confirm that that is still the case and that the full independent investment process was followed? Will he also confirm that the unexpected resignation of the National Wealth Fund CEO just days before that announcement is not connected?

Darren Jones: I find it odd that Members on the Conservative Benches do not welcome an additional £7 billion of investment into our economy; it is rather a testament to their poor performance on investment over many years in government. To answer the hon. Gentleman's specific questions, I can confirm that each of the business cases for Grangemouth will have to go through the normal process for sign off, and that John Flint leaving the National Wealth Fund is not in any

way connected to the decisions taken by this Government. We look forward to appointing his successor in due course.

Investment: Newcastle Upon Tyne East and Wallsend

7. **Mary Glindon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): What steps she is taking to encourage investment in Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend constituency. [902979]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): This is an important question when, shockingly, household incomes in the north-east hardly grew over the long 14 years of the previous Conservative Government. We need to raise public and private investment, which is why we are working with the north-east combined authority on its local growth plan. The Office for Investment is working particularly closely with the north-east, alongside Liverpool, on developing local growth opportunities.

Mary Glindon: With the town's access to the world's biggest offshore wind farm, a cluster of advanced manufacturing firms and an expanding energy skills academy, more of Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend's potential is yet to be tapped. What discussions is the Minister having with the Energy Secretary to ensure that the investment is there and that green supply chains are anchored in places such as Tyneside?

Torsten Bell: I have spent far too much of my life talking to the now Energy Secretary, but my hon. Friend is right to highlight the potential of green energy supply chains in her constituency and across the north-east. This is a Government committed to securing economic gains alongside energy security from the energy transition—in stark contrast to the previous Government, who thought the net zero transition was something on which to create dividing lines, not jobs.

Affordable Housing: Supply

8. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): What steps she has taken with Cabinet colleagues to increase the supply of affordable housing. [902980]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): At Budget, the Government announced major steps towards delivering a once-in-a-generation increase in social housing, including a £500 million boost to the affordable homes programme, increasing annual spend to £3.1 billion—the biggest annual budget for affordable housing in more than a decade. Earlier this month, the Government also announced an additional £350 million to fund affordable homes. That is the difference a Labour Government can make to people across the country waiting desperately for secure housing. Further investment decisions will be set out at phase 2 of the spending review.

Cat Smith: Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the *Lancaster Guardian* for its recent investigative report into the reality for many families living in temporary accommodation in the Lancaster district? That is paired with a frustration I hear from local house building developers over delays in the planning process in the

district. What more does the Minister think can happen in Lancaster to ensure that families in the district actually have secure housing?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend knows that we are doing everything possible in this place to streamline and improve planning legislation and planning processes. We are providing clear signals to everybody across the country that we need to build and build rapidly, not least to meet our housing target. Local councils play an important role in this process, as they make decisions on local developments. I understand that in Lancaster city council she has had some struggles with members of the Green party, who are becoming blockers as opposed to builders. I say to them and to people across the country that they need to get behind the build agenda, because that is what the British people voted for.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): To what extent is the Chancellor concerned about multiple potential breaches by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs of its charter since it issued Spotlight 63, which impacts rental housing supply and is causing real concerns among my constituents—both landlords and tenants? Will the Minister meet me urgently to discuss this matter?

Darren Jones: I am afraid that I have no idea what the answer is, but if the right hon. Gentleman writes to me, I shall make sure that he gets an answer.

Public Spending: Value for Money

9. **Nesil Caliskan** (Barking) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure value for money in public spending. [902981]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): The Government are committed to spending taxpayers' money efficiently. At the autumn Budget, we launched the Office for Value for Money to realise benefits from every pound of public spending. Through phase 1 of the spending review, Departments were set a 2% productivity, efficiency and savings target to ensure that every pound of taxpayers' money is well spent. The next phase of the spending review has gone further. I have asked each Department to conduct a line-by-line review of existing day-to-day budgets to identify where spending is no longer aligned with this Government's priority or is poor value for money.

Nesil Caliskan: I thank the Minister for his answer. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I see on a weekly basis the waste that existed under the previous Government, from the billions spent on badly procured covid contracts to a Rwanda scheme that delivered nothing. What steps will the Minister be taking to make sure that we deal not only with value for money for the taxpayer, but the legacy of waste under the previous Government?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. [Interruption.] Conservative Members are chuntering, but that is their legacy. Not once in 17 years was a zero-based review done, not once did former Conservative Ministers require their Departments to go line-by-line through their budgets, and not once did they think that the responsible thing to do was to go through to check

how every pound of taxpayers' money was spent. Instead, there was an argument each year: how much more money am I going to get; how much more borrowing will there be to pay for these bills; and how many more promises am I going to make that I know I will not deliver. The British people were sick to death of that approach to politics, and this Government are taking a fundamentally different approach.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The adoption and special guardianship support fund provides excellent value for money in Mid Sussex for Beacon House, which is a specialist mental health and trauma clinic. Unfortunately, however, the clinic's financial future is looking uncertain. Does the Minister agree that investing in mental health is always a good idea when it comes to getting people back to work and well again and able to contribute to society? Will the Minister work with the Department for Education to secure future funding for this vital service?

Darren Jones: I agree entirely that mental health services are in desperate need of investment and support across the country. The evidence is very clear that there are, for example, too many people out of work who would be like to be in work, but who are waiting at home unwell and unable to receive the support and services that they need and deserve. The Health Secretary is working hard on that at the moment. We are going into the spending review negotiations over the coming weeks and months, and we will set out further detail in due course. I look forward to being able to provide more information specifically as we go through that process.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): Improving public sector productivity was the No.1 ask of Institute of Directors' businesses trying to weather Storm Rachel, but under Labour, public sector productivity has fallen further behind pre-pandemic levels. The number of civil servants working from home has gone up and, shockingly, as *The Daily Telegraph* has found, thousands of civil servants are being signed off to work from abroad. Therefore, whether it is on civil servants working from their bedrooms or from Benidorm, or on other blockers of public sector productivity, what has the Chief Secretary to the Treasury actually done in his last eight months in office, or is he too comfortable with what the Prime Minister calls

"the tepid bath of managed decline"?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his question. My No. 1 ask is that he has another go at making better jokes in future. To answer the substance of his question, I agree with him that the state is not productive enough on a whole range of issues. He talks about civil service headcount, about Government offices and locations, and about working conditions. He could also talk about digital transformation. Frankly, we have an enormous amount of work to do, which will become evident through our spending review. It is something that is being taken very seriously not just by the Treasury, but from the Prime Minister downwards. I look forward to his reflecting on what we suggest is the answer to 14 years of failure from his party when it was in government.

Government Borrowing

10. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the most recent figures for Government borrowing. [902982]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): In the autumn I took the decisions to put our public finances back on a firm footing. The most recent GDP data showed that the economy grew by 0.4% in the final month of last year. As I have said on many occasions, our fiscal rules are non-negotiable. The Conservative party sent mortgage rates and business borrowing costs spiralling; we have returned stability to the public finances to give families and businesses the stability that they need.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The servicing cost is now twice what we are spending on defence, which the Chancellor is right to be increasing. What is her ambition for finding savings in the welfare budget?

Rachel Reeves: I agree that we need to get a grip of the welfare budget, which got out of control under the previous Conservative Government. Frankly, I am not going to take lectures from the Conservative party, which crashed the economy. Let me remind the House what the right hon. Gentleman said about the disastrous mini-Budget:

"I share entirely the free-market ideology that underpins the Chancellor's statement... The Chancellor was right to be radical."

He added:

"I rejoice at the two fingers the Chancellor has raised to socialist dogma and envy."

I think that the financial markets and the British public have united in their view on the previous Government.

Economic Growth: Scotland

11. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in Scotland. [902983]

15. **Tracy Gilbert** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in Edinburgh North and Leith constituency. [902987]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): Economic growth is the No. 1 mission of this Government. Scotland will play an important role. At the autumn Budget we announced that the Scottish Government will be provided with £47.7 billion in its 2025-26 settlement—the largest in real terms in the history of devolution. We also confirmed £130 million of targeted funding, including for city and growth deals.

Elaine Stewart: In Scotland, we have seen almost two decades of wasteful spending while public services get worse. Does the Minister agree that good public services are essential to economic growth, and that Scottish taxpayers are not getting good value for money under the SNP Government?

Darren Jones: On my recent visit to Scotland I heard just that. The people of Scotland deserve the same approach that the people of England are getting from this Government, who have stability and economic growth as their mission and who are getting a grip of public finances after years of failure. Quite frankly, we have given the Scottish Government the money, and they now need to get on with the job. If they cannot, they need to move out of the way.

Tracy Gilbert: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree on the importance of the Scotch whisky industry. Support for the industry starts at home by attracting investment, including at the Port of Leith distillery in my constituency, which is producing single malt Scotch whisky, attracting tourists and showcasing the best of Scottish hospitality. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the industry's concerns about the watering down of the definition of single malt, which will have an impact on investment and growth. Will he therefore work with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that no change is made to the definition of single malt that would undermine the Scottish success story and investment in the Scottish whisky industry?

Darren Jones: Scotch whisky is a proud British brand and export, and this Government will always support the industry. I have checked with Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I can confirm that we will not be watering down the definition of single malt whisky.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, you will have seen the film "Skyfall", in which James Bond and M travel up the A9. But the A9 is a killer road, and we have had a litany of broken promises from the SNP Government. That is hardly conducive to economic growth in Scotland.

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his tour of the scenic A9 and for telling us the importance of that road to Scotland. I am sure that I support what would have been his question. The Scottish National party Government in Scotland ought to take infrastructure seriously, as we are doing here in the UK Government.

Mr Speaker: The Minister gives a very good answer to a non-question.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): We can listen to the braying of Labour MPs from Scotland or we can look at the fact that the Scottish economy grew 12% more than the UK economy in 2024. That is because of the SNP Scottish Government's forensic focus on making Scotland the most attractive place in the UK for foreign direct investment year after year, having a progressive taxation system, rewarding our public sector workers properly and investing in our communities. What difference does the Minister think agricultural property relief and business property relief will have on the Scottish economy—positive or negative?

Darren Jones: Of course, when we make changes to taxes, even when that it is difficult, that results in additional funding for the hon. Member and his colleagues

to spend. I am sure he is grateful that we have given a record-breaking increase in investment to the Scottish Government.

Dave Doogan: I'm grateful for nothing!

Darren Jones: He may be grateful for nothing, and he may be agitating in his place. I suggest that he goes back to the people of Scotland and explains his party's record in government.

Taxation: Impact on Working People

12. **Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): What assessment she has made of the impact of the level of taxation on working people. [902984]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government are committed to keeping taxes on working people as low as possible, which is why we are not increasing the basic, higher or additional rates of income tax, employee national insurance contributions or VAT. The Government have published tax information and impact notes for tax policy changes made at the Budget, which give a clear explanation of the policy objective together with details of the tax impact on individuals. The OBR publishes an economic and fiscal outlook alongside the Budget, which sets out its assessment of the effects of Government decisions taken on tax.

Julia Lopez: Borrowing costs are soaring, the economy is weakening and we need to spend much more on defence. In those circumstances, can people be absolutely confident that to meet her fiscal rules, the Chancellor will not be raising income tax in the course of this Parliament?

James Murray: The OBR's spring forecast will take place on 26 March and be accompanied by a statement to Parliament from the Chancellor. Ahead of the statement, the Government will not give a running commentary responding to forecasts and economic developments, but I reassure the hon. Member that the Chancellor's commitment—indeed, the whole Government's commitment—to our fiscal rules is non-negotiable.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It should not be working people who pay more tax, because wealth inequality is growing in the UK and improving living standards is ultimately what the Government will be judged on. Does the Minister see the merit in introducing an annual wealth tax of 2% on people with over £10 million-worth of assets, which would go an awful long way to raising £26 billion per annum to equalise society?

James Murray: I hope my hon. Friend will welcome the £200 million investment in the Grangemouth facility, which has already been spoken about today. I hope he will also support the Government's decision to restore fiscal responsibility to public finances within the tough fiscal rules that the Chancellor set out at the Budget.

Autumn Budget 2024: Business Confidence

13. **John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What discussions she has had with businesses on the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on levels of business confidence. [902985]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Economic stability and growth are vital to help businesses across the UK to grow. The Lloyds business barometer published last week showed business confidence up 12 points, building on recent surveys by EY and PwC that show that business and investor confidence is rising. The Government are partnering with business to unlock investment and to drive growth.

John Cooper: The Chancellor, with her unimpeachable record in the sector, will know that economics is known as the dismal science. As a member of the Business and Trade Committee, rather than using second-hand statistics, I have spoken directly with businesses one to one and found that the mood is indeed dismal. After her dud Budget, can she think again and go back on this desperate jobs tax? She is in danger of becoming tough on growth and tough on the causes of growth.

Rachel Reeves: Conservative Members welcome the additional money for the NHS, but they never welcome the means to pay for it, which is why we are in the mess that we are with the £22 billion black hole we inherited from the previous Government. The hon. Member says that these are backward-looking surveys. The EY survey of UK CEOs found that 82% felt optimistic. PwC's latest global CEO survey ranked the UK as the second-most attractive global destination for international investment, and last week the Lloyds survey showed a boost in business confidence. Those are the facts. People are choosing Britain as a place to invest and to locate their businesses. On the Government side of the House, we welcome that.

Topical Questions

T1. [902998] **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): It is clear that the world is changing, which is why we must bring about a new era of security and renewal to keep our country safe. Last week, I convened European Finance Ministers at the G20 to discuss our shared challenges. I set out that national security will always be the first responsibility of this Government as well as national security being the bedrock for economic prosperity.

I was also proud to welcome President Zelensky to Downing Street alongside the Prime Minister at the weekend, where we signed a loan agreement that will deliver £2.26 billion in funding to Ukraine above our other commitments to bolster its military capacity, repaid by the profits from frozen Russian sovereign assets. We will use the additional investment in defence to create more good jobs paying decent wages in all parts of the UK. That is why we are giving the National Wealth Fund a new strategic steer to invest in technologies that better support our security and defence. Britain is a strong country with strong defences, and I know that we can weather this changing world.

Josh Newbury: As the father of five-year-old, I know at first hand how important indoor play facilities are. Providers in Cannock Chase, such as the Beach Hut in Norton Canes and the Kids Rule Play Cafe in Cannock,

have written to me asking for consideration for a sector-specific VAT reduction and the opportunity to shape the reform of business rates. Is Treasury Minister willing to meet me, local providers and the Association of Indoor Play to discuss the sector's priorities?

Rachel Reeves: The Government have no plans to consider zero rating indoor play facilities for VAT. All tax breaks must provide value for money and evidence suggests that such savings are only partially passed on. I would, however, welcome my hon. Friend engaging with us as we look to inform our "Transforming Business Rates" paper ahead of the Budget later this year.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): How many jobs will the right hon. Lady destroy as a result of her jobs tax?

Rachel Reeves: I know that the right hon. Gentleman will have looked at the OBR forecast from the Budget last year, which forecasted that employment will rise in this Parliament, unemployment will fall and real household disposable income will increase. That is a far cry from the last Parliament, which was the worst on record for living standards.

Mel Stride: I am surprised that the right hon. Lady did not reference the fact that the OBR also said that there would be 50,000 fewer jobs as a result of the NICs increase; indeed, Bloomberg put that figure at 130,000 jobs. It does not need to be that way. On 26 March, the right hon. Lady should come to this House with a spring statement containing a clear plan around welfare savings, which we had when we were in Government. Will she now confirm that she is prepared to do that with our support and put an end to the pernicious tax increase?

Rachel Reeves: The right hon. Gentleman and his party had 14 years to reform the welfare system. They failed to do so, but this Government will. We are turning the British economy round after the disaster left to us by the previous Government: three cuts in interest rates since the general election, real wages rising at their fastest rate for three years, fuel duty frozen, the payslips of working people protected, and millions getting a pay rise through an increase in the national living wage. That is the change that this Government are delivering; that is the change that the Opposition are blocking.

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Jacob Collier.

T2. [902999] **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): During his recent visit to Burton, His Majesty the King sampled one of Tower Brewery's excellent beers, putting our rich brewing heritage in the spotlight. Even though His Majesty and I like a tippie, low and no-alcohol sales are up 610% since 2013. With a clear opportunity to support that growing sector while promoting public health, will the Chancellor consider raising the alcohol-free threshold to 0.5% alcohol by volume, in line with international markets, to improve consumer choice—

Mr Speaker: Order. Answer, please.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): My hon. Friend is a fantastic campaigner for the breweries in his constituency. We want the drinks sector to go from strength to strength. We are reviewing the responses to the consultation on the threshold that my hon. Friend mentioned.

T3. [903000] **Freddie van Mierlo** (Henley and Thame) (LD): Oxfordshire has no night-time cover for palliative care, which means that patients must dial 111 and wait hours for urgent pain relief to arrive. Will the Minister commit to increasing funding to the Department of Health and Social Care so integrated care boards, including the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West ICB, can deliver palliative care round the clock?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): This Government, as the hon. Member will know, has already given £26 billion of additional funding to the national health service and additional funding to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for social care. We know that we have more to do. The Government are working hard on that and will set out further details in due course.

T4. [903001] **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Under this Labour Government, Cornish tin mining is back. Following the recent National Wealth Fund investment in South Crofty tin mine at the centre of my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency, does the Chancellor agree that, in doubling the National Wealth Fund investment, that is a perfect example of how public funding should be used to unlock private investment in a strategically vital industry?

Rachel Reeves: Unlike the Conservatives, we believe that investing alongside private industry is good for jobs and good for economic growth. I visited the National Wealth Fund's offices last month where I heard at first hand about its equity investment in Cornish Metals. This will help to finance the reopening of Cornwall's South Crofty tin mine, creating more than 300 local jobs, and—

Mr Speaker: Order. Look, enough is enough. I have to get Members in from both sides. I am sorry that the Front Bench does not want to get these Members in, but I am determined to. These are called topical questions, which means I want quick questions and certainly short answers. I call the Father of the House, Sir Edward Leigh.

T5. [903002] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I hope that I will not damage the Chancellor if I commend the fiscally conservative way in which she is increasing defence spending. Given that if every European country matched our 2.5% commitment, we could release over £150 billion of defence spending, does she agree that we can crack this, because war and peace are always won, ultimately, by the size the economy?

Rachel Reeves: I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman. This is why I met my fellow European Finance Ministers in Cape Town at the G20 last week.

All of Europe needs to step up. The British Government are doing so and we need to see that from other countries, too.

T6. [903003] **David Taylor** (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): Acknowledging that official development assistance will go down to 0.3% of GNI in 2027, can the Minister confirm whether it will remain at 0.5% for the calendar year of 2026, which will help ensure that UK aid keeps the maximum number of people alive for the longest possible time?

Darren Jones: Impacts on ODA budgets are currently under review by the Government. Our commitment is to prioritise legal obligations and minimise disruption. We will confirm details in due course, but I will happily meet my hon. Friend and colleagues to discuss this further.

T7. [903004] **Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Expanding UK airport capacity has a very shaky case for economic benefits, because business is not increasing its use of air travel, and the UK sends three times as many tourists out by plane as we welcome in. Will the Chancellor urgently publish her evidence of any net benefits to the economy from airport expansion so that it can be carefully examined?

Darren Jones: We have to decide whether we are for growth or against growth. This Government are for growth and we will set out further details of this particular project when the developers come forward with their plans for the Government to consider.

T10. [903007] **Michelle Scrogam** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): The previous Government's mismanagement has left our flood defences unfit for purpose, which has a huge impact on my constituents. Will the Chancellor set out what the Government are doing to increase community resilience against flooding and coastal erosion?

Darren Jones: To ensure that we protect the country from the devastating impacts of flooding, we have committed £2.65 billion over 2024-25 to 2025-26 to improve flood defences, and we have established a flood resilience taskforce to feed into our decisions on future spending, which will report in due course.

T8. [903005] **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Bridgwater's 77 pubs, including the Crossways Inn in West Huntspill, are at the heart of our local communities, yet the sector overpays £500 million in business rates relative to turnover. Will the Chancellor commit to the British Beer and Pub Association's call for a 20p cut in the small business multiplier and 15p off the standard multiplier, in order to secure the future of British pubs?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): We have frozen the small business multiplier this year and we will be introducing permanently lower multipliers for retail hospitality and leisure premises from April 2026, which will benefit pubs. Meanwhile, they also benefit from our decision to increase the duty relief for draft products.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What are this Government doing to ensure innovation in UK tech companies, such as Kao Park in my constituency, so that they can drive economic growth as part of world-class AI computer ecosystems?

Emma Reynolds: Harlow is home to one of the UK's largest supercomputers. We are taking forward the AI action plan and we also have the tech adoption review, which will look at how we can unlock the potential of AI in our high-growth sectors.

T9. [903006] **Sir Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): Attracting high net worth individuals to spend more time in the United Kingdom drives jobs, growth and, crucially, tax revenues, but unfortunately the opposite is happening in the UK right now. Will the Chancellor use the spring statement to look at the statutory residence test and, in particular, the ties rules to see whether we can incentivise people to spend more time in the UK, not the other way around?

James Murray: As part of the reforms announced at the autumn Budget, we are modernising the system for people from overseas spending time in the UK with a new residence-based test. We are always looking at ways to encourage people from overseas to spend time in and invest in the UK and to help grow our economy.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Government on announcing the greatest level of financial sanctions last week. Does the Chancellor agree that keeping dirty money out of the City of London and homes and communities across our country is vital for our national security, as well as our economic stability?

Rachel Reeves: It is absolutely right that we increased and stepped up the sanctions last week. Also, under the loan agreement we made with Ukraine last week, the loan will be repaid with the profits on foreign sovereign Russian assets. Russia should pay for the damage it has done.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): My constituent is one of hundreds of people who suffered from the collapse of Collateral. While the Financial Conduct Authority has apologised to investors for failing to act faster to stop Collateral's fraudulent activities, I am concerned that, without internal changes, the FCA will make similar mistakes again. Should there not be an investigation into the FCA's handling of the case?

Emma Reynolds: I am happy to meet the hon. Lady and look at the case she mentions, because I need to get more detail.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Transport Committee has looked at the economic growth case for the Heathrow expansion and has heard conflicting evidence on the project's growth impact on regions away from London and the south-east, and also on other carbon-using sectors. Will the Chancellor ask Heathrow Airport to release the full text of the Frontier Economics report on which she made her decision to expand Heathrow?

Darren Jones: Heathrow, as an important hub airport, will have benefits for regions across the country, as chambers of commerce have said to us. Of course, I

understand that the Transport Committee is looking at the issue, and we will consider its report when it publishes it in due course.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): St Raph's hospice in my constituency faces a £140,000 increase in staff costs due to the Government's national insurance hike. That means the hospice will have to further cut staff services that take pressure off the NHS. Will the Chancellor think again and provide an exemption for healthcare providers from the national insurance rise?

James Murray: The Chancellor set out our Budget, and I set out during debates on the Finance Bill and related legislation exactly how we will implement the changes announced at the Budget. In the case of employer national insurance contributions, there are defined ways in which public sector organisations are reimbursed. The changes do not apply to hospices, as they are largely charities or are not directly part of the public sector. I also point him to the £100 million of extra investment that we have announced in improving hospices.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that investment in the fifty500 midlands growth corridor will provide an excellent opportunity to deliver this Labour Government's mission for growth and opportunity for all?

Darren Jones: I join my hon. Friend in celebrating investment in her region. Our growth mission is one in which each part of the country will benefit, and we look forward to working further with her.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): With farmers protesting again in Westminster today, why is the Chancellor of the Exchequer running away from meeting farming unions from across this nation? Why do those who feed our nation not deserve some of the Chancellor's time?

James Murray: Just two weeks ago, I spent a fair amount of time meeting representatives from the National Farmers Union and other representative organisations from different nations within the UK. I listened to their concerns and what they had to say. We have to be honest that we disagree. They do not agree with the Government's policy, and I need to be direct about that because we had to take a number of difficult decisions at the Budget. But I do not apologise for the importance of balancing the public finances and sticking to our fiscal rules.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Next month will see a rise and an extension to the minimum wage. In Portsmouth North, there are 9,600 minimum wage workers—higher than the national average—leaving many in in-work poverty and in desperate need of a boost to living standards. What steps are the Government taking to help improve living standards for those low-paid workers?

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that a higher minimum wage is an important way that we make low-earning workers' lives better—as is the extension that we announced to sick pay yesterday, which I hope will be welcomed on all sides of this House.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The art of taxation is extracting the largest amount of money with the lowest amount of squeaking from the

goose. Yet the Chancellor will have heard the honking of the tractors on Whitehall today in response to her raising an amount of money that will pay for less than one day of NHS spending. Will she commit to reversing the family farm tax?

James Murray: As we have debated several times in this Chamber and Westminster Hall, the changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief retain a generous relief for people accessing those benefits within the taxation system. That means that people will get £1 million before inheritance tax is due, in addition to the existing nil rate band for spousal transfers. Over that, it is up to an effective rate of 20%, and any money due can be paid over 10 years, interest free.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): The Government's recent £100 million investment in hospices, including St Michael's hospice in Basingstoke, will help to modernise facilities, enhance digital services and provide more comfortable spaces for patients and their families. Given the vital role that hospices play in all our communities, will the Treasury continue to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure the sector's long-term financial stability?

James Murray: As my hon. Friend rightly points out, £100 million is being made available for hospices—£25 million in 2024-25 and £75 million from April 2025. That capital funding is intended to help charitable hospices in his constituency and elsewhere across the country to improve and modernise their facilities and physical estate.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Britain is only 55% food secure. In these deeply uncertain times internationally, is it not time to change policy when it comes to agriculture? Is this not the day to get rid of the family farm tax, undo the 76% cut in basic payments and invest in the people who keep us food secure?

James Murray: As I have made clear to other hon. Members, the changes to agricultural property relief are a fair way to raise the money necessary to balance the public finances. Britain has excellent food security, and that is a priority for the Government.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is right that the Government have put more money into defence. However, in answer to a previous question, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that there is an impact assessment of the overseas development budget. Does that mean that it is still in scope of the spending review and that there could be changes to that budget in June?

Darren Jones: Just to clarify, I did not say there was an impact assessment; I said that the impact of the changes is being considered by the Government, but we will set out the detail on that in due course.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I commend the Government for their international leadership at this challenging time. Events overnight make it even clearer that Europe must find considerably more resources for Ukraine. The Chancellor has rightly continued our policy of using the interest on frozen Russian state assets to benefit Ukraine, but I believe that now is the moment to go further by actually seizing those assets. Russia's invasion of Ukraine violates the principle of sovereign equality, providing a basis in international law for such a policy, and by acting in concert with our allies, we can ensure that there are no risks to financial stability. May I urge the Chancellor to push for co-ordinated action to seize those frozen Russian state assets and give that money to the Ukrainians so that they can defend and rebuild their country?

Rachel Reeves: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words about this Government stepping up the funding for defence. Last week, we expanded sanctions on Russia, including by looking at financial services. This week, we have signed off a UK Export Finance package to provide more military support, above and beyond our defence spending and as well as the loan repaid using the profit on those assets. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, we would look at going further but, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, it is incredibly complicated to do that in line with international law. However, we keep all options on the table, because, as he is absolutely right to say, Russia should pay for the damage that Russia has caused.

Gaza

12.39 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Gaza.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): We urge all parties to fully implement the ceasefire to help deliver a permanent end to hostilities. We are very concerned at reports that Israel is preventing humanitarian aid from entering Gaza. Israel must not block aid coming into Gaza. Humanitarian aid should never be contingent on a ceasefire or used as a political tool. We urge the Government of Israel to lift restrictions immediately and unconditionally.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is dire. The halt on goods and supplies entering Gaza risks breaching Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law. The UK is doing all we can to provide support. Alongside our existing support, on 28 January, the then Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), announced a further £17 million in funding to ensure that healthcare, food and shelter reaches tens of thousands of civilians, and to support vital infrastructure across the Occupied Palestinian Territories and neighbouring countries.

We must all work together with the United Nations and all partners to continue to facilitate aid and ensure it is sustained. Fully reinstating commercial deliveries will be key, as will allowing more types of goods in, so that civilians who lost their homes can be protected and civilian infrastructure repaired.

We welcome the announcement of an agreement to end the fighting in Gaza, and we welcome the release of 38 hostages in Gaza so far, including British national Emily Damari and Eli Sharabi, who both have both close links to the UK. Emily, of course, has met the Prime Minister and discussed her dreadful treatment at the hands of Hamas. The hostages and their families have endured unimaginable suffering from the cruelty of Hamas, and the situation in Gaza has continued to worsen. The current ceasefire is the only way for the region to move forward.

As we have made clear, we want to see a negotiated two-state solution, with a sovereign Palestinian state, including the west bank and Gaza, alongside a safe and secure Israel. We have also made it clear that we would oppose any effort to move Palestinians in Gaza to neighbouring Arab states against their will. Forced displacement of Palestinians or any reduction in the territory of the Gaza strip are simply not an option. We need Palestinian civilians to be able to return to their homes and lives, and to rebuild. International law guarantees them this right. A two-state solution is the only way to secure long-term peace and security for Palestinians and Israelis.

As the Foreign Secretary said:

“You can hold in your heart the pain of the Israeli people and the plight of those hostages and their families, and at the same time, you can hold in your heart the awful damage, pain and suffering that this has wrought on Gaza, with well over 45,000 Palestinian people having lost their lives.”—[*Official Report*, 16 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 535.]

We must continue to focus on the future and on turning the current ceasefire deal into a political process that leads to a two-state solution, including the west bank and Gaza.

Ellie Chowns: Over the weekend, the Israeli Government took the decision to block the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza. The Minister talked about that aid, but it can no longer be delivered. Israel is once again using starvation as a weapon of war, and today we hear that it has also announced a so-called “hell plan” that would see electricity and remaining water supplies cut off.

These decisions coincide with the end of the first phase of the ceasefire agreement, with negotiations on phase 2 barely begun, jeopardising the release of the remaining live hostages, plans for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and a longer-term peace agreement. The UN has said:

“International humanitarian law is clear: We must be allowed access to deliver vital lifesaving aid.”

Oxfam described the move, made as Ramadan began, as a

“reckless act of collective punishment, explicitly prohibited under international humanitarian law”,

and the International Court of Justice has previously issued explicit instructions to Israel to facilitate aid deliveries to Gaza.

Does the Minister agree that the Israeli Government are again in clear violation of the ceasefire agreement and of international humanitarian law? Has she, or have her colleagues, spoken to their Israeli counterparts to condemn Israel's “hell plan”, and to make it clear that there must be no resumption of the war and that it is unacceptable for the people of Gaza to be denied critical food, water, and medical or any other supplies? What action will the UK take against the Israeli Government if they continue, illegally, to use humanitarian aid and access to water and power as a bargaining chip? I know that the Minister wants the ceasefire to hold. Can she share her assessment of the impact of these latest developments on the prospects for a lasting, just and fair peace?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Lady for the urgent question. A halt on goods and supplies entering Gaza, such as that announced by the Government of Israel, does risk breaching obligations under international humanitarian law. To answer her question directly, the UK Government have been in touch with interlocutors to make that point. In fact, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), is in the region pushing for a peace deal, hence my covering this brief today, although I am the Indo-Pacific Minister.

Humanitarian aid should never be contingent on a ceasefire or used as a political tool. On 28 January, the then Minister for development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), announced £17 million in funding to ensure that healthcare, food and shelter could reach tens of thousands of civilians, and to support vital infrastructure across the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The UK has announced £129 million of funding for the OPTs so far this financial year, including £41 million for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

[*Catherine West*]

The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) asked about the long-term ceasefire prospects. The UK plays its part in pushing both sides towards a hopeful future for the region. We are working with not just Arab states, but partners such as the US to try to push for a solution that is in line with international humanitarian law.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I have just come back from the middle east, where I went with the Foreign Affairs Committee. While the world watches with increasing alarm the disintegration of the peace process in Gaza, we were warned in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the west bank and Israel that the far-right Government in Israel may have no long-term plan on Gaza, but that there is a long-term plan for the west bank, and that is annexation. The international community is well aware of that. It sees the evictions, the demolitions, the increasing number of Israeli settlements, and that 40,000 people have recently been displaced. In these days of hard power, what is plan B? What will the international community do to stop the annexation of the west bank? It will not be enough to simply condemn it once it has happened.

Catherine West: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her ongoing interest in this important matter of foreign policy, and for the work that she and her Committee have done, including through personal interviews and visits to the region. That is all part of the supportive role that the UK must play. It must take an international role in pushing for peace.

The UK Government have taken a very tough position on militant factions or groups attacking Palestinians in the occupied territories and the west bank. We continue to look at the measures available to get our message across in not just words, but actions. With my right hon. Friend's permission, I will write to her as Chair of the Select Committee with an updated assessment of the situation.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): As recent days have shown, the ceasefire continues to be incredibly fragile. Of course, we all want this agreement to hold, and none of us should be in any doubt that that hinges on the release of each and every hostage held by the Iranian-backed terrorists Hamas, who caused the conflict by their sickening acts on 7 October. As the Minister has pointed out, those hostages and their families have now suffered unimaginably for more than 500 days, and that cannot go on. The hostages have been held in barbaric conditions, and the world has been shocked by the distressing scenes involving those who have been released.

The Minister rightly referred to Emily Damari and others. Emily has shared details of her really awful ordeal in captivity by Hamas. We all wish her well in her medical appointments and in the treatment that she is receiving. Last week, we also tragically saw the distressing return of the bodies of those killed in Hamas captivity. Our hearts break for their loved ones, and we mourn with them and with the people of Israel.

I have a series of questions for the Minister. First, what role is the UK playing in helping to get an agreement on phase 2 of this ceasefire over the line? What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with America, Israel, and other regional players in recent days? What engagement have the Government had with the plans for the future of Gaza that are being discussed in Cairo, and on how to prevent Hamas from continuing to control the Gaza strip?

Secondly, what is the Government's practical response on aid access? How are they working to unblock this situation, and what is happening to the British aid that is already in the region or en route? Finally, what recent conversations have Foreign Office Ministers had with the International Committee of the Red Cross, both on its efforts on hostage release and on humanitarian assistance more broadly?

Catherine West: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for emphasising the effect on families on both sides of this terrible conflict, but particularly on the British families whom the Prime Minister has met, and on Emily Damari, and their dignity and grace. She also mentioned all those who want a home, want security in the region, and have been affected by this most horrendous of wars. She evoked the terrible images of hostages being released while the most macabre of pantomimes went on behind them. That cruelty is utterly unacceptable, and the UK has made that very clear to interlocutors, both at ministerial and Foreign Secretary level.

The shadow Foreign Secretary has talked about phase 2. There have been stops and starts in this peace process, as there often are in these very difficult situations. Our role is to continue to speak very closely with the US and with Steve Witkoff to push for practical, day-to-day solutions. She asked about British aid and what negotiations we are undertaking. We are in daily contact with the region, and are pushing for discussions, conversations and dialogue, so that aid can get back in. Following this urgent question, we undertake to contact the Red Cross, one of our partner organisations, with the message that this House wants that aid to re-enter the area, and to save lives.

Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The powerful scenes of Palestinians celebrating the start of Ramadan, even as their homes and lives have been reduced to rubble by Israeli forces, send a defiant message to the world that despite the displacement and destruction, Palestinians remain rooted in their land. Will the Minister confirm that the decision to block all aid to Gaza, collectively punishing the entire population, is a war crime and a breach of international law, contravening provisions of the Geneva convention and the Rome statute?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is quite right to point out the devastating impact of no aid getting through, and to say that a halt on goods and supplies entering Gaza, such as that recently announced by the Government of Israel, risks breaching Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law. It is not for Ministers at the Dispatch Box to make legal decisions or judgments, but I assure my hon. Friend that the former Minister for development pledged £17 million to ensure that healthcare, food and shelter can reach tens of thousands of civilians, and to support vital infrastructure.

My hon. Friend must reassure her constituents that the Foreign Office is doing all it can to get infrastructure across the OPTs and into Gaza, in order to relieve the suffering.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Israeli Government are wrong to prevent humanitarian aid entering Gaza. That threatens the lives of Gazans who are dependent on aid after the destruction of the past 15 months, and is a clear breach of international humanitarian law. What practical steps are the Government taking to ensure that the Israeli Government back down and let that aid in? I understand the depth of distress in Israel about the despicable way that Hamas terrorists have played psychological games with the hostages and their families, but withholding essential supplies of food, medicine and shelter only worsens the devastation faced by the Palestinian people.

In the west bank, we also see illegal settlers violently attacking Palestinians and apparently receiving the support of members of the Israeli Cabinet. Does the Minister agree that we in the UK must do all we can to undermine the extremists in this conflict, so that a second phase of the ceasefire can be negotiated, all hostages can be released, and Gazans can receive the aid that they desperately need?

Catherine West: I thank the Lib Dem spokesperson for his words. He is quite right to emphasise the psychological impact of this terrible conflict, and the traumatised state of people in the region. As the Foreign Secretary has said, we welcome the release of the 38 hostages in Gaza, including of course Emily Damari, whom we have already mentioned. We think so much of those members of the Lifshitz family—they of course had strong ties to the UK—who were held hostage by terrorists in Gaza and who died. We thank Qatar, Egypt and the US for providing support to ensure that the horrific ordeal of individuals and families can come to an end, but unfortunately, this is not the end. That is why it is so important that we take this moment to push.

The hon. Gentleman asked what we were doing practically. We are in daily contact with the region, including our mission there. Obviously, in the context of the international debate, interventions such as this urgent question push for a just solution for those on both sides of this terrible conflict.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Last week, I was in the west bank, alongside other members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, on our wider trip to the middle east. While the world's attention is rightly on the devastating humanitarian situation in Gaza, we met Palestinians in the Jordan valley whose schools were being attacked, whose mosques were being burned, and whose livestock were being stolen by extremist Israeli settlers. This is happening with the apparent connivance of the Israeli security forces, and it appears to be part of a wider plan for annexation. What steps are we taking to prevent further erosion of Palestinian land in the west bank that would put the two-state solution even further away?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for his expertise on aid and foreign affairs. He is quite right to emphasise the actions of some settlers. There are many settler communities that just

get on with it, and that want a peaceful solution, but he is right to say that there is violence in the settlements, which are of course unlawful under international humanitarian law and harm the prospects of a two-state solution. I thank my hon. Friend for putting on record the impact on the faith community, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan, and the fact that mosques have been attacked. We will ensure that that point gets through in our next discussion with our interlocutors, both on the Israeli side and on the Palestinian side.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): No one is surprised that as soon as the world's attention shifted from Gaza, Israel reimposed its siege, preventing the entry of all humanitarian aid. The Minister knows the impact that this will have on the beleaguered civilian population, who are already suffering from disease, starvation and an absence of healthcare. After 17 months in which Israel has been given carte blanche, none of us—least of all Netanyahu—expects there to be any meaningful consequences from Israel's actions, but does the Minister consider what is happening in Gaza to be collective punishment? If she does not, what would she call it?

Catherine West: Sometimes, the words we use are really important. There has been an enormous amount of suffering. We know that so many in Israel feel that we do not understand their need for security, and so many in Gaza feel that we do not understand the depth of their suffering. We must redouble our efforts to communicate what we want, which is a two-state solution and a peaceful future for both communities, which must live side by side.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): The leaders of the Arab world have made welcome proposals about the future of Gaza and its people. What update can the Minister give on the UK's support for those proposals, and will she join me in welcoming the fact that the proposals recognise that the terrorist death cult Hamas can have no part in the future governance of Gaza?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that, as a proscribed terror organisation, Hamas have certainly displayed some very frightening characteristics that we would expect of a terrorist organisation. There was also the macabre pantomime that we saw in the past couple of weeks during the release of hostages—that was truly shocking. I thank him for his question. The exact detail on the next stage of the negotiation is to be defined by the two parties, but we play a real role both with the ally, which is Israel, but also working with Egypt, Qatar and the wider region. That is why our Minister right now is in the region, making the point that we want to be involved, pushing for a peaceful solution and to see that day when terrorism is not extant and the two communities can live side by side in peace.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I was going to ask what we would do if the Israelis refused to let in aid, or to turn on the water and power, but I think we all know that basically the answer is nothing. Instead, let me ask this. The Minister rightly mentioned the macabre display around the return of the hostages and the condition of those hostages, and she is right. I think she said that she has taken that up with interlocutors.

[Kit Malthouse]

Why has not she mentioned the return of the Palestinian non-combatants? Why has not she mentioned their condition when they are returned, often emaciated and showing signs of torture? Why has she not mentioned the number of senior medics who have been detained without charge and then died in mysterious circumstances in Israeli detention? Apparently there is some kind of investigation, but it never comes to a conclusion. Is she surprised that people have become cynical about British conduct in this conflict, when it seems that we are only concerned about the welfare of one side?

Catherine West: With all due respect, I think that across this House we have had a very balanced approach to the suffering of all the communities in the region. The right hon. Member is right to mention the terrible suffering of those who have experienced arbitrary detention or alleged torture by various law enforcement agencies. He is also right to include that in what needs to be the next step of the negotiation—the hostages on the one side, but those being released from prison on the other. I remind him that there are concerns that some people who might have been released should not have been. All of that has to be taken in the round and balanced. I encourage balance and understanding about the suffering of both sides of the community and the desire for security in the words that we use in the House.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): The issue of collaboration and infiltration between Hamas and some UNRWA officials is well documented. Clearly, people in Gaza need aid, so can the Minister update us on how we are monitoring the work being done to restore neutrality and confidence in UNRWA?

Catherine West: The UK Government have been a supporter of the work of UNRWA throughout this conflict and before it. We have been supporting UNRWA financially, as have all international organisations and countries. There have been problems with certain challenges to individuals who have been employed by UNRWA, but we have consistently joined with allies in expressing our concerns about the role of UNRWA being curtailed. At the UN Security Council sessions on 6 November, 11 December, 3 January, 28 January and 25 February, and in a joint statement with partners on 27 October, we urged that the important work of UNRWA can continue.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): The blockade of aid is just the last line in a long list of activities that Israelis have committed against the Palestinian people. Now that we have cut our overseas aid to a mere 0.3% of GDP—the lowest in real terms in 20 years—does the Minister still agree with the Labour party manifesto that international aid makes the world “a safer, more prosperous place”?

Does she agree that, with this move, the UK’s historic role in the middle east is dead and over?

Catherine West: The hon. Member is right to talk about the ongoing need for aid in the region, and the Prime Minister was very careful in his speech at the end of last week—I think he has mentioned it since then in the press—to say that humanitarian aid must continue. Gaza was specifically mentioned, because it is one of

our top priorities. The hon. Member is aware that the decision to divert some of our aid spending into the defence of Europe is only a week old, but he must also be aware that we will come forward with the detail of that. I reassure him and his constituents that Gaza was specifically mentioned in this House by the Prime Minister, because it remains one of our top priorities in the Foreign Office.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is clear that Israel has been emboldened by Trumpian tactics in imposing a total siege and blocking all supplies, including humanitarian aid into Gaza, to force new ceasefire terms. We in this House should be clear and call that what it is: collective punishment of the Palestinian people, starvation as a method of war, and a blatant war crime. Will the Minister finally sanction Israel for these gross violations of international law?

Catherine West: Specifically on the question of sanctions, I think my hon. Friend knows what I am going to say, which is that we do not talk about them until we make a decision. We review any tools that we have available to us to protest. We also need to understand that we are in the midst of a peace process. We know that peace processes throughout history have had stop-start elements. What we are doing is making clear our views—the views of this House and of the Government—that humanitarian aid must not be prevented from entering Gaza. While this important peace process is going on, people still need to eat. They still need lifesaving medical treatment. Children still need to be educated. That is the point we have continued to make all the way along.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): In her letter resigning as Development Minister last week, the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) wrote that

“it will be impossible...given the depth of the cut”

to maintain the Government’s support for all their development commitments. She explicitly cited aid to Gaza. At this point, I commend the Totnes Friends of Palestine for raising £10,000 to help those in Gaza. With hospitals destroyed, a lack of clean water, desperate food shortages and now more threats to power and water supplies, how will the Minister ensure that last week’s cuts to development spending will not worsen the humanitarian catastrophe happening in Gaza?

Catherine West: I congratulate the hon. Member on all the work she does in her community to show international support and solidarity for communities in Gaza. We know that the humanitarian situation remains extremely challenging, with more than 48,000 having been killed and 90% of the population having been displaced, many repeatedly. I think the UK has a really good story to tell. We have been in there for many decades now. She mentions the outgoing Minister for Development, and a further £17 million was announced on 28 January so that healthcare, food and shelter could reach tens of thousands of civilians, and to support vital infrastructure. The hon. Member asks about ongoing funding, and she is right to ask that question and hold our feet to the fire. Once we have had time to look at the coming financial years and the comprehensive spending review, she will have her answer.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that Israel's decision to block aid to more than 2 million Palestinians in Gaza is collective punishment? With 80% of Gaza's health infrastructure destroyed, 1,000 medical workers killed and the World Health Organisation estimating that 14,000 Palestinians, including 4,500 children, require urgent medical evacuation, what concrete steps have we taken to ensure that aid gets in and that those who need medical treatment have that treatment made available to them?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for her ongoing campaigning on humanitarian aid for Gaza. It is very positive that the Rafah crossing remains open: that has led to a significant increase in the number of medical evacuations in recent weeks. It is vital for Israel to ensure that there is a sustained passage for patients who need treatment that is not available in Gaza, and officials from all relevant Whitehall Departments are exploring avenues to ensure that our support best meets the needs of the those who are critically ill there. The right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) talked about the medical staff who are under threat. We have supported them with technical advice and training, and we have also announced £1 million for the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, to be delivered through WHO Egypt, to support Palestinians who have been medically evacuated from Gaza.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday the all-party parliamentary group on UK-Israel heard from the families of five of the remaining hostages. It is estimated that of the 59 who are still in captivity, only 24 are alive and 35 have been murdered. The recently released hostage Eli Sharabi described the conditions in which he was detained: he was held in chains, brutally beaten and starved. Alon Ohel, who was held alongside him, remains in captivity. The families believe that the remaining hostages are in a very vulnerable position. Clearly the demand must be for all of them to be released immediately, and that should be the aim of the British Government. What action is the Minister taking to ensure that happens?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Member for his ongoing support for peace in the region. He specifically mentioned the family of Eli Sharabi, and we know that those families have a UK connection. The UK has played an active role in co-ordinating with international partners since the beginning of the conflict. The Foreign Secretary has visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories on three occasions since taking office, and has worked closely with European partners in pushing for a resolution to secure the ceasefire. I think the situation has improved on that front in the last couple of weeks, but the hon. Member is right to emphasise the importance of the return of hostages as part of the negotiated next part of the peace process.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank the Minister for updating the House on this troubling matter. The Israeli Government's decision is contrary to international humanitarian law and clearly undermines such a fragile ceasefire. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have been absolutely clear about the right of Palestinians to return home to Gaza to rebuild their lives. Does the Minister agree that their right to

return is jeopardised by the blocking of critical humanitarian aid, and what actions will the Government take if that right continues to be restricted?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is right that humanitarian aid should never be contingent on a ceasefire or used as a political tool, and we urge the Government of Israel to lift restrictions immediately and unconditionally. He asked what else this Government will do. We will continue to support the peace process, which should involve both sides getting around the table, freeing the hostages, allowing the aid in, and having a vision for the future of this region that is so affected by conflict and death.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I pay tribute to the former Development Minister, my constituency neighbour the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), for her work in this area, and also for the wise words in her resignation letter.

The Minister has rightly said that forced displacement is unacceptable. Indeed, I think she said that the actions of the illegal extremist settlers were unlawful. You may have seen the Oscars ceremony this week, Mr Speaker, which featured an incredible film called "No Other Land", which highlights the forced displacements in Masafer Yatta, and was made by Israelis and Palestinians together. It won the Oscar. I bet they would trade every gong going for that film to have its desired effect, and for the violence to stop. We can do something, and if ever there was a time for us to ban the illegal settlement goods that fund those extremist settlers, is now not that time?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Lady for all her work in the community and also in the House, educating Members not just on the two sides that we always think about but on the Christian community in Gaza and in Palestine—the Palestinian Christians who are so much affected by the current conflict. She mentioned the UK's position on settlements. I want to be clear that our position is that they are illegal under international law, present an obstacle to peace and threaten the physical viability of a two-state solution.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): Many Members have spoken about the importance of humanitarian aid, which is vital to saving so many lives, but the role of the aid workers who are working on the ground in horrific conditions is also vital. According to estimates, more than 320 have been killed, the highest number on record, but we see many aid organisations being attacked on social media, with claims that they have links to terrorist organisations. What more can the Minister do to make clear the Government's support for these vital international aid workers and organisations? They include Islamic Relief, based in my constituency, which is one of the UK's five non-governmental organisations certified by the core humanitarian standard in respect of aid and transparency. What more can we do to support these vital aid workers?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for her important work in this regard, and I thank those aid organisations that are based just across the river. Not only must aid reach those who need it in all areas, but the important work of aid workers must be respected

[*Catherine West*]

and they must be protected. It is horrifying to hear reports that, for example, six babies have died from hypothermia and cold-related injuries in Gaza in just two weeks. Islamic Aid, the Red Cross and all the other organisations that make up the partnerships across the region must be able to get into Gaza to do their important work, and must also be allowed to bring in goods such as tents, medical equipment and machinery that are needed to support the resumption of basic services in Gaza.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her responses to the urgent question. Over the weekend and in the Chamber yesterday, the Prime Minister made very clear his support for Ukraine until peace is achieved, for which I am eternally grateful; but will the Minister confirm that our support remains with Israel as we attempt to secure peace for now and a lasting solution to maintain it, and that we hope that a future can be achieved for the children on both sides of the Gaza boundary?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Member for mentioning the children involved in this conflict. He is well aware of the trauma that can be passed down from generation to generation, and of the many orphans in the region. I thank him for his commitment to the state of Israel and a secure future for its people so that the suffering of people in Palestine can also come to an end.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): As well as expressing my sadness and alarm about the Netanyahu Government's again blocking aid from entering Gaza, may I point out that over the years I have repeatedly expressed my concern in Parliament about the forced evictions and illegal settlements in the west bank? Now, shockingly, for the first time in two decades, there are tanks in Jenin and further displacement of Palestinians. What representations are the Government making to the Israeli Government that aid must not be blocked from entering Gaza, and that this illegal occupation and these further evictions must be stopped immediately?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend's question gives me a further opportunity to emphasise that Israeli settlements are illegal under international law and harm the prospects for a two-state solution. The Foreign Secretary has made it clear to Israeli Ministers on a number of occasions that their Government must clamp down on settler violence and end settler expansion.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I thank the Minister for mentioning orphans, who, unfortunately, do not have much of a voice in this place, although sadly there are too many in the world as we see more and more conflict.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) that civilian lives are just as precious whether they are Israeli or Palestinian, and that we should do all we can, across the House, to save lives. I fear, however—this may be a surprise—that the biggest foreign policy headache for the Government over coming months may be not Ukraine but Israel, with the divergence of the new American Administration over Israel being of great concern. Does the Minister accept what has been agreed today at

the Arab summit in Cairo—a \$53 billion five-year reconstruction plan for Gaza which will allow displaced Palestinians to return, no Trump Gaza riviera, and countries in the region putting Palestinians back into Gaza and at the heart of its future?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Member for his question, which has many aspects. He is aware that the majority of homes in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed, the economy has collapsed and the delivery of basic services, including energy and water, has been badly affected. Over 60% of the electricity distribution network has been damaged or destroyed. Over 90% of main roads are damaged, profoundly limiting the mobility of people, aid and goods. That is why the underlining of the \$53.2 billion is so welcome. We are supportive of regional efforts cohering around a single workable reconstruction plan for Gaza, and we support the regional expertise in construction to get going on that.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about orphans, he is perhaps aware that one of the Foreign Secretary's main areas of concern is the welfare of children, particularly children who are orphans or in need of adoption or fostering. I will take back the concern that he expressed about that workstream, on which we do quite a lot in the Foreign Office, and emphasise its importance.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The suffering of Palestinian children who have been attacked by Israeli drones is devastating, and the fact that those children are denied medical support and assistance is even more so. The Minister has said that we are looking at medical evacuations, but does she agree that actions speak louder than words? When will enough be enough, and when will these children get the attention that they so desperately need? Other countries are providing support right now.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is quite right to talk about children. Whether it is in Sudan, Ukraine or anywhere else, we know that children suffer deep trauma as a result of conflict, and we are deeply alarmed by the disproportionate impact of the conflict on children in Gaza. Half of Gaza's population are children, and the consequences of tens of thousands being killed, injured or separated from their parents threaten not only their individual futures, but the very fabric of Palestinian society for generations to come. Most, if not all, students in Gaza have not had access to education since 7 October, and at least 88% of school buildings will need full or major reconstruction.

My hon. Friend is quite right to ask what we are doing. The UK is supporting the restoration of education services in Gaza, including through the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East. She will be aware of the important work to maintain the ceasefire so that we have a hope of realising the reconstruction dream.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I am very pleased to hear the Minister emphasise that the withholding of humanitarian aid is a direct contravention of international humanitarian law. What steps are her Government taking to work with partners in the region and in Europe to apply pressure on the Israeli Government, to ensure that the flow of critical aid is no longer impeded?

Catherine West: That is precisely why we have ministerial visits to the region: to emphasise the importance, not only to the Government but to this House, of the message that we must keep pushing for a peaceful future. In the meantime, we must provide enough food to eat and enough water to wash and to cook, to educate children and keep people healthy and safe.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Have the Government carried out an assessment of the impact of the withdrawal of USAID from the region? In light of any assessment that may have been carried out, are the Government confident that the decision to cut the international aid budget will not be an increasingly detrimental problem in Gaza? I understand that the Prime Minister has said that funding for Gaza is ringfenced and that our humanitarian aid will continue, but I am concerned that the withdrawal of American aid may leave a vacuum that we cannot fill.

Catherine West: It is true that, over the decades, the people of the USA have been generous in providing aid across the world, including in the region. It will be almost impossible to replace the important work that USAID has done over the decades in the middle east. I will not, however, give up hope, because we have to keep making the case for working together internationally. A lot of the work in the region is done by partners working multilaterally. Much of that work has been done by USAID, but it is also about trying to encourage other countries, including those in the region that have more vibrant economies, to step up to the plate and fill the gaps.

On my hon. Friend's specific question about the assessment, it is not complete, because the decision is still relatively recent, as is our own decision on UNRWA a week ago. I trust that we will come back to the House when we know the shape of the comprehensive spending review and how we will address this difficult problem.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): On Monday, the London School of Economics' middle east centre will host the launch of a book called "Understanding Hamas". One contributor to the book, Azzam Tamimi, has previously called for the destruction of the state of Israel. Speakers at the event deny that Hamas is a terrorist organisation and wrongly dismiss Israel as a "white, settler colonialist nation". Will the Minister join me in saying very clearly that this is not an accurate description of Israel? There is no genocide, as I heard an hon. Member claim earlier, and Hamas is a terrorist organisation that seeks to murder Jews and has brought nothing but destruction and disaster to the people of Gaza.

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Gentleman for doing his research before coming to the House, and I can confirm that Hamas is a terror organisation that is proscribed by our Government for those reasons. It is really important that we are robust in our defence of the right of the state of Israel, our ally, to exist.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The people of both Israel and Palestine have been failed by their leadership, with horrific consequences. One person who knew that more than most was my constituent's father, Oded Lifschitz, whose coffin we saw paraded horrifically through the streets of Khan Yunis. We

should say his name in this place, because he dedicated his life to securing peace between Israel and Palestine. He drove ambulances over the border to help Palestinian people. We can be clear in this Chamber that withholding aid and using starvation as a weapon of war is wrong, but if we want to challenge that leadership, we must step up ourselves. The Minister previously spoke about what we are doing to try to support medical needs in Gaza. For the avoidance of doubt—may Oded's memory be a blessing, and in his cause we will follow up—can the Minister be clear that we will evacuate people who need medical assistance from Gaza to the UK?

Catherine West: The Lifschitz family have a great champion in my hon. Friend, who has come to the House and laid out in clear terms her expectation of the Government. There are certain schemes to assist families in medical emergencies. With her permission, I will write to her with the detail and the exact guidelines that are used by the Government to determine who is eligible for those schemes.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): There have now been 60,000 known deaths in Gaza. Israel is already accused by the ICJ and the ICC of war crimes, including genocidal acts, and it is now committing a new war crime by denying food and water to the people of Gaza. What will it take for the British Government to cease all arms supplies to Israel and to end the use of the RAF base in Akrotiri as a staging point for delivery to Israel? When will we end the security co-operation with Israel to make it absolutely clear that we are not prepared to support a regime that is breaking international humanitarian law in so many respects?

Catherine West: As the right hon. Member is aware, as soon as the Foreign Secretary took office he ordered a review of the compliance with international humanitarian law of various export items. Following the review, the Government suspended export licences to Israel in a number of categories, assessing where there was a clear risk that they might be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law.

As the right hon. Member will also be aware, the question of genocide is not for a Minister to determine at the Dispatch Box. Legal experts continue to look at the definitions and descriptions of acts of war, and they will come forward with their determinations over time.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am planning to run this urgent question for only about another 10 minutes, so it would be very helpful if questions were short, please.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Over recent days, we have seen the power of co-ordinated action when addressing a most challenging diplomatic, military and humanitarian crisis, yet in 17 months we have not seen a parallel in addressing the challenges over Gaza. What action is the Department taking to ensure that there is such a co-ordinated effort, and will the Foreign Secretary call such a summit?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion. The UK will certainly continue to work, as it has done, ceaselessly with Israel, the Palestinian Authority,

[*Catherine West*]

the US and regional partners to build consensus for a post-conflict Gaza governance and security framework that supports conditions for a permanent and sustainable peace. Her request has been heard in the Chamber.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): What message does the Minister think the Government send about their commitment to international aid in Gaza—and, indeed, anywhere else—by not only cutting it to 0.3%, which is its lowest level this century, but removing the ability of this House to scrutinise that cut or any remaining spend by moving ministerial responsibility for aid and development from this Chamber to the other place?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Member for her question; there will be an opportunity in the estimates debates later this week for her to ask further questions. However, as I am sure she is aware given her expertise in aid and development and in soft power, it will take some time for the comprehensive spending review to come forward with a picture of the resource implications. I know that she and her party fundamentally support the decision to look at the security of Europe and to try to make that part of the balance in our foreign policy work.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I understand that the Minister does not want to give a legal opinion, but is it not clear that banning all supplies to Gaza is a breach of the Geneva conventions and the Rome statute? Failure to call that out emboldens Israel in its collective punishment of all Gazans. Will she confirm, as it was missing from her earlier response, that when the Government finally recognise the Palestinian state, it will include not only the west bank and Gaza, but East Jerusalem as its capital?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work as the vice-chair of the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group, and for his ongoing campaigning in this area. To be clear, humanitarian aid should never be contingent on a ceasefire or used as a political tool, and Jerusalem should of course be the shared capital.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): My constituents are horrified at reports that the UK Government are not only complicit in Israeli atrocities, but have actively and directly participated in the war crimes and ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Israel. Will the Minister explain to this House what the UK's participation and role have been in the Israeli genocide and the ongoing atrocities that continue in Gaza and the west bank?

Catherine West: As I have mentioned, it is not for the Minister here, but for legal experts to determine the definition of genocide. On the role of the UK, the reason I, as the Indo-Pacific Minister, am before the House is that my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for the middle east is currently engaging in conversations and pushing for a peaceful solution. There can be nothing better than a face-to-face meeting with a Minister of His Majesty's Government in the region having those important discussions and pushing for peace.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): With almost 20,000 Palestinian children having been killed, Gaza and its people are in a state of devastation. The use of starvation as a weapon of war is a war crime. The denial of humanitarian aid is a war crime, and it leads to babies freezing to death—an example the Minister gave earlier. What specific action are the Government taking with allies to pressure the Israeli Government to comply with international law and let aid into Gaza?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work she did before she entered Parliament on aid and supporting international solutions for war-affected areas. Our work continues with our partners—Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the US and regional partners—to build consensus, because we all want to live in a world where aid is no longer necessary and there is a vibrant economy and people have jobs, schools and hospitals. That is what the UK is doing: redoubling our efforts for a post-conflict Gaza governance and security framework that supports conditions for a permanent and sustainable peace.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): It has been very frustrating to hear about this Government's practical inaction in the face of flagrant breaches of international law in the siege of Gaza, and I sincerely hope that the Government do not continue down this path of inertia. With that in mind, what steps is the Minister taking to recognise Palestine as a state immediately as part of the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders? This is surely essential to reinvigorate the peace process and deter extremists seeking perpetual conflict in Gaza, the west bank and across the middle east.

Catherine West: The hon. Member is quite right to describe what feels like a hopeless situation, but I would remind him that over the last few weeks we have seen some rays of sunlight and a few bits of hope as—hopefully—less violence is being perpetrated and more people are going back to their homes. However, he is right to push the Government and to ask what more can be done, and that includes visits to the region to speak to the interlocutors I have mentioned and to keep pushing for peace.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Of course, many of us in this House want to see progress towards a permanent two-state solution following the current ceasefire and hostage deal. In December, the Prime Minister announced that the Foreign Secretary would be convening a meeting of partners to support civil society in both Israel and Palestine. What update can the Minister provide to the House on how the UK plans to support the international forum for Israeli-Palestinian peace?

Catherine West: In the short term, Israeli military withdrawal from Gaza will be phased—all parties have agreed to that—but in time we must see the occupation end, as confidence is rebuilt in Gaza and Israel. The Palestinian Authority should play a key role in the future governance and security of Gaza. For the deal to work, we need all parties to co-operate, including on future security arrangements that protect both Israelis and Palestinians and allow the safe distribution of aid, in the vision of the two-state solution.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Despite the appalling abuse of the hostages who were released and the propaganda value made of them, in 42 days the Israeli Government have allowed 25,200 truckloads of aid into Gaza, which is enough to sustain the entire population for four months.

Iqbal Mohamed: Nonsense!

Sammy Wilson: It is a fact. The concern is that Hamas are now using aid as their major source of income and are seeking to control the billion-dollar aid industry there now is in Gaza. What assurances can the Minister give that UK aid will not be used to sustain that terrorist organisation or to control the local population?

Catherine West: If the right hon. Member is reading things online, he needs to be careful that they are correct, because while there have been recent arrivals of aid, we all know that there is a continuing need for aid. We all want to eat fresh food, we all need fresh medications, and we all need water and all those other things, and the essential aid going in needs to be refreshed every day. What we can say in this House is that providing access to essential civilian services with that aid is also crucial. I encourage him to widen his sources of reading on the access of aid into Gaza and the west bank.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Instituting an aid blockade, while getting on for 50,000 Gazans have been killed and there is a polio epidemic, surely looks as if civilian deprivation is being used as a weapon of war. What are the Government doing about that, and to ensure that the entire fragile ceasefire does not fall apart and the hostages can come home?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for specifically mentioning polio. We are very pleased to hear that the latest polio vaccination roll-out reached 99% of the children who were targeted, but we remain gravely concerned by the lack of adequate medical care in a wider sense in Gaza. All prisoners detained in Gaza, including medical staff, must be allowed full International Committee of the Red Cross access.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Other than the Minister's response to the excellent question from the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), I strongly welcome both the tone and content of the Minister's answers. It is clear that there is no justification for the vindictive and counterproductive actions of the Israeli Government, but they are clearly emboldened by the US President. In seeking to build international alliances to put pressure on the Israeli Government to change their actions and stop that vindictive behaviour, what conversations are the Government having to ensure that their view is conveyed to the United States so they can adopt the same line as we are?

Catherine West: To provide clarification on some of the ideas that have been proposed, for example on the future of Gaza, we have made it clear that we would oppose any effort to move Palestinians in Gaza to neighbouring Arab states, and the forced displacement of Palestinians or any reduction in the territory of the Gaza strip are simply not an option. I thank the hon. Gentleman for helping to keep us on track with what people in the region actually want, and for supporting around the table all partners who are pushing for a peaceful deal between the two parties.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, especially at a time of such intense suffering for so many civilians in Gaza, this use of both humanitarian assistance and aid is totally unacceptable and not conducive to a lasting ceasefire and long-term peace?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is quite right to emphasise the need for the steady inflow of aid. Anything else could potentially be a breach of international humanitarian law. What we see in peace processes are hiccups: one step forward and two steps back. We would be pushing for all parties to see this as a hiccup. I hope to wake up tomorrow morning to the happy news that all is back on track, aid is getting in, conversations are happening and that the peaceful future we all want for the two parties is becoming a reality.

Hong Kong Democracy Activists

1.43 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the bounties placed on Hong Kong democracy activists in the United Kingdom by the Chinese Communist party and other authorities in Hong Kong and China.

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question on what I agree is a very serious matter.

Security is the first duty of Government. As such, we are deeply concerned by the recent bounties placed on Hong Kong democracy activists resident here in the UK. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the Foreign Secretary issued a statement condemning those bounties. As he said at the time, the individuals were merely exercising their right to freedom of expression. As the Foreign Secretary has also said, we call on Beijing to repeal the national security law, including its extraterritorial reach. We also call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their targeting of individuals in the UK and elsewhere for seeking to exercise their basic rights. Ministers have raised those concerns with the authorities during recent visits to both Hong Kong and Beijing. The continued safety of Hong Kongers remains a priority for this Government. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual cases, but I want to be clear that we will not tolerate any attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate, harass or harm their critics overseas, especially here in the UK.

We have received assurances from counter-terror policing that the appropriate measures are in place for the individuals in question, and we regularly assess potential threats to the UK and use all available levers to counter them. Where we identify individuals at heightened risk, we are front footed in deploying protective security guidance and other measures as appropriate. Anyone—anyone—acting to coerce individuals in the UK is liable to prosecution under the National Security Act 2023. To date, there have been six individuals charged under the new Act.

The Government's position is clear: we will protect the rights and freedoms of all individuals in the UK. We will use every available power and tool to uphold the principles we hold dear.

Chris Philp: This is an incredibly serious issue. The Chinese Communist party is an authoritarian regime which has been persecuting people in Hong Kong, mainland China and elsewhere for some time. Nearly 100 people—that we know about—have been arrested for political reasons in Hong Kong since July last year. It is completely unacceptable that harassment and intimidation takes place now on British soil. It is a gross infringement of the liberty of the individuals concerned and it is an affront to British sovereignty.

Bounties, amounting to approximately £100,000 each, have apparently been placed on three people who are in the United Kingdom: Tony Chung, aged 23; Carmen Lau, aged 30; and Chloe Cheung, aged only 17. All fled Hong Kong owing to persecution. Chloe Cheung was apparently advised by the police to dial 999 if she felt under threat, which strikes me as an inadequate response. I understand that posters appeared near the home

addresses of two of those people, and that letters were posted to their neighbours, offering a reward if they were “delivered to the Chinese embassy”. That is completely unacceptable. That cannot be tolerated and robust action must be taken.

I have a couple of questions to put, respectfully, to the Security Minister. First, has the Chinese ambassador been summoned by the Foreign Secretary to the Foreign Office to have it explained to him that this is unacceptable and to ask what is being done to stop it? My understanding is that no such summons has been issued, which is unacceptable. Does that not make clear that giving the Chinese permission to build a mega-embassy in London is completely inappropriate? It will simply be used as a pan-European base for Chinese spying. Are investigations into the perpetrators under way? Why is China not being placed into the enhanced tier under the foreign influence registration scheme? Surely China should be placed into that tier as a matter of urgency. What is the update on the Chinese police stations operating covertly in the United Kingdom? I was briefed on that as Policing Minister a year or so ago. Where are we with those? Finally, the Security Minister says that we will not tolerate this happening. I am sure the whole House will agree with that, but what concrete and tangible action is being taken to prevent these outrages?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for his points and questions. Let me again, for the avoidance of doubt, be absolutely clear about the Government's position. The safety and security of Hong Kongers in the UK is of the upmost importance and the UK will always stand up for the rights of the people of Hong Kong. Wherever we identify such threats, we will use any and all measures, including through the use of our world-class intelligence services, to mitigate the risk to individuals.

The shadow Home Secretary asked a number of questions, so I shall attempt to respond to them. First, he asked about raising concerns with the Chinese authorities. I can tell him that concerns have been raised at every opportunity, including by the Foreign Secretary and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), who has met with the families of the individuals involved.

Secondly, he raised a point about the Chinese embassy. A final decision on China's planning application for a new embassy has yet to be made. As I am sure he will be aware, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in her independent, quasi-judicial role, will make the final decision in due course. However, the House should be aware that a joint letter sent by the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary to the Planning Inspectorate on 14 January outlines that the Home Office, working with the Foreign Office, has considered the full breadth of national security issues in relation to this planning application. In the joint letter, the Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary also made it clear that they would want to see the implementation of suitable mitigations for any public order and national security risks before China was permitted to build a new embassy at the Royal Mint Court site.

Thirdly, the shadow Home Secretary asked about overseas police stations. As I am sure he will understand, the police have carefully examined these allegations. We

have made clear to the Chinese authorities that the existence of undeclared sites in the UK is completely unacceptable and that their operations must cease, and the Chinese authorities have confirmed that they have been closed.

Fourthly, he asked about FIRS. As he will be aware, I am due to make a statement shortly that will include an update on the implementation of FIRS, so I will not get ahead of myself. However, I will say that FIRS strengthens the resilience of the UK political system against covert foreign influence and provides greater assurances on the activities of certain foreign powers or entities that are a national security risk. As a result, the UK will be better informed about the nature, scale and extent of foreign influence in this country.

As I am sure he will be aware, since coming to power in July, we have ensured that more people than ever are now working on FIRS implementation. The case management team have been recruited and are in place in dedicated accommodation, and an IT system has been identified and a contract signed for its delivery. We plan to lay before the House the regulations underpinning the scheme shortly ahead of the scheme going live in the summer.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I also spoke to Chloe Cheung this morning, and I want to reiterate what the shadow Home Secretary has said. I want to ask the Minister whether guidance can be given to police forces, not only to give reassurance to Hongkongers who have a bounty on them or threats made against them, but to carry out target hardening and security work to ensure that Hongkongers are safe in their own homes in the UK and not under threat of abduction. It is a real, serious and live threat, and we need to do more than just tell people to call 999.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that important point. I can reiterate what I have said specifically in this case, which is that we sought and received assurances from counter-terror policing that the appropriate measures were in place for the individuals in question.

On his broader, important point on transnational repression, I can tell my hon. Friend and the House that the defending democracy taskforce is reviewing the UK's approach to transnational repression to ensure we have a robust and joined-up response across Government and law enforcement. The Government will update on the conclusions of that work in due course.

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

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for raising these appalling incidents. I also thank him on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), whose constituents have been affected and have received some of these letters.

For me, these incidents are a reminder of the pernicious threat we all face as the Chinese Government try to infiltrate every level of British society. I have been filmed by a drone while filming at a pro-Hong Kong democracy rally in Edinburgh; Members have been sanctioned by the CCP; secret police stations have operated across the UK, including in Glasgow; there is the issue of the embassy in London; and the attempts of

Chinese companies to be involved in our energy provision in a way that, if not mitigated, will threaten our energy security and national security. The list grows longer almost daily. We must strengthen and make clear our response to China and stop more of our citizens and brave activists being threatened on British soil.

How will the Government bring these bounty hunters to justice? Will they enforce Magnitsky sanctions to crack down on those in Hong Kong and Beijing who are responsible for this and every other insidious attack on our freedoms and democracy?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those questions. I can reiterate the points I have made previously about how these concerns have been raised at every opportunity and about how seriously the UK Government take these matters. We will use all the tools at our disposal to ensure that everybody who lives in this United Kingdom can go about their lawful business uninhibited by the activities of those in other countries. We take this matter incredibly seriously, and we are working at pace to ensure that every protection is in place.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): Since the launch of the British nationals overseas visa route for Hongkongers, more than 209,000 people have been granted a visa, of whom more than 150,000 have arrived in the UK, including in my community in Erewash. I welcome the Government's continuing support for Hongkongers. What steps is the Immigration Minister taking to support the integration of those coming into the UK via the BNO route?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important point. He will understand that the BNO route reflects the UK's historical and moral commitment to the people of Hong Kong who chose to retain their ties to the UK by taking up this status at the point of Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997. I am sure he will be aware that to be eligible for this route, applicants must have BNO status or be the eligible family member of someone with this status.

Since the route opened in January 2021, close to 220,000 visas have been granted to Hongkongers, who are making much-valued contributions to communities across the UK, including in his constituency. We will work closely with those constituencies and local authority areas to ensure that all those people feel properly valued and supported. If my hon. Friend has any specific concerns, I am happy to meet him to discuss them further.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): First, I want to say that one of the proudest things I was able to achieve over the past few years was the BNO visa route, which was a correct correction of a mistake made by this House nearly 40 years ago. I am grateful that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who was in her place as shadow Foreign Secretary a few moments ago, was able to introduce it when she was Home Secretary. The support I received from the Minister at the time was also gratefully received.

Turning to the threat to activists, as someone who is sanctioned and who occasionally gets letters to my home and text messages from random Hong Kong and

[Tom Tugendhat]

Beijing numbers, I can only imagine how much more threatening that activity would be if I had connections or relatives in Hong Kong and mainland China. Will the Minister assure me that he is advertising as widely as possible the role of the counter-terrorism police in fighting not just terrorism, but the state threats that are appearing before us? The reality is, we do not expect war today to take its old nature of massed armies or invasions. We are instead seeing a pernicious undermining of the confidence in the British state and the credibility of our ability to protect our citizens and friends, which, in turn, undermines not just our position, but our economy and the freedom of our citizens.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the work he did in government. He raises some important and valid points. Let me say, first of all, that the matter of sanctioned Members of this House is something that we take incredibly seriously. The Foreign Secretary has personally raised his concerns about it at the highest levels. We will continue to keep it under very close review.

The right hon. Member made some other important points. I hope he will join me in welcoming the additional resource that the Prime Minister announced the other day for our operational partners and the intelligence services. He will know from his previous service what a hugely important role they fulfil in keeping our country safe. He knows, too, the seriousness that we attach to these matters, and I look forward to continuing to work with him on a cross-party basis to ensure that we maintain our national security.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): The director general of MI5 has highlighted the increasing risk of state actors operating in the UK. What steps is the Minister taking to support MI5 in protecting the UK from these intrusions?

Dan Jarvis: This provides us with a very good opportunity to pay tribute as a House—I hope collectively—to the extraordinary work of our operational partners and the security services. By the very nature of their work, they serve in the shadows. It has been an extraordinary pleasure and privilege to work very closely alongside them in recent months. They do difficult work, but they do it incredibly well, and we owe them a debt of gratitude for doing it.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I hear what the Minister says. As somebody who is sanctioned by the Chinese Government, who has been pursued by low-level intelligence operatives around the world, and who, like others in Governments elsewhere, has had falsehoods about me placed in newspapers, I can say that this goes on and on. Most of all, for those who have fled here from Hong Kong, what we are seeing is extraterritorial attacks in plain view, yet it seems that, ultimately, nothing ever happens. I have here a copy of a redacted letter about an individual who has been threatened. His neighbours have been offered a bounty if they hand him in to the Chinese embassy. I ask how much longer will we keep on saying all these wonderful words in this House about what we stand for, because when it comes to those who need our protection,

nothing ever seems to happen. What will the Minister do about the embassy? Wherever China has a super-embassy in the world, we see extraterritorial activity grow massively. Will he now reject that and start arresting the people responsible and kicking them out of the country?

Dan Jarvis: I know the right hon. Gentleman speaks with long experience on these matters. The Government are crystal clear that the activity that he has just described is not acceptable. We will do everything that we can to prevent it from taking place. He referred to the embassy. As I think he knows—I know that he has raised specific concerns about this previously—a decision on the embassy will be made by the Deputy Prime Minister in her capacity as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. I refer him to the letter that has been written jointly by the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, which takes into account the full breadth—[*Interruption.*] The shadow Home Secretary tuts from a sedentary position. I do not know whether he has read the letter, which is available online. He should read it, because it takes into consideration the full breadth of national security concerns. This Government will stand against all those who seek to repress others or behave in the way that he has described, and use all the tools at our disposal to stop it from happening.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Across the UK, including in Exeter, where we have a very large and welcome Hongkonger community, we have seen rising threats from state actors who seek to influence and intimidate peaceful dissidents. Will the Minister update the House on how the foreign influence registration scheme will help to tackle these threats?

Dan Jarvis: I do not want to get too far ahead of myself, as I will be making a statement shortly. I can say that we are working at pace to implement the FIR scheme. This is an important tool in the Government's armoury. It will strengthen the resilience of the UK political system against covert foreign influence, and it will provide greater assurance around the activities of certain foreign powers and entities that we know to be a national security risk. We are getting on with the work, and we plan to lay the regulations that underpin the scheme in the near future, ahead of it going live in the summer.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a privilege to represent a substantial community of Hongkongers in Richmond Park. I notice from *Hansard* that I was last here two months ago to ask the Government about renewed reports of repression against Hongkongers in this country, yet here we are again and nothing has been done to reassure my constituents about their continued safety and security in this country. I was interested in the Minister's response to the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), who talked about reviewing transnational repression. I urge him to give us some more detail about when we in this House, and my constituents in Richmond Park, can expect to hear more about what the Government plan to do about this.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Let me give her an absolute assurance that we take these matters incredibly seriously. That is why, through the defending democracy taskforce, which I chair, we have

continued a process that was initiated by the previous Government to review the issue of transnational repression. For the sake of clarity, I can say to her that any attempt by any foreign Government to coerce, intimidate, harass or harm critics overseas, which undermines our democracy and the rule of law, is completely unacceptable. We have at our disposal now the National Security Act 2023, which enables law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies to deter, detect and disrupt the full range of modern-day state threats, including actions that amount to transnational repression. As I say, the defending democracy taskforce is looking very carefully at the issue of transnational repression. There has been a lot of work taking place across Government, and we will have more to say about it shortly.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Birmingham has a large and growing community of people from Hong Kong. Although most are now well settled in the wider community, some of my constituents are fearful about continued monitoring and surveillance, especially if they speak out on human rights. Will the Minister give me and my constituents an assurance that if they are subject to those utterly unacceptable practices, they will receive protection and support?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and for his representation of his constituents. Yes, I can give him that assurance. Hopefully, my comments today convey the seriousness that we attach to this particular issue. We work incredibly closely with counter-terrorism policing, policing right around the country, operational partners and the intelligence services, and I can absolutely give him the assurances that he seeks on behalf of his constituents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to our questions. The activity of Chinese operatives on our shores has to stop. No steps taken thus far have deterred the Chinese from overstepping the mark on our shores. If those who legally and peacefully oppose China are not safe here, just where are they safe? Putting bounties on people's heads sounds like something from a film, but this is real life for those living lawfully in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland right now. What will the Minister do to tell China that the line has been crossed and that there will be consequences?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful, as I always am, to the hon. Member. He has a long-standing track record of standing up for repressed minorities wherever they might be. Clearly, that is particularly relevant in the context of today's urgent question. He will have heard my opening remarks, in which I referred to the statement that had been issued by the Foreign Secretary specifically condemning the bounties, and in which he called on Beijing to repeal its national security law, including its territorial reach. We take these matters incredibly seriously. We are working with the police and local communities and will do everything we can to make sure that people get the support that they deserve.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I want to come back to the embassy. I have been contacted by several constituents on this matter. At 700,000 square feet, it would be China's largest embassy in Europe. As we know from the incident at the Manchester consulate in 2022, such

an embassy would be contributing to the transnational repression that Hongkongers, Tibetans and the wider Chinese diaspora in the UK experience. Have the Government made an assessment of whether this new super-embassy would contribute to transnational repression and, if so, on what basis has that assessment been made?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend's question has been asked by others. I assure him that national security is the overriding priority for this and, I hope, any Government. We look incredibly carefully at these matters. We will consider every aspect of this application, which ultimately is to be decided on by the Deputy Prime Minister. But as I have said, both the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary have written a very clear letter—I invite those Members who appear not necessarily to have read it to do so—and I can tell him and the House that the letter covers the full breadth of national security issues in relation to this planning application.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Minister is talking about the national security position in relation to the super-embassy. In January the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary wrote a letter about the application to the Deputy Prime Minister, who has to make the decision. In the light of the new information that has become available, will the Minister review that letter and take advice on whether the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary should be writing to the Deputy Prime Minister to recommend that the planning application is refused, rather than taking all these things into account?

Dan Jarvis: I understand the concerns that the hon. Member has raised. He will understand that I have already referred to the letter that was written back in January. If new evidence comes to light that is material to the planning application, no doubt that will be looked at very closely both by the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, but I can assure him and the House that we take these matters incredibly seriously and look very closely at them. The letter that was written on 14 January does consider the full breadth of national security implications.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Hong Kong.

I welcome the Minister's recognition that the bounties on the heads of these British Hongkongers are for exercising rights guaranteed to them under the joint declaration. I do not wish to repeat what other right hon. and hon. Members have said, but at some point, when Ministers come to the House again and again to talk about the infiltration of the royal family by Chinese agents, the putting of bounties on people's heads or secret police stations, there have to be consequences for the relationship with China.

I have a practical question. The fear felt by those who have bounties on their heads here is nothing compared with those who remain in Hong Kong who fear that they may not be able to leave. What practical assistance can we give to Hongkongers who have had either their BNO passport seized or other travel documents frozen, so that they are able to come to the safety of the United Kingdom?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work through the APPG and his long-standing interest in this particular matter, and for his practical question. BNO status holders and their families are making significant contributions to our economy and local communities. He asked an important question about passports. I can assure him that there is no requirement for a person's passport to be valid in order for them to apply to extend leave or for indefinite leave to remain under the BNO route. I know that colleagues in the Foreign Office will have heard his point about those who remain in Hong Kong, but I would be happy to discuss it further with him should that be helpful.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Intimidating pro-democracy Hongkongers living in the UK, placing them on a wanted list and circulating reward notices to their neighbours is simply unforgivable. I am sure that the Minister will agree that no trade deal is worth subverting our values and allowing the rights of our people to be abused in such an appalling fashion. What discussions has his Department had directly with the Chinese ambassador? What has the ambassador been told the consequences will be for those found to be responsible? What is the status of the current investigation, or does everybody just accept that this matter is now closed?

Dan Jarvis: I understand why the hon. Gentleman raises these concerns in the way that he does. I hope that he will be reassured that the UK Government, especially the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, take these matters seriously and take every opportunity to raise these concerns at the appropriate level. We will continue to do everything that we can to protect the public in our country.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): At the recent lunar new year celebrations, I met democracy activists who have had bounties placed on them. The fear in the room was palpable. People chose not to attend the event so that they would not be photographed with people who have a bounty on their head. I fear that that chilling effect is already very real. I thank the Minister for confirming that transnational repression is being looked at by the defending democracy taskforce, but could he give us a bit more detail on the practical measures that can be put in place now to better protect those in the UK with a bounty on their head, and their family members still in Hong Kong, for whom they are deeply concerned, given the possible knock-on effects for them?

Dan Jarvis: I completely understand my hon. Friend's point about the fear felt, and the chilling effect that I am certain there will be in a number of communities. He has asked me for practical measures; I gently ask him to be a little patient, because I will have more to say about these matters very soon.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Government and Opposition Members have asked the Minister several times whether the Chinese ambassador has been summoned to be held to account for these actions. This House deserves an answer from the Minister. A lot of these people face kidnap plots. What investigations are being undertaken into those?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman will know from his time in government that, in the first instance, these matters will relate to the ambassador in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I can give him the same assurances that I previously gave: the UK Government take these matters incredibly seriously and raise them at every opportunity. He asked about investigations; the police are working incredibly hard alongside operational partners, and will investigate all these matters, using the appropriate resource, in order to bring perpetrators to justice and ensure that victims are provided with the support that they need and deserve.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Today I spoke with Chloe Cheung, the youngest person to be sanctioned under the national security law. I know that she will be pleased to have been at least referenced by Members on both sides of the House. Chloe conveyed to me the anxieties and concerns of the Leeds Hong Kong community, which were not new to me, given the conversations that I have been having with that community, who form a substantial part of my constituency.

I understand that the Minister cannot comment on specific cases, so I have two general questions. First, can the Government give a cast-iron guarantee that any future trade deals with China will not compromise the protections that we have offered Hongkongers living in the UK? My second question is about MI5. Will the Government consider facilitating a meeting between MI5 and those Hongkongers who have had a bounty put on their head as a result of the national security law, to ensure that robust protections are in place for those who have been sanctioned?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is an assiduous constituency MP. He has raised the plight of his constituent previously in this House, and I am grateful to him for doing so. On his first point, national security is the first priority of this Government. His second point is probably more a matter for counter-terrorism police and West Yorkshire police, but I have heard what he said, and I will take it away and come back to him with a fuller response.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I thank the shadow Home Secretary for securing the urgent question. I am lucky enough to represent, in my constituency, one of the largest Hong Kong communities, and they tell me that the proposed Chinese super-embassy is a chilling prospect for Hongkongers who have moved to our country to escape repression in Hong Kong. As we all understand, the decision is with the Deputy Prime Minister at the moment, but surely the Minister agrees that it is unconscionable that a foreign state should be allowed to massively enhance its operations in this country while it flagrantly conducts extrajudicial acts on the streets of the UK. Does he agree that if permission is given, it would undermine any assurances given that foreign states will be held to account for hostile actions targeting British residents on British soil?

Dan Jarvis: Given the hon. Member's strong constituency interest, I completely understand why he raises those concerns. I hope that he and other hon. Members will understand that, from a national security perspective, we take these matters incredibly seriously.

There is a limit to what I can say about the specifics of this case, but let me put this in a slightly more diplomatic way than I might normally seek to. There seems to be something of a misunderstanding about the circumstances of this case. I give the hon. Member an absolute assurance that we look incredibly carefully at these matters, and some of the suggestions that have been made are not correct. A process is under way, and I am legally bound not to interfere with it. No hon. Member would expect me to do so, but I point him again to the very carefully considered letter written by the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, which includes reference to the full breadth of national security issues to do with this application.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that the Joint Committee on Human Rights is conducting an inquiry on the important issue of transnational repression. Will he commit to looking very carefully at any recommendations that come from that inquiry, so we can ensure that we have the correct measures in place to uphold the fundamental British values of democracy here in the UK and, of course, safeguard our national security?

Dan Jarvis: I know about the Joint Committee on Human Rights inquiry; in fact, I believe that I am due to give evidence to it. I can absolutely give my hon. Friend an assurance that we will look carefully at the findings of that important piece of work. I have written to the Committee Chair about it, and I look forward to meeting the Committee and giving evidence. I look forward to progressing the work through the defending

democracy taskforce, so that we can say more about the work against transnational repression that the Government intend to do.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I recently met Jimmy Lai's son Sebastien and his legal team, and I was horrified to hear that his UK legal team from Doughty Street Chambers recently faced a concerted and co-ordinated campaign against them, including intimidation, surveillance, hacking of bank accounts and rape threats aimed at their children. It appears that the Chinese state is now undermining our legal system.

The Minister has repeated at the Dispatch Box that the Government will take all steps to prevent persecution of Hong Kong nationals in the UK. Will he support the call from me and my hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) for high-profile visits by UK and Chinese officials in our respective countries to be paused until the security situation is resolved?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising the case of Jimmy Lai. I too have met Sebastien Lai. Jimmy Lai's case is a priority for the Government, and we have made that clear in our engagements with China. We call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their politically motivated prosecution and immediately release Jimmy Lai. The Prime Minister raised his case with President Xi at the G20 summit in November; the Foreign Secretary raised it with China's Foreign Minister in October; and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), raised it with Hong Kong officials during her visit to Hong Kong in November.

Iranian State Threats

2.24 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the growing threat to the UK from Iran, and the steps that the Government are taking to combat this threat. [HON. MEMBERS: “Welcome back!”] It is a pleasure to be back.

The threat from Iran sits in the wider context of the growing, diversifying and evolving threat that the UK faces from malign activity by a number of states. The threat from states has become increasingly interconnected in nature; the lines are blurring between domestic and international, online and offline, and states and their proxies. In the last year, the number of state-threat investigations run by MI5 jumped by 48%. That statistic is a stark indication of the increased threat.

I turn to Iran. The regime has become increasingly emboldened, and is asserting itself more aggressively to advance its objectives and undermine ours. That is evidenced by the fact that direct action against UK targets has substantially increased over recent years. The director general of MI5 recently stated that since the start of 2022, the UK has responded to 20 Iran-backed plots presenting potentially lethal threats to British citizens and UK residents. The Iranian regime is targeting dissidents, and media organisations and journalists reporting on the regime’s violent oppression. It is also no secret that there is a long-standing pattern of the Iranian intelligence services targeting Jewish and Israeli people internationally. It is clear that these plots are a conscious strategy of the Iranian regime to stifle criticism through intimidation and fear. These threats are unacceptable. They must and will be defended against at every turn.

It is testament to our world-leading law enforcement and intelligence services that, through their tireless commitment, so many plots have been thwarted. I am sure that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the brave men and women of our law enforcement and intelligence agencies, who work day in, day out, to keep us safe.

To tackle this threat, we must understand it. The Iranian intelligence services, which include the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, direct this damaging activity, but often, rather than working directly on UK shores, they use criminal proxies to do their bidding. That helps to obfuscate their involvement, while they are safely ensconced in Tehran. We see that in intelligence, but we also saw it publicly in the 2023 conviction of the Chechen-born Austrian national who was imprisoned for conducting surveillance on Iran International’s UK headquarters.

These threats are not only physical in nature. The National Cyber Security Centre has seen malicious cyber-activity, conducted by actors who are affiliated with the Iranian state, that targets a range of state sectors, including in the UK. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that our intelligence and law enforcement agencies have the tools that they need to disrupt and degrade the threats that we face from Iran, so I can announce today that we will place the whole of the Iranian state, including Iran’s intelligence services, the IRGC and MOIS, on the enhanced tier of the new foreign influence registration scheme. The FIRS is a critical disruptive tool for the UK.

This action will mean that those who are directed by Iran to conduct activities in the UK, such as criminal proxies, must register that activity, whatever it is, or face five years in prison. They will face a choice: expose their actions to the Government or face jail. The Home Office will lay regulations before Parliament as soon as possible, with a view to having the scheme up and running by the summer.

On proscription, as hon. Members will know, we do not routinely comment on groups that are being considered for proscription, but I assure the House that we do and will continue to keep the list of groups considered under constant review. However, it has become increasingly clear that there are challenges inherent in applying our existing counter-terror legislation to state and state-linked threats to our national security. That challenge was first raised by the Home Secretary in opposition. She warned of a lack of a comprehensive strategic approach for state threats to mirror that adopted on terrorism, and the specific difficulties of using on state bodies a proscription mechanism that was designed for groups such as al-Qaeda.

We are progressing work at pace to address that challenge, so I can announce today that Jonathan Hall KC has been asked to review the parts of our counter-terrorism framework that could be applied to modern-day state threats, such as those from Iran. That includes giving specific consideration to the design of a proscription mechanism for state and state-linked bodies, providing more flexibility than is offered under the existing powers. As the independent reviewer of both state threats legislation and terrorism legislation, Mr Hall is perfectly placed to undertake the review and we are grateful to him for agreeing to provide that advice.

Let there be no doubt: we are utterly determined to stay ahead of those who threaten our country, and any step that could aid us in that critical endeavour will be considered. The UK is not alone in facing such threats. States across the western world are threatened by Iran, so we will work with our allies to better understand, expose and condemn Iranian actions and bring Iranian-linked criminals to justice wherever in the world they may be.

We regularly collaborate with our Five Eyes and European partners to protect our democracies from hostile Iranian attack. Here at home we are going further too. The National Security Act 2023, which was supported on both sides of the House, has given the police new powers to target evolving activity. For example, the Act criminalises assisting a foreign intelligence service, such as the IRGC or MOIS. The maximum penalty for those offences is 14 years in prison, which is the same as the maximum for a proscription offence.

I can also announce that training and guidance on state threats activity is now being offered by counter-terrorism policing to all 45 territorial police forces across the UK. That will mean that when any frontline officer encounters a suspected state threats incident, they will know what to do and what to look for to ensure that our communities are kept safe. Furthermore, we have recently issued guidance on the National Security Act and how it applies to the UK security profession, including private investigators. That ensures that they are aware of the law and understand where they might be criminally liable if they were working for any foreign power such as Iran.

We will also continue to go after the criminal networks and enablers that Iran uses to carry out its work. The leader of the Zindashti organised crime group—a group frequently used by the Iranian regime—has already been sanctioned. We will explore further sanctions against other Iranian-linked criminals, and the National Crime Agency will target those who assist the IRGC and others to launder their money.

Alongside the recently launched Border Security Command, which strengthens Britain's border security and disrupts criminal smuggling gangs, I have asked officials to consider new ways to enforce our robust immigration rules to specifically address threats from Iran. That work will focus on further protecting the UK from Iranian infiltration, including those who promote Iranian interference in the UK.

I am clear that our response must be a UK-wide effort, so I welcome the Charity Commission's statutory inquiries into both the Islamic Centre of England and the Al-Tawheed Charitable Trust. I have also asked officials to review where any Iranian interference is being conducted in the UK, and FIRS will shine more light on any undisclosed relationships between the Iranian state and UK-based institutions and individuals.

Finally, the National Protective Security Authority and counter-terrorism policing will continue to provide protective security advice and support to individuals and organisations threatened by the Iranian regime and its criminal proxies, including Persian-language media organisations and their employees. We will also continue to maintain funding for protective security measures to synagogues, Jewish community centres and schools, ensuring that we do all we can to keep our Jewish communities safe.

In a dangerous, volatile world, Britain must lead the way. That means proudly promoting our values and straining every sinew to keep our people safe. The measures I have set out today should reassure the House and the public about our unflinching commitment to those objectives. Under this Government, security will be the foundation on which everything else is built. We will resist attacks on our way of life as vigorously as we counter threats to life, whatever their source. We will work relentlessly to root out those intent on causing harm on our streets, and we will do whatever it takes to protect our country and our democracy. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.35 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the Security Minister, once again, for his courtesy in giving me advance sight of his statement. The House should be in no doubt about how serious the threat posed by Iran is. Iran sponsors terror organisations across the middle east. It is an enthusiastic and significant supporter of Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen and it backs Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria. Those organisations kidnap, murder, rape and commit terrorist atrocities. Without Iran's support, those terror organisations would not be able to operate in the way that they do. Iran therefore bears a heavy burden of responsibility for enabling those terrorist actors to perpetrate atrocities.

Let us not forget that Iran is also an enthusiastic supporter of Putin's murderous regime and its invasion of Ukraine. Iran supplies drone technology to Russia and more recently, according to the Foreign Secretary, has supplied ballistic missiles to Russia, which are being used in furtherance of their illegal and barbaric invasion. There is no question that Iran is a hostile state; it promotes terrorism, undermines freedom and undermines democracy. We have recently seen actions by Iran on British soil and journalists being harassed to the point that one media organisation had to relocate its activities—thankfully, only temporarily—from London to New York. That is completely unacceptable.

We of course support the Government in the listing of Iran in the enhanced tier of FIRS, and we will support the relevant statutory instrument when it comes before Parliament. I am glad that the National Security Act 2023 is being used, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat)—I see he is in his place—for his work in putting that Act on the statute book.

Having welcomed this move, I have some questions, however, which are essentially in this vein: is merely requiring registration a strong enough sanction? I put it to the House that it is not, because under FIRS all that is required is registration, and that alone is not enough. We saw our allies, the United States, in 2019 designate the IRGC as a terror organisation; we saw our Canadian allies do the same just last year. Yet I have heard nothing on proscription.

The Minister said they do not comment on proscription, but the Home Secretary did comment on it in January 2023, when in opposition, and in unequivocal terms:

“The IRGC is behaving like a terror organisation and must be proscribed as such.”

She then said in April 2024 that she would like to make changes to the legal architecture. Yet it is only today that the Security Minister has announced the review by Jonathan Hall. Why has it taken seven months to initiate a review, which the now Home Secretary talked about nearly a year ago?

Then we come to the views of Jonathan Hall himself, because he said—coincidentally, also in April 2024—that the National Security Act 2023 is good enough for the purposes of dealing with Iran. My question to the Security Minister is this: who is right? Is it the Home Secretary, who in 2023 called for outright proscription? Is it the Home Secretary, who in 2024 called for a change in the law about which nothing appears to have been done until today? Or is it Jonathan Hall, who said also in April 2024 that the National Security Act is sufficient? There is some confusion about the Government's position, which seems to have moved over time, so clarification on that would be welcome. Why is the Home Secretary not introducing outright proscription, as she said she would do in 2023?

More needs to be done to counter the threat posed by Iran on our shores. The Security Minister hinted at this towards the end of his statement. For example, are there more diplomats that we could expel who might be undertaking espionage activities or directing some of the activity on British soil? I see that the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention—my successor as Policing Minister—the right hon. Member for Kingston

[Chris Philp]

upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), is in her place. Is there more that the police could do to investigate this activity?

Are we doing enough to provide protective security to potential victims of this activity? It was, in my view, completely unacceptable that the independent Iranian dissident media group had to move temporarily to New York. We should make sure that no one has to move again as a result of these threats. And are we using sanctions enough? The Security Minister mentioned this in his statement, but should we be using more sanctions against individuals in the Iranian regime and organisations that are part of the Iranian security apparatus? I think we should, and we should certainly be using the levers at the Home Office's disposal, such as visa sanctions—that is to say, not issuing entry visas to people we suspect of being complicit in these activities, or denying visas to high-ranking or other well-connected Iranian officials to act as a deterrent.

The Security Minister talked about the wider context of hostile state threats. He said in the previous urgent question that he would address in this statement the question of whether China should be placed in the enhanced FIRS tier—

Dan Jarvis *indicated dissent.*

Chris Philp: Well, he said he would address it, and eagle-eyed Members will notice that he did not address it, so I will ask him the question directly now and there will be no avoidance because there is no further statement. Will he place China in the enhanced tier of FIRS? Will he please confirm that to the House, because I think all of us would support him if he did?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for the points he has raised, which I will endeavour to work through. First, let me agree with his characterisation of the Iranian regime. I hope there is no disagreement among us about that, which is precisely why it is right that we proceed with the measures I have described today. He was right to mention the National Security Act 2023, a landmark piece of legislation—I pay tribute to all those who were involved in it, including my predecessor, the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat). It is an incredibly useful tool that is already delivering and making a significant contribution to our national security. It is a mechanism that we will continue to use and also to build on.

Perhaps the shadow Home Secretary will forgive me if I suggest that he was seeking to make a bit of mischief over the issue of proscription—heaven forbid. He will understand, because this was the case when he was a Minister in the Department, that Governments do not comment on organisations or entities that are being considered for proscription. He knows that is a long-standing protocol and will understand very well the reasons for it. He would not expect me to break from that long-standing precedent today, and I am not going to.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to comments made previously by the Home Secretary. The Home Secretary, when in opposition, absolutely rightly identified the challenge that we are now seeking to address in government. I know that there is huge respect for Mr Hall. Clearly, he is independent of the Government and

supremely well qualified. He is a credible and authoritative figure who is perfectly placed to look at the legislative framework and give advice independently to the Home Secretary about how best to proceed, given our concern that the architecture that is in place is better geared towards a terrorist entity—an organisation such as al-Qaeda, for example—than to a state-backed entity. I think that is entirely the right way to proceed. We will obviously look very closely at Mr Hall's findings. I am very happy to discuss them further with the shadow Home Secretary and others, and of course we will give a further update to the House as soon as possible.

The right hon. Gentleman entirely reasonably asked what more could be done. Again, as a former Home Office Minister he will completely understand that there are lots of things that we are doing that we are not going to talk about, and he will understand the reason for that, but I can give him the assurance that we are doing everything we possibly can to combat the threat that we all know we face.

The right hon. Gentleman also made an important point about protective security. Again, we take that matter very seriously; it has been tested on numerous occasions in recent years. He will understand that the Home Office works closely with other Government Departments, as well as with the relevant agencies and law enforcement, to ensure that we are providing the proper protection for those individuals who have been identified as at risk, and that the police and the security services work tirelessly to investigate those threats and to take other steps to ensure the safety of those concerned. Tailored, protective advice is offered to those individuals considered to face specific threats and, where necessary, more extensive security options can be put into effect.

Finally, the shadow Home Secretary—again, slightly mischievously—sought to infer that I had made a commitment in my previous response, but that was not quite the case. He will understand that announcements about FIRS will be made in this House. Today's announcement specifically relates to the decision that we have taken on Iran; it is specifically about that country, and other announcements that are made with regard to FIRS will be made in due course.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the Minister for his statement and also for his unwavering commitment to addressing the threat posed by the Iranian regime here in the UK, particularly to our Jewish communities. I have heard evidence of the IRGC operating on British campuses, seeking to radicalise our students; operating charities to pursue its malign aims; and plotting to murder people on Britain's streets. Can the Minister reassure the House that the review of proscription and state threats will be expedited, and that he will do whatever is necessary to protect Britain from this growing threat?

Dan Jarvis: I know that my hon. Friend has a long-standing interest in these matters, and I can give him the assurances that he seeks. I completely agree that the kind of disruption and interference that he has described—whether that is in universities, on students, or through charities—is completely and utterly unacceptable. He specifically asked me about the review of state threats that the Home Secretary has commissioned Mr Hall to undertake. He will understand, as will other Members, that Mr Hall is extremely efficient and well organised.

He understands the importance of this work, and he is getting on with it at pace. We are keen to work with him and make sure that he has all the support that he requires, and I anticipate that he will be able to complete that work quickly.

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

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement. The Liberal Democrats of course welcome the steps he has outlined and recognise the existential threat that Iran now poses not only to Israel but to western democracies, including here in the UK. Last year, the head of MI5, Ken McCallum, laid bare this very serious threat—Iran and other nations such as Russia intensifying their efforts to interfere in all aspects of British life, including the 20 plots backed by the “emboldened” Iranian Government, as he described them, that MI5 has identified in the past three years.

Of course we welcome the placing of the whole Iranian state on the FIRS enhanced tier, and that will include Iran’s revolutionary guard, which is a vital part of the infrastructure that makes Iran’s Government such a threat, acting as it does with impunity, supplying terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, and contributing so much to the tension and violence across the middle east. If we are to achieve lasting peace, it is also essential to curtail the influence and threat of Iran to the west.

We welcome the review by Mr Hall that has been outlined. I am glad to hear that the Government continue to keep the list of proscribed groups under review, but I hope that a decision on the IRGC will come sooner rather than later. I would like to hear how we will strengthen sanction regimes to start tackling the influence of Iran. The measures announced today are a welcome start, but we stand ready to support sanctions, and I hope the Government will go further and faster.

I am pleased to see the Government working closely with territorial police forces across the United Kingdom to give officers at all levels the skills and confidence to identify these threats on our own shores, particularly those to communities that remain vulnerable, so I also welcome the reference to the threat faced by our Jewish communities across the country and the rising tensions on our streets. I hope the Minister can outline how his Department will work with the Community Security Trust and other groups to keep all Jewish communities safe at a time when those abroad seek to undermine our whole country. We must not let them succeed.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member is absolutely right that we must not let them succeed, and we will not. She is also completely right about the existential nature of the threat. The 20 plots that she referenced—in the threat lecture by the director general of MI5 towards the end of last year—illustrate the scale of the challenge.

I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s support for the specific announcement today on FIRS and for her acknowledgment of the work that we seek to do with Mr Hall in looking carefully at the legislative framework. We keep matters relating to proscription under constant review. She is right to mention sanctions. I can assure her that we work incredibly closely with partners in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

I am grateful, as I know other Members will be, for the hon. Lady’s reference to the importance of ensuring that we work cross-party to protect Jewish communities around the country. She mentioned the Community Security Trust. It is an organisation that will be well known to Members across this House. It is incredibly professional and delivers massive value to communities right around the country, and we will continue to work closely with it.

I just want to make one further reference. I spoke earlier about the landmark nature of the National Security Act—it is a measure for which we are truly grateful. I also want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the contribution made by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) in introducing that landmark piece of legislation—it is not forgotten.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the action that this Government are taking to counter the malign influence of Iran on Britain’s streets. Given the wide range of threats from hostile state actors, including Iran, it is vital that we take effective action to protect critical national infrastructure from cyber-attacks. Will the Minister update us on plans announced in the King’s Speech last year for a new Bill on cyber-resilience and on the other action being taken to improve our protections in this area?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend raises an important threat vector that is not often commented on. I can tell him that the National Cyber Security Centre assessed that Iran is an aggressive and capable cyber-actor, with a number of powerful disruptive and destructive tools at its disposal. As he will understand, the NCSC continues to work closely with Government, industry and international partners to mitigate the cyber-threat from Iran. It is something that we take seriously and that we are working across Government to counter.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Minister agree that this is at least one area where our co-operation with the United States can continue on the basis of a common mutual interest, given President Trump’s extremely strong attitude to the abuses carried out by the Iranian regime? Is the Minister aware—I think he probably is—that during the previous Parliament the Intelligence and Security Committee completed the classified version of a major report on Iran and all its activities? Does he look forward, like me, to the redaction process being completed soon, so that we can all benefit from the findings of that report?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful, as always, to the right hon. Gentleman because he always adds a significant amount of wisdom to proceedings, and I appreciate it. I agree about the importance of our relationship with the United States and that we absolutely have a mutual interest with colleagues in the new Administration. The Prime Minister discussed the matter with President Trump on his recent visit to Washington. I am aware of the report by the Intelligence and Security Committee in the previous Parliament that the right hon. Gentleman referenced. I wrote to the Committee this morning outlining the measures that I have announced today. I look forward to working closely with the Committee to ensure that

[Dan Jarvis]

we can collectively derive the benefits of the report. I am grateful to him and previous Members for the work they have done.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his reference to money laundering. He will know full well the extent to which Iran uses illicit financial networks to evade sanctions and to fund hostile activities. Will the Minister update us on what the Government are doing to follow the money and disrupt those money laundering networks, particularly those used by proxies and enablers in the UK?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and the important work that he does through the all-party parliamentary group. He is absolutely right that illicit finance funds hostile activities, and this Government take it incredibly seriously. That is why we have appointed Baroness Hodge as the anti-corruption champion and we are in the process of producing an anti-corruption strategy, which the Government intend to publish before the summer recess. That is also why I recently visited the United Arab Emirates, because the nature of this particular challenge requires an international response. It is why the UK seeks to work with our international partners to do everything we can to tighten the screws on those who would seek to use illicit finance to fund terrorist activity. It is a priority for the Government. We are grateful for the support and work that he does and for the work that Baroness Hodge does, and we will continue it at pace.

Tom Tugendhat: I pay tribute to the Minister for the work he is doing on leading this fight against a hostile state that is doing so much against us. I join him in paying tribute not just to Jonathan Hall—he did amazingly good work for us in government and I am sure will be serving the Minister with the same dedication and diligence—but to MI5, whose leadership under Sir Ken McCallum has begun to put real focus on some areas that had previously slipped by.

Does the Minister agree that this is not just a domestic challenge? I recognise all that he has set out, but we need to be working on this matter with friends and allies. The pressures that we see in Iran today—the failure of the state, the emergence of a civil society and perhaps even, let us hope, the destruction of that dreadful regime that has occupied the country and tortured those people for so many years—require a whole-of-Government response. We are feeling the effects here in the United Kingdom because the poison is seeping out of Tehran.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the work he has done previously and for the support he has provided. I completely agree with what he said about Jonathan Hall. Jonathan Hall is a figure of great integrity and authority. We are lucky to have him, and we benefit hugely from the advice and support that he provides in his own, and very independent, way.

I completely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said about the leadership of MI5. We do not say a lot about them in this House for understandable reasons, but they do extraordinary work and we should be grateful for their service.

The right hon. Gentleman is completely right that this is not just a domestic challenge; it is a challenge that requires an international coalition of the willing, and we need to work incredibly closely with our partners—with the US, with our partners in Europe and partners in the region. We are progressing that work with colleagues in the Foreign Office and as the right hon. Gentleman knows—he reflected on the Prime Minister's statement yesterday—the Prime Minister personally takes it very seriously. These are the most profoundly important matters. We take them incredibly seriously, and we are working across Government and with our partners to address them.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the action that the Minister is taking to combat Iranian state threats on our streets. He said in his statement that there was a long-standing pattern of targeting Jewish and Israeli people by the Iranian intelligence services. Although that is certainly no secret, it is still very concerning for the community involved. I absolutely welcome what he said about maintaining funding for protective security measures around synagogues, community centres and schools, but given the seriousness of the situation, will he set out in more detail how the Government will protect the Jewish community in the UK from those and other threats?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point—that concern will be shared right across the House. I spoke in my opening remarks about the importance that we attach to ensuring that all communities in our country are not just safe but feel as if they are safe. He is absolutely right to reference the importance of ensuring that our Jewish communities feel that they are both properly valued and properly protected. He will have heard me refer to the important work of the Community Security Trust, to which we have made a significant financial commitment to support that work. I have written to the trust today, and will meet it, I hope, in the very near future. It does extraordinary work, and we are grateful for that. I am very happy to take this opportunity to reassure him and all Members of our continued commitment to work with the trust in the future.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I welcome what the Security Minister said about the inclusion of Iran in the enhanced tier of FIRS. Can he confirm—I hope that the ISC will look at this—that as that system operationalises, it will also cover more complex situations in which it is not as straightforward as somebody taking instruction from an organ of that state or from some other organisation, including under FIRS, or indeed situations in which there is no actual instruction or relationship at all but somebody chooses to act on that organ's behalf?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his previous work. He makes an important point, and I can absolutely give him the assurances that he seeks. We will have much more to say about that in future, but I hope he recognises that today marks a significant step forward. This measure was introduced by the previous Government, and we think that it is the right way to proceed and are seeking to progress it at pace.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. I am confident that he will agree that this House, the Government and the country bear no animosity towards the Iranian people, and that it is the actions of the Iranian state that we are deeply concerned about and taking action on. In that regard, will he give me more detail on the training available for police officers, who must often counter the actions of the Iranian state on our streets in constituencies around the country?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes two important points. I completely agree with his point about the Iranian people. This is not about them; it is about the targeted activity of the Iranian state. We are absolutely clear that the measures we have announced today are specifically for those state entities, not for the people of Iran.

My hon. Friend also made an important point about police training. I confirmed in my introductory remarks that work by counter-terrorism police, with all our territorial police forces right around the country, is already under way. It is absolutely essential that police officers on the beat, wherever they may be, have the training that they need to spot and more effectively understand the risks and threats that some of our citizens are subjected to. That is relatively new work; it is being progressed at pace. I am grateful to counter-terrorism police and to police forces right around the country for their commitment to it.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It has been a privilege and an honour to engage with my many Iranian constituents over the years, but I am always filled with horror when they tell me stories not only of what is happening to their family and friends back home in Iran—particularly the oppression still suffered by many women—but of their experiences in this country. I very much welcome the measures that the Minister has outlined, particularly in relation to police training, which I know will make a big difference to my constituents.

One issue that those constituents often raise with me, and which is one of the biggest for British-Iranians living in this country, is banking. I very much welcome the Minister's response to the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) on money laundering, but British-Iranian residents who have been living here for many years often find that their bank accounts are frozen, which leaves them in considerable financial hardship—some of those banking restrictions are just imposed without discrimination. Will reassurances can the Minister give my constituents about their ability to continue banking without restrictions?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those points, and for referring to our work to ensure that, wherever they are in the country, police officers have the requisite knowledge and experience to handle such matters when they encounter them. She makes a good, practical point about frozen accounts and banking arrangements for British-Iranians. Let me take that away and come back to her. She will recall that I mentioned earlier the work being done, through the defending democracy taskforce, to review the issue of transnational oppression. We are looking carefully at what more we can do in that area. I will take away her point about banking, for which I am grateful.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): It is welcome that the Minister is taking such strong action to counter the threat posed by Iran on Britain's streets, but will he explain how the process to consider a proscription-style framework to tackle the IRGC will work?

Dan Jarvis: In opposition, the now Home Secretary rightly did not think that the existing legislative architecture was necessarily appropriate. That is the challenge of terrorist entities such as al-Qaeda, and ensuring that a mechanism that might be used to proscribe a state entity will work in the same effective way. In order to seek advice, the Home Secretary has commissioned Jonathan Hall to look carefully at that. As my hon. Friend will have heard me say, Mr Hall is superbly qualified to do that work and is working at pace on it. We will have more to say about it in the near future.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the statement. The Minister is absolutely right to underscore the interconnected nature of the threats that we face from malign state actors—which George W. Bush called the “axis of evil.” Given recent events in the US—the apparent distancing of Washington from some of its allies, and an alignment, perhaps, with President Putin—and noting the strong connection between Tehran and Moscow, does the Minister share my concern that America may not have fully understood the connection between the two, and what conversations will he and his colleagues have with the US about the need for it to distance itself entirely and cauterise its relationships, as far as that nexus between Tehran and Moscow is concerned?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, as I always am. He always asks challenging questions. I completely agree with his point about the interconnected nature of the threat—he is absolutely right in his assessment. He will understand, as a very experienced Member of this House and a former Minister, that I need to choose my words incredibly carefully, so I will say that we place huge emphasis on the importance of the relationship with the United States. That is why the Prime Minister was in Washington recently to meet President Trump.

The right hon. Gentleman will understand from his ministerial service the huge importance and value of the operational partnerships that we have with the US in the wider context of the Five Eyes arrangements. Those are valuable linkages from which we benefit hugely. As a relatively new Government, we are still investing in those relationships to ensure that we get the most out of them. We will work very closely with our new US allies to target what he rightly describes as the interconnected nature of the threats from countries about which he knows all about.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement. The Israelis have done a huge amount to dismantle Iran's influence in the middle east, so will the Minister ensure that we carry on giving Israel the support to ensure Iran is not able to re-establish that influence in some areas through Hezbollah and Hamas? Will he also ensure that British companies are not supplying components to Iran through a series of countries with which they can trade, and that we are able to achieve our stated objectives on that supply chain?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman makes important points. He is right to attach importance to our relationships with partners in the middle east. We invest heavily in those relationships, and it is in our national interest to do so. He made a very good point about supply chains. I can give him an assurance on that, but it is a good point and I will think further on it.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I welcome the content and nature of the Minister's statement. He says that he is considering new ways to enforce robust immigration rules specifically to address threats from Iran. Can he flesh out what that means, specifically on the Government's stance about proscription of the IRGC? I know he is reluctant to talk about that, but he may sense the frustration among right hon. and hon. Members that zero context has been given and the Government are standing behind a veil of obscurity about how that might happen.

The Minister spoke appropriately about the protections that will, quite rightly, be afforded to members of the Jewish community in the United Kingdom, and previously, in response to the urgent question, he spoke about the protections that will be afforded by the UK state to Hongkongers against foreign state actors acting against their best interests. Will he tell the House what the UK state will do to protect Iranians and Persians living in the UK who are the subject of malign foreign state action against their interests?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; there was quite a lot in his question. With regard to proscription, I hope I have given him a sense of the importance we attach to the work that the Home Secretary has commissioned. It is entirely reasonable for the Government to say that we have looked at the existing legislative framework and decided that we need an independent reviewer and some independent advice to guide us about whether proscription is most appropriate for the state threats that we undoubtedly face. I think that is the right way to proceed. I hope he understands that no Government would ever get into a running commentary about proscription, because that is not helpful and undermines the deterrent effect of that tool.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point about ensuring that, as a Government, we do everything we possibly can to protect Iranians who are currently residing in the UK. I can give him those assurances. Hopefully he heard my words earlier about the work the defending democracy taskforce is progressing and about the transnational repression review, which is an important piece of work. The process has taken some time, but it should provide the mechanisms by which Government can most effectively ensure that people in this country are protected from the kind of threats that we have been discussing today.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): I know I bore the Minister incessantly with my repetitive calls for the proscription of the IRGC, so I welcome what he has to say today, particularly about the independent adviser's review, which I hope will be rapidly available for him to take action. May I pick up the issue raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) about the need for a whole of Government response? That does not mean just the Foreign Office as well as the Home Office; it is wider

than that. I could give the Minister a single example or a number of examples. Successive British Governments have stood aside while British universities have done military research in conjunction with Iranian researchers on battlefield armour, range-finding lasers, drones and fighter jets. Will he ensure that the whole of Whitehall brings the focus to this that is required?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman has never bored me—[*Interruption.*] I sense, Madam Deputy Speaker, that not everybody in the Chamber would be able to say precisely those same words, but I can say them and look the right hon. Gentleman in the eye. He is right to mention Jonathan Hall's work. He will know that Jonathan Hall is not an individual who sits on his hands; he will work at pace. We need to get a move on with this, and I can give the right hon. Gentleman an assurance that we will and that work will progress at rapid pace.

The right hon. Gentleman's point about wider Government is exactly right. There is an important role for the Department for Education. The defending democracy taskforce that was set up by the previous Government, which I now chair, brings together virtually all the Departments, as well as a number of other operational partners, so that fulcrum point across Government that looks at these matters very much has that wider approach, which he is right to raise.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. It is reassuring that the Government are not losing sight of all the other threats that face the United Kingdom and our allies. I praise and endorse his comments about how our relationship with the United States is far deeper and more integrated in defence and security, goes well beyond any disagreements we have with the present White House and will endure. However, I warn him that while he has been speaking, President Putin has made overtures to the Iranian regime to offer to broker talks between Iran and President Trump. Is it now time to draw to the United States' attention the true nature of their new friend in Moscow?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great wisdom on these matters. I simply say that I completely agree with his analysis of the depth of the relationship with the United States. The truth of the matter is that all our constituents are kept much safer because of the partnership arrangement we have with the United States and other Five Eyes allies. That is the most important security relationship we have, and we need to invest in it for the long term. I can give him an assurance that that is what we will do.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I warmly welcome the Minister's statement. He will probably be aware that at the start of this year our close ally the United Arab Emirates proscribed 19 organisations for their links to the IRGC and Iran, and that eight of those organisations are headquartered in the UK. Will he give a commitment to the House not to take action today, but to review what has been decided by our allies and take action to prevent those organisations from carrying out terrorist activities in the United Kingdom?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that important matter. I was in the United Arab Emirates on Friday, so I am well versed on the points he made. I have responded to that issue in the House

previously, but I give him an assurance that we will look closely at it, and I am happy to discuss it with him further.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for his very diligent turn at the Dispatch Box this afternoon.

Plan for Neighbourhoods

3.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement about the Government's plan for neighbourhoods.

The defining mission of this Government is delivering economic growth and driving up living standards. In that pursuit we are determined that nowhere is left behind, because, as every Member of this House will know, when our economy has prospered in the past, not everywhere has benefited. Over the past 14 years, decisions taken by the Conservatives have seen too many neighbourhoods fall into decline, with the most deprived areas suffering more than others.

As we deliver our mandate for change, the £1.5 billion plan for neighbourhoods means that in 75 places across the UK, which for too long have been underestimated and undervalued, this Government will support the delivery of growth and access to opportunity and raise living standards, because when our local neighbourhoods thrive the rest of the country thrives too.

Our new plan for neighbourhoods marks the turning of the page on levelling up. This Government will not repeat the mistakes of the past: no more micromanaged pots of money or pitting communities against one another to bid for them. The truth is, for all the promises about levelling up, the Tories' instinct was to hoard power and hold our economy back. Some 75 towns were promised funding that did not exist, with inflexible restrictions on how that money could be spent. Our plan for neighbourhoods stands in contrast with the Conservatives' unfunded and failed approach. Unlike the Tories' list of restrictive options for how towns could spend funding, we have doubled the policy activity that can be considered by neighbourhood boards and put communities at the heart of making these changes.

The money will be spent on a broadened set of interventions and has completely different objectives, aligned with the missions that the Prime Minister set out in our plan for change. For example, communities can now spend funding on the things that really matter to them, such as the modernisation of social housing, community-led housing, skills support, cohesion, childcare and much more. We are making good on commitments to deprived communities, giving each of the 75 places the certainty that they will receive up to £20 million of funding and support over the next decade.

In many communities, work has already been undertaken, and we want to build on that rather than undo it. That is why in each area, we will support new neighbourhood boards, bringing together residents, local businesses and grassroots campaigners to draw up and implement a new vision for their area. For the first time, that will include representatives from social housing and workplace representatives and, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the representative in the devolved legislature. In consultation with its community, each board will be given the freedom to decide how to spend the £2 million a year to deliver the priorities of local people, ranging from repairs to pavements and high streets to setting up community grocers, co-operatives or even neighbourhood watches.

[Alex Norris]

These new, broadened objectives will give communities the tools to make informed decisions, with a list of interventions aligned with this Government's central missions. Those interventions have already been assessed as demonstrating good value for money, so they can be pursued without delay. We have also published a toolkit outlining the wide-ranging powers available to communities and local authorities in England, with similar powers for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to come following consultation with the devolved Governments. This is about giving communities autonomy and about people designing and delivering the change that they want to see.

Our new approach puts communities at the heart of delivery, which is why we have introduced three new objectives to guide the plan. First, there is the importance of building thriving places. People take immense pride in their local area, but too many of our high streets and estates have been neglected and left behind. This funding can be used to ensure that town centres and neighbourhoods better reflect the needs of their community, giving residents a say in how they are designed. It will deliver change that people can see and identify with, so that at the end of this Parliament, people can look out from their doorsteps and see a better neighbourhood. We also want the UK to be a country with world-class public services that work for everyone, which is why this objective will support services that are accessible, responsive and tailored to local need, because investing in young people's futures and in preventive measures now will ease pressure on services over the long term.

The second aim is to build stronger communities. We want to empower neighbourhood boards to tackle the root causes of disengagement and division and to bring people together so that they can feel proud of their area and safe in their neighbourhood to restore a collective sense of belonging to their community. That is about understanding how division is not only an impediment to growth, but a barrier to driving up living standards.

Our third aim is to empower people to take back control. Everybody should be in the driving seat of their own life and should feel in control of their future, but that can feel like a distant prospect when people are living from payslip to payslip, stuck on a waiting list or just not listened to. It is quite right that people want to have a say over the future of their community, with enough to get by and the opportunity to make the most of their lives. We want to make sure that children have the best start in life and that adults can live the life that they want.

I will finish by talking about the inspiration for this programme, which can be traced back through six decades of community politics. We have drawn enormously from John Prescott and the noble Baroness Armstrong's new deal for communities, which provided the stability of long-term funding backed by the support of central Government. Like them, our aspiration is to empower local people to drive the renewal of their neighbourhood and to deliver the transformational change that they want to see. This announcement also has its origins in the community development policies of Wilson and Callaghan, who drew the link between social deprivation and social division, and now we are looking to the future.

The Prime Minister has been clear that the task before us requires a decade of national renewal, and our country has all the necessary raw ingredients, untapped talent and potential across every town, city, village and estate, but we also have people without enough to get by and places and public services that have been hollowed out. Addressing that is the central driver of our plan for neighbourhoods, and that is just the start. We have already begun to deliver a real shift of power, aligned with the Deputy Prime Minister's broader work on devolution, making work pay, fixing the foundations of local government and building decent homes, but this is also a down payment on what we know that communities can achieve. We will give people and places the resources and powers that they need to succeed.

Today's announcement is a response to anyone in these 75 places who wants to see change. It sends a message that the full force of Government will be there to help them to deliver it, and that is why I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

3.24 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Much in this statement builds on the work of the previous Government, and we share the new Government's ambitions for the growth and renewal of our neighbourhoods and high streets, which are so fundamental to our constituents' quality of life. As the Minister knows, there is a history behind this statement that links back to the desire of all our constituents to have a proper say in the development of their home area. In a country that is as grossly centralised, by democratic standards, as the UK, that local voice is vital.

EU cohesion funds, which were the predecessor of the UK shared prosperity fund, were directly accountable to both the UK Government and local representatives. In the short timeframe in which the previous Government's levelling-up strategy was in effect, it sought to bring to bear a wide variety of national resources on exactly the challenges that the Minister referred to in his statement. There was a £2.6 billion fund allocated for regeneration and communities; the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, which was specifically designed to support treasured assets such as pubs and theatres, where there was strong community support; and the £1.5 billion long-term plan for tax. We know that local leaders welcomed that investment, and many Members across the House spoke very warmly of the benefits to their constituents, so the challenge to the Government today is to set out how this very small and limited project sits against that much broader levelling-up ambition and, in particular, where it sits against the £3.6 billion towns fund set out under the previous Government.

The House will acknowledge that this statement comes at a time when this Government's financial decisions are bearing down very heavily on our communities. The massive rise in national insurance contributions, the increases in business rates on pubs, retail businesses and hospitality, the changes to business property relief and the multibillion-pound funding gap that opened up in council budgets as a result of the Government's Budget last October all weigh very heavily in the balance against this modest announcement. That leaves aside the impact of the loss of things such as the rural services grant and

the community ownership fund, which were specifically targeted at delivering support to communities that needed it.

While we welcome this rebadging and rehashing of a scheme that we progressed when we were in office and its allocation to largely the same list of recipients, we have some questions to put to the Minister. The first is about the accountability of the proposed neighbourhood boards. It is a significant concern that the Minister finds time to say that the boards will include trade union representatives, but not to mention the democratically elected representatives of those local communities—a trend that sits alongside the changes in the proposed planning White Paper. Local democracy is vital if these boards are to work effectively.

The second question is about the lack of a clear purpose for these resources. While it sounds like a positive thing to broaden the range of areas in which they can be spent, it is a serious concern that the Government again choose refurbishment and modernisation of social housing, which is already allocated for in other areas of local government funding. It begs the question of whether these funds will, in fact, go towards making up shortfalls that the Budget created in other areas of Government spending.

Finally, there is real concern that broadening the criteria, and choosing to use generalised national statistics rather than local understanding of need to decide how to allocate funding, will mean that the resource is allocated in a way that simply does not reflect needs and local circumstances. A bidding process allows local authorities—which lead and represent their areas, and can identify particular needs—to come forward to Government and present a plan. The process of allocation that is being suggested creates a serious risk that those who can do the most to regenerate and benefit our high streets and communities will lose out in favour of those who are simply able to meet the criteria of Whitehall box-ticking.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the Opposition spokesperson for those questions. He is right to say that this plan builds on the previous long-term plan for towns commitment, which is why we thought it prudent to retain the same recipient areas. That promise has been made, and it should be kept. However, when I entered the Department on my first day in government, and talked to civil servants, it was astonishing to find out that the programme—a £1.5 billion commitment made by the previous Government—was unfunded. It was funded through a reserve that had been spent three times over. That is simply no way to run a country. I am very pleased that we have been able to keep that commitment to those communities, because goodness knows there would have been disappointment had we not.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the plan's place in the wider environment. Of course, we committed to the transition year of shared prosperity funding in the Budget. We are now in a spending review period, and as I said in my statement, we are committed to getting communities the tools and resources that they need in order to shape place.

To respond to the hon. Gentleman's questions on accountability, of course local councillors are still involved. We are talking about changes to broaden neighbourhood boards. We want local councillors to be involved; we

would like local Members of Parliament to be involved; and in the areas where they exist, we would like devolved representatives to be involved. However, we think that the voices of people who work in the communities are also valuable, and I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not.

The hon. Gentleman talked about a lack of clear purpose. I think this is where we are in different spaces, because I believe in freedom to make decisions locally. I believe that expertise is held locally; the wisdom about communities across this country is held by the local community, rather than the Minister. That might perhaps be revelatory for a Minister to say. I believe that changing a community—whether through what we call local growth, levelling up, or any of the other things that it has been called over the past 60 years—is an inside job, best done by local communities, and that my role as Minister and our role as Government is to get communities the tools and resources that they need. We differ on that point.

Even the previous Government moved away from their affection for the bidding process by the end of the last Parliament. They understood that it did not work—that a debilitating beauty parade that pits communities against each other was not a very good way of getting money to those communities. However, another point of difference is that I believe in a longer-term allocative settlement that is more flexible and guided by people locally, whereas the Opposition believe in shorter-term bidding and central prescription.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Value for money.

Alex Norris: I believe that the best value for money is when communities have the tools and resources to shape place themselves, according to their criteria, rather than mine. That is how we drive change.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the statement. A number of Members have been on councils, and some of us still serve on them. If we are all honest, the unfortunate reality is that the competitive tendering process did pit some councils against each other, including deprived councils. It is right that we move away from that, and away from the sticking-plaster politics that we have seen over the past few years.

I want to press the Minister to give us a bit more of an understanding of how the neighbourhood boards will be set up and how they will function. Will there be a clear recruitment process to get the local buy-in that is critical? As the Minister said, it is important that we bring communities along with us. If there is conflict between local authorities and the boards—for example, over a regeneration plan—will one have the power to veto the other, and will the Department have oversight, so that it can intervene, should there be serious concerns about interventions and operation?

The Minister said that it was important for communities to have a say in their future, so is the Department looking at the community right to buy? I declare my interest as a Labour and Co-operative MP. Through the community right to buy, we have seen local pubs, libraries,

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

leisure centres and so much more saved. When can we expect to see that new light, and when will that legislation come forward?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for those questions. I agree with what she said about competitive tendering; the *quid pro quo* is that the Government of the day have to be very clear about how allocations are made. My commitment is that we will always be very transparent about how the decisions are made, and I know that the Select Committee will take a strong interest in that.

Turning to the establishment of boards, I suspect that one of the themes of discussion over the next few minutes will be our not wanting to hold back areas that are making great progress. Areas with established boards may take advantage of the opportunity to add more people to those boards, and may move on at pace, while other areas may want to treat this moment as a chance to reboot their board. Either way, the basic principle is that the local authority will be the ring-holder, supported by the local Member of Parliament, but once that board has got going, we expect it to be in leadership. We do not want boards to have significant tensions with their councils, and we would expect any tensions to be resolved in the usual way, but those boards will have the power to get on with the job.

The community right to buy was a component of the White Paper. We are looking forward to delivering the community right to buy, because we know that it would be greatly valued, whether we are talking about buying pubs or other buildings in communities. We are very keen on that, and as a fellow Labour and Co-op MP, I am particularly keen on it.

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

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome this plan to work with communities to improve local amenities and engagement in the process. We also welcome the move away from local council areas bidding against each other, and towards a more objective approach, based, for example, on indices of multiple deprivation. In our opinion and my opinion, the previous system divisively pitted one area against another in a way that did damage to more areas than it helped.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to allowing communities to take action to improve their area. Given sufficient powers and resources, local authorities can play a major role in responding to climate and nature emergencies, whether through the insulation of homes, enhancing green spaces or improving air quality. However, the Conservative Government forced councils to do more and more with less and less, plunging many into financial crisis. As a result, councils have gone bankrupt around the country, and many are feeling the strain of cuts to public services and a lack of investment in community assets.

No community can flourish without proper powers and resources, so we welcome the plan's commitment to ensuring that new neighbourhood boards work with local authorities to implement new funding. However,

we urge the Government to confirm that local authorities will be funded and resourced substantially to take on this additional workload.

The financial burden on councils has forced many to make impossible choices on funding. In my council of Somerset, for example, nearly 70% of council tax receipts go on care for vulnerable adults and children, which many believe should be a national responsibility. Until we have a national solution to the care crisis, councils will continue to be held back from reaching their full potential. We welcome the Government's commitment to investing in community-led improvement.

We also welcome the new neighbourhood boards, which should provide community engagement throughout the process. We urge the Government to reconsider their decision to remove district council-level scrutiny from the planning process. Where Whitehall takes power and decisions out of the hands of local councillors, it also takes decisions out of the hands of local people. That is undemocratic and will ultimately slow up the process of getting the homes that we need. We also call on the Government to confirm that nature and climate specialists will be included on the neighbourhood boards. Finally, can I ask the Minister—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind the hon. Member that there is a time limit. I will give him one more sentence.

Gideon Amos: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will the Secretary of State review the list of 75 towns, so that others can be included in future? Finally, will the Government consider rolling the plans into neighbourhood plans, so that they are given more statutory effect when planning decisions are made?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for those questions. On the point about climate and nature, gaining consent from the community often starts with buy-in, and localised climate interventions through these programmes may well be a good way to do that. On the local authorities point, the Budget was the first step in rebuilding local authority finances, which will take time. As the hon. Member says, resolutions on social care will take some of the pressure off, too. On planning, local plans are so important, and not enough of the country is covered by them. Local people rightly want a say, and the best way to ensure that is through the local plan process. On the 75 towns point, the ones that were previously announced are the ones for which we have honoured commitments, but as he says, there may be scope to go further in the future. I cannot run ahead of the spending review, but if we can prove that things have worked in these 75 towns, there will be a strong case to do them elsewhere.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. The previous Government admitted that they thought that Labour's formulas, which provided money to deprived urban areas, "needed to be undone", so I welcome this Government's commitment to tackling deprivation, which is much-needed. As a local authority area, Middlesbrough has the lowest wages in the region and some of the worst statistics for deprivation in the qualifying metrics, so it is regrettable that no community in my constituency of Middlesbrough and Thornaby East has qualified for the long-term plan for towns, which is a legacy of the predecessor Government's failed levelling-up agenda.

I fully understand the rationale, in terms of the parameters and populations, and the need to follow through on promises previously made, but will the Minister confirm the steps that he is taking to move on from the Conservatives' pork barrel politics, and provide assurance that the Government's determination is to invest in the deprived urban areas not served in today's announcement?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the chance to reiterate that we wanted to honour the commitment made to those 75 communities, because we felt that it was the decent thing to do. Our commitment, which I have given at the Dispatch Box previously, is that in the future we will have allocative formulas based on deprivation and need, and we will go where the data says we should. Too often in the past Ministers sought to go where the politics were, but that did not serve those communities or the country, and we will do much better in the future.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The Minister will understand that in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, we were delighted to receive the towns fund money from the last Government, and we are grateful to him for—in his words—honouring that commitment from the Dispatch Box. May I also thank him for the courtesy he has shown in the discussions that he and I have had about this? As I have said to him before, I hope that he will pay a state visit to the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, where we can show him not only the delights of the town, but how well we will ensure that this taxpayers' money is spent.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that, and for the conversations that I have had with the right hon. Gentleman. The difference between his area and the other 74 is that in his case, the connection is with a town council, rather than a local authority. As he knows, I am a great proponent of town and parish councils. He bears a heavy weight as a result, but we want to demonstrate that this is a model that works and could be used again in the future. I look forward to working with him, and I will of course pay that visit.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): The two towns in my constituency are delighted to be included on the list of towns that will receive this long-term funding—such certainty has been absent from previous financial commitments—but I am particularly interested in the Government's arrangements for the future. Under the previous arrangements for town board deals, decisions have been made about putting money into parts of projects that have been left to suffer delay and incur extra costs; in my case, money that had been intended for the library was reallocated. Can my hon. Friend reassure my constituents that there will be an opportunity to review the Government's arrangements for the new neighbourhood boards?

Alex Norris: Yes: now is the time to review those boards, and we will be asking for that to be done by the end of next month. There will then be time for the boards to formulate plans over the next few months, and to put in writing how the money will be used to make that commitment to, and contract with, the local community. I hope that communities become involved in those conversations—indeed, I am sure that they will—so that the plans reflect what local people want.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister referred to his support for parish and town councils. Can he explain a little more about the neighbourhood boards? Will their geographical footprint be similar to that of parish and town councils in the 75 areas concerned? If so, would it not have been better to give this role to elected bodies, such as parish and town councils, rather than to unelected new boards?

Alex Norris: The elected body that will be the fundholder will be a local authority. As I have said, in only one case do the arrangements differ from those for the other councils, apart from parish and town councils. As for the boundaries, they reflect the human rather than the political geographies; there may or may not be points of alignment. The best models will have a local political as well as a local community say—I think that that balance can be found—but if there are concerns about boundaries, now is a very short moment in which that could be revisited. There is not much flexibility to change the scope completely, but if sensible tweaks can be made, we will of course have the necessary conversations.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): It is welcome that today's plan finally delivers on the unmet promises made to communities through the last Government's long-term plan for towns, but since the selection methodology in that plan was delivered, Pendleton in Salford has sadly lost its only leisure centre and pool to fire, which has left a community who were already starved of leisure facilities with nothing at all. Will the Minister meet me to discuss what help the Government can give Salford to ensure that this vital facility is rebuilt as a matter of urgency?

Alex Norris: I am very sad to hear about the fire, and I will of course be happy to have that meeting.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the plan's commitment to social housing and to ensuring that development is community-led. However, it is disappointing that Somerset will not feel the benefit, given that demand for social housing in Glastonbury and Somerton, and across the county, vastly outweighs supply. Can the Minister confirm whether there are plans to extend the plan to allocate further funding, in addition to the 75 local authorities confirmed today?

Alex Norris: The hon. Lady knows that I cannot run ahead of the spending review. Other funds are available, including through the enhanced local government settlement and the shared prosperity fund, but if we can prove that this is an effective model, there may be scope in the future to extend it.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): For all the talk of levelling up from the Conservatives, I gently remind them of my Hasting and Rye constituents' experience of levelling up: £150,000 of taxpayers' money was given to a Conservative donor to improve Hastings town centre, and all we have left as a result is a boarded-up shop. I really welcome the Minister's commitment of £20 million for Hastings, which will be spent in a responsible way, based on the priorities of my constituents, whether that is broken pavements, broken bus shelters or buying back important community assets, from pubs to closed concert venues—I know there is a lot of

[*Helena Dollimore*]

concern in Hastings about St Mary in the Castle. Can he explain how residents of Hastings can feed into the process for how the money is spent?

Alex Norris: I am aware of the history that my hon. Friend mentions. I hope that this will be a reboot moment for Hastings and a chance to get some of the benefit that the community undoubtedly wants to see. The plan will be to get a board in place quickly, and then to develop a neighbourhood plan. I exhort the board to engage with its community as best as possible, and there are some brilliant examples. Chesterfield and Arbroath spring to mind, and I am sure those communities will be generous in sharing their experience of how to do it well.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): The Minister and I had a very consensual exchange yesterday at questions, and he knows that Arbroath has been exceptional in this endeavour. Can he assure me that where communities have good structures, those structures will be kept? The funding is welcome, but it is fair to say that there has been some disappointment in areas such as Perth and Dunfermline. There has also been some disappointment about the promises that were not kept by those who backed our leaving the EU on the lifeline funding that came from the European Union. Can he give us some of his thoughts on how we match some of that up? Finally, will he assure us that devolution will absolutely be respected in any plans going forward?

Alex Norris: As I said yesterday, it was impossible in the church hall not to be struck by the extent of the consultation in Arbroath, which is a model for elsewhere. As the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have said, we see devolution through the prism of wanting to reset our relationships with the devolved Governments. I have had those conversations, as the hon. Gentleman may know, and I will continue to do so. Having representatives of the devolved legislature involved in the board is a positive step. We do not want to hold back progress where areas have made significant progress, so they should move at pace. I believe that we will be able to make the relatively minor tweaks that are needed in their cases and move forward at great pace. With regard to previous structural funds, we were able to deliver what we could in the Budget, and what is coming forward will be looked at as part of the spending review.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the overall thrust of this important area of policy, which puts communities at the heart of regeneration and investment. I have a couple of questions for the Minister. I appreciate that Reading has unfortunately missed out this time around, and I hope we are successful in the future. Could he explain how successful initiatives, such as high street action zones, will be incorporated into this sort of work? Similarly, how will the Government incorporate assets of community value and other local matters that have helped communities to rebuild and re-energise their areas?

Alex Norris: That is a really important point. The support provided previously was well meant but not very efficient. What we have seen over recent years is an accumulation of various different strands of levelling-up funding, which was less than the sum of its parts. One of the challenges is that we lose great insight, so we will absolutely draw on the best initiatives—whether that is high street accelerators, community ownership or funding assets of community value—and share that insight with not just those winning 75 recipients, but the rest of the country.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Torbay is the premier resort in the United Kingdom, but behind our palm trees and Victorian villas is the most deprived council in the west of England, so it is a truly welcome that Torbay is one of these 75 neighbourhoods. Sadly, we have had a pregnant pause while the new Government walked through the wreckage of the finances left by the previous Conservative Government, but it is very welcome that this money is coming to bear. It is also really heartening that it will be over a number of years, so we can have confidence about how to support our communities. However, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) are particularly concerned about the resulting pregnant pause, because we have oven-ready opportunities for our communities. I have already written to the Minister on this issue, but is it possible that, after conversations with him, we could pre-spend rather than have even more months of delays in implementing the changes we all desperately want for our local communities?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his forbearance and for his consistent lobbying. I want to be very clear that the programme starts from 2026, and that cannot be brought forward. Local authorities do have the flexibility to spend earlier, understanding that the money is coming, but that would of course be a decision for them to take locally.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister and his Department for today's announcement and for the commitment to Leigh in the plan for neighbourhoods. As he knows, Leigh is home to some amazing community organisations and businesses that are working hard to improve our area, but they have been doing it alone for too long. Today's cash boost for Leigh changes that. Does he agree that this plan marks the first step towards a new partnership in which communities are supported and empowered to shape the places they call home?

Alex Norris: I know of Leigh's great creativity, not least at the Spinners Mill, which my hon. Friend used to run. From our perspective, we want this to be a reset of the way in which central Government work with local communities to unleash that creativity. As I have said, I think this was seen by the Opposition as revelatory, but I believe the people of Leigh, rather than me, should make decisions about the future of Leigh.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's statement. It is indeed very welcome in Northern Ireland, where it affects Coleraine and Londonderry in my patch. The 10-year period is particularly welcome as it allows for planning and for

proposals to be put in place. Can he assure us that, towards the end of this Parliament, we will review the plan to see if it is possible to develop it and to become very focused on trying to get benefit for our constituents?

Alex Norris: Yes, this is a really important point. Plans do take time to gear up, and there may not be a uniform spend of exactly £2 million every year. There may be some flexibilities, which is why I think such a length of time is valuable. However, after the fourth year we will do a stocktake, because we do not want places spinning their wheels and building up a huge backlog of funding. Plans have to be realistic, so by the end of this Parliament, exactly as the hon. Member says, we will have a full stocktake.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for this very positive statement. I am naturally delighted that my home town of Thetford in South West Norfolk will receive a share of this money. It is really going to help unlock Thetford's potential, but after 14 years of so much decline, what measures will be taken to ensure that this money is spent as quickly as possible and makes as much of a difference as possible in the short term?

Alex Norris: We will work closely with Thetford and all the other recipients so that they have the best possible insight about what is effective and about some of the good practices elsewhere. We have developed, as part of the prospectus, a series of pre-approved interventions, so Thetford could pick from among those knowing that they have already been assessed as representing value for money. Such information and insight should be there to build a really effective plan really quite quickly.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): The plan for neighbourhoods prospectus published on the website earlier today talks about ending the "Whitehall knows best" culture. With that in mind, would the Minister look at the current allocation of 75% capital and 25% revenue, and if that split needed to be changed in a local area, would he consider doing that? In his statement, he said that this "is about giving communities autonomy and about people designing and delivering the change that they want to see."

I am sure that all communities in the UK would wish to have that autonomy, so how could the principle of neighbourhood boards be rolled out, even if the funding is not there to begin with?

Alex Norris: Absolutely, we would want to see those boards meeting. I know from other areas where they have anticipated and set up their boards early that they have asked them to do other things as well, which I think is a really good sign of mature partnership. On the revenue-capital split, I am afraid there is no flexibility, although that point is heard. As part of the evaluation we will see what is effective, but I am afraid that what has been agreed in the Budget is what is agreed.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for today's statement and wholly welcome the up to £20 million for the town of Coatbridge in my constituency. I am grateful to him for taking the time last year to speak to me about the former towns fund. Coatbridge was earmarked for levelling-up funding, but that was put at risk by the

previous Government announcing the plans, but cynically—yet perhaps unsurprisingly—failing to identify how they would fund them. Does my hon. Friend agree that, by delivering this funding, it is this Government who are supporting regeneration in Coatbridge, putting local people and local businesses at the heart of decision making to provide much-needed jobs and growth?

Alex Norris: Yes, absolutely. When my hon. Friend came to visit me in my office, I felt that he and his colleagues had come rather as wallet inspectors and that I was not going to get away with the shirt on my back. I have to be candid: as I said then, I really did not know whether we would be able to find the funding to deliver the programme, which is why I am overjoyed that we have. Those promises were made and needed to be kept, for the people of Coatbridge and beyond.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I rise to thank the Minister for his commitment and his assurances today, not least on behalf of the people of Peterhead, which is in my constituency. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) asked him about the geographical footprint of the new bodies. I want to press him on that, because it is important to be clear whether there would be scope within the reorganisation of the boards to extend their footprint. Is he able to comment on that please?

Alex Norris: Yes, that is not an unfamiliar ask that colleagues have made. As I have said, we could not support boundary changes that really change the nature of an area—if we went up to a population of 1 million people, it would cease to be the programme it was. However, if there are common-sense changes that could be made, we will look at them very closely. Now would be a very good moment for a local authority and a local MP to come forward with such an idea.

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): Like the Minister, I am proud to be a Labour and Co-operative MP. Today's announcement is a great win for our movement, putting power where it belongs: in our communities. In areas such as mine, community can be found in our proud grassroots sports teams. Will the Minister update us on what more can be done to empower fans to own and shape their local sports teams?

Alex Norris: We are very enthusiastic about fan ownership and we are, through the fan-led review, taking forward many things related to football. The community ownership fund had its final round just before Christmas, which in many cases had a sporting element to it. The shared prosperity fund, through the local authority, can support sports teams. We understand that sports teams, facilities and fields are a huge part of local communities. We are committed to ensuring that local communities have control and the security of knowing that they will be there at the heart of their community.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and the vision that will truly transform communities and constituencies such as mine. I am made up that Kirkby will get a massive funding boost under the Government's plan. Knowsley is the second-most deprived area in the country, yet communities across

[Anneliese Midgley]

the constituency never stop working to improve their home. Centre 63, in the heart of Kirkby, is a vital youth and community hub that was opened by my illustrious predecessor, Harold Wilson, who was mentioned in the Minister's statement. I invite the Minister to meet me to discuss how we could give Knowsley more power, and the funding and resources we need, to shape the place that we call home.

Alex Norris: I absolutely support the points my hon. Friend makes. I know the people of Knowsley are very proud of the communities that make up Knowsley. I was very pleased to visit recently and to talk to my hon. Friend and her local authority, which really has a strong sense of local purpose. I would be very happy to have similar conversations about the plan to support Kirkby and much more.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for today's statement and announcement, which are incredibly welcome. I am most grateful, not least because my constituency of West Dunbartonshire and my home town of Clydebank are set to receive up to £20 million of funding. I met the Minister last year on this matter, too. Can he confirm that Clydebank will decide how best to use the funding to transform its town centre to ensure the investment has maximum transformational impact on my community, and that this demonstrates that this UK Labour Government are delivering for West Dunbartonshire and for Scotland?

Alex Norris: I totally agree. My hon. Friend has told me of the proud sense of identity in his community and the desire for the tools to enable them to shape their community, which is what we are doing through this programme. I know he will be a proud champion of getting residents' voices into those local plans to ensure they are as effective as possible.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement of the plan for neighbourhoods, which replaces the unfunded promises left by the previous Government. I welcome in particular the fact that it gives communities far more agency to decide how the

money is spent. However, I am sure the Minister will appreciate that other communities across the country will have their noses pressed against the proverbial shop window, including Dartford, where projects such as the Swanscombe pavilion are in dire need of funding to bring them back to life. It has been great to discuss that particular project with the Minister. Could he give an indication of how we might build on this great programme throughout the Parliament to provide investment for critical projects outside the designated 75 places?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend succinctly expresses the strength of feeling from colleagues today. As I say, we are going into a spending review phase, which may be a good moment for those conversations. I enjoyed the conversation I had with him on the Swanscombe pavilion, and will look to support him in whatever way we can to try to find a solution.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): For the final question, I call John Slinger.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I know that the list of areas is the one the Minister inherited. He gave a truly brilliant statement, which spoke of a stronger community, of pride in place and of the need for thriving communities. I pay tribute to the Minister for visiting Rugby, where he did a walk-around and held a roundtable with me, and saw that our Labour borough councillors—my colleagues—are working hard to achieve all those things, as well as a vibrant community and business sector. I hope the Minister will work with them so that they can learn some of the lessons from this absolutely superb plan for neighbourhoods going forward.

Alex Norris: I greatly enjoyed my visit to Rugby. It took me more than an hour to realise that the great ovoid-shaped public art installations were rugby balls, hence the rugby pun. It was, perhaps, not my sharpest day. However, I really enjoyed the session we had with local business and community and the local authority. It was impossible not to come away with the sense that the community of Rugby really has a grip of where it wants to go in the future. As a Government and a Department, our job is to give that community the tools and resources to make that a reality.

Housing Estates

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

4.3 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for a right to manage for freeholders on unadopted private or mixed-use housing estates; to set minimum standards for public amenities on new housing estates; to make provision about the enforcement of those standards; to make provision about the adoption by local authorities of public amenities on new housing estates; and for connected purposes.

In perhaps less parliamentarily precise language, but in words that might be a bit more relatable for those watching at home, the Bill will make sure we are finally tackling the fleecehold stealth tax that is affecting far too many new homeowners on new estates right across the country.

I am incredibly proud to be here as a member of a party that recognises, in some of the best traditions of this country, the importance of a secure home in which people can build stable and prosperous lives. Indeed, as a Labour MP, I am probably contractually obligated to remind the House that one of the defining missions of this Labour Government is to get Britain building again. When it come to the state of the housing market that we inherited, it is clear that far too much simply is not working for far too many people. That may be due to the following: the broken state of the house supply system, which prices far too many people out of home ownership; the lack of affordable social rented homes or insecure private rented sector accommodation, creating precariousness for families who just should not have to face that in their lives; or the broken leasehold system, on which we announced some really important measures yesterday that I know many Members across the House will have welcomed.

Today, I wish to address a slightly less appreciated issue, but one that is no less important. Fleecehold housing estates are really growing right across the country. Fleecehold arises when homes are not adopted by local authorities, leaving new occupants exposed to fleecehold stealth taxes and paying money to a private management company for services that others receive as part of their council tax. They are on the hook to an estate management company, which is often unaccountable to them and often seeks to exploit them with every available power.

I know from lots of conversations that I have had with other Members across the House that I am far from alone in experiencing this issue. It is growing in my constituency, and also right across the country. Indeed, when I am away on holiday, I cannot escape it either. Over recess, I was up in Scotland visiting my family. A family friend took me to one side to raise the issues that they have had, which is quite typical. Their estate had gone unadopted for many years. There was no end in sight to this situation. In the meantime, they were paying hundreds of pounds each year for basic services that the rest of their neighbours were receiving through their council tax. But that was not the worst of it. When they missed one bill, which had gone up quite considerably at a week's notice, rather than giving them any tolerance, their estate management company used the contractual powers that it had to go straight to their mortgage

lender to have the amount added to that family's mortgage and to drive a wrecking ball through their credit score in the process. This injustice cannot be allowed to persist, but for far too many people, this situation is becoming the norm.

There was once a time when local authorities would typically adopt housing estates when they came forward, but that simply is no longer the case. Indeed, a Competition and Markets Authority report into this issue last year found that up to 80% of new housing estates now go unadopted, with no end in sight. Indeed, many in my constituency have gone unadopted for well over a decade after completion. In the meantime, these householders are on the hook to a private management company that they never expected to be stuck with and for a length of time that they had never considered. The impact of that relationship has many facets. First, these householders are hit with what is in effect a new homes stealth tax. They are often forced to pay hundreds of pounds each year for services that every other homeowner would get as part of their council tax.

Typically, these bills are around £350, but that is a significant amount in a cost of living crisis. However, the bills are far from limited to that. I have had correspondence from constituents who have been hit by bills running to thousands of pounds. Again, very short notice is often given for steep increases. Across the whole country in 2022, the CMA found that more than £260 million was spent by households on exactly these charges. In that time, given the growth that we know has happened and that needs to continue to happen in our housing supply, that amount will only have grown. That cannot be fair and it cannot be justified.

Part of the issue is not just the injustice of paying twice for something, but the fact that this delivery mechanism is structurally designed to maximise the costs that these households bear. The management companies are not directly accountable to the homeowners—to the people to whom they are providing service. There is no incentive for these management companies to keep bills down. Indeed, I have had correspondence from people who have been charged upwards of £250 just for having one lightbulb changed on their estate. Moreover, the small size of some of these estates, or the extent to which they can be subdivided, means that the bulk of the high fees can often just covers management and professional services fees, and bear no relation to any actual service delivered on the estate.

Indeed, one estate had been subdivided to such a level that the vast majority of the bill that every household was paying was simply the fee for how they were audited each year. That cannot be right. Alongside that, it is not just the cost that is the problem, but the way that this is undercutting the very nature of the stability and prosperity that home ownership is meant to bring with it.

By being on the hook to these management companies, residents often have to fight for years to get bare-minimum works and services and responses to their queries. They also often find that when they look to move away from this exploitative relationship, they are unable to do so because of the risk created by that fleecehold system. I have spoken to homeowners whose sales have fallen through when crucial management pack information has not been provided by management companies in a timely way or who, when they have looked to move,

[Alistair Strathern]

have not been able to because their credit score has been decimated by exploitative charges when they have not been able to pay steep increases in their service charge in what the management company viewed to be a timely manner.

I welcome the Government's commitment to trying to do something about this, but it is important that we address it at pace. Hopefully, we will be building 1.5 million homes over the course of this Parliament, but those homes will not deliver security or prosperity for the families who take them up if they trap them in fleecehold relationships and on fleecehold unadopted estates. My Bill looks to take several important steps forward to address this. First, it looks to build on some of the recommendations in last year's CMA report to cut off unadopted estates at source, mandating minimum adoptable standards that all developers would have to reach as part of their works and laying out minimum adoption timelines that local authorities would be accountable for delivering on. All that would ensure that unadopted estate limbo can finally be a thing of the past.

Given the perilous state of local authority finances, I am aware that this could create some financial burden. However, giving certainty over the direction of travel in the adoption of estates and creating clarity about the minimum standards for estates to be adopted would create the conditions for local authorities to be able to assess, negotiate and condition through the planning process any value that they need to extract, to ensure that they can cover the maintenance costs of that estate. Hopefully, that will enable us to undercut that iniquitous persistence of two tiers of council tax payers at source.

Alongside that, it is important that we do not walk by those who are already in these estates, particularly because until we have a solution, they will only grow in number since they are now the default model for housing provision across this country. The Bill also looks to build on amendments tabled by the then shadow Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), in the last Parliament to give freeholders on private estates the ability to enact right to manage. This would put them back in the driving seat, give them the power to fire unaccountable management companies, ensure that they have a choice, and drive up service levels, responsibility and, hopefully, the performance of those undertaking management work.

The Bill is far from a panacea. Many homeowners will want adoption to be the end state for their estate, but it is an important step forward to drive down the ability of management companies to be exploitative and extract unjustifiable fees from new homeowners. It puts them back in the driving seat and part of those adoption conversations, hopefully to get their estate to where it needs to be, so that the inequity can finally end.

I am so excited about this Government's housing mission, and to see the number of people in my constituency and across the country whose lives will be transformed by our commitment to stable homes. However, for a long time now we have failed to appreciate the extent to which fleecehold becoming a default model for new home delivery in this country is undercutting the very sense of security and prosperity that new home ownership is meant to bring.

I hope that the Government will act with the pace that this issue deserves. I am very excited to introduce the Bill today to start to tackle at source the root causes of the fleecehold stealth tax that is affecting thousands of homeowners across the country, who are paying millions every year in unjustified service charges. I look forward to working with the Government to do right by those affected right across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Alistair Strathern, Emma Foody, Abtisam Mohamed, Yuan Yang, Connor Naismith, Amanda Hack, Ben Coleman, Tom Rutland, Callum Anderson, Mr James Frith, Luke Murphy and Mrs Sarah Russell present the Bill.

Alistair Strathern accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 June, and to be printed (Bill 190).

CHURCH OF SCOTLAND (LORD HIGH COMMISSIONER) BILL: ALLOCATION OF TIME

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Church of Scotland (Lord High Commissioner) Bill:

Timetable

(1)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion five hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3)(a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

- (d) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;
- (e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8)(a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(10)(a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(14) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(15)(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(16)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(17)(a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of such a debate.

(18) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(19)(a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

Church of Scotland (Lord High Commissioner) Bill

Second Reading

4.15 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am pleased to open the debate on this Bill, which I hope will have the House's support. It is a simple, straightforward and clear piece of legislation that seeks to do one simple thing: it will remove a legal barrier that prevents Catholics from holding the office of the Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. This historic legal restriction applies only to Catholics; it does not apply to people of other faiths or indeed of no religious faith.

For those hon. Members who are not familiar with the role of Lord High Commissioner—if there are any—perhaps it is beneficial for me to set out some context. The Lord High Commissioner is the sovereign's personal representative to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. They are appointed as an observer to attend proceedings on behalf of His Majesty the King. The General Assembly is the governing body of the Church of Scotland that meets each May in Edinburgh to hear reports, make laws and set the agenda for the Church for the coming year. The ceremonial duties of the Lord High Commissioner include addressing the Assembly at its opening and closing sessions as well as attending the daily business on the sovereign's behalf. In addition, the Lord High Commissioner undertakes official visits in Scotland as well as hosting engagements at the Palace of Holyroodhouse.

Historical legislation currently prevents the appointment of Catholics to the role: specifically, the Claim of Right Act 1689 set out restrictions against Catholics being appointed to public offices in Scotland, including the role of Lord High Commissioner. Most of that was changed by the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829, which removed many aspects of religious discrimination towards Catholics. However, it did not explicitly remove the restriction against Catholics holding the office of Lord High Commissioner. That means that a legislative restriction exists to this day against someone of the Catholic faith being appointed to this office. Until now, the issue did not arise because no Catholic was ever appointed to the role, but that position changed in December with the announcement of the appointment of Lady Elish Angiolini. The Bill will allow Lady Elish to take up the role.

There is similarity to the approach adopted in the Lord Chancellor (Tenure of Office and Discharge of Ecclesiastical Functions) Act 1974, which removed restrictions on Catholics taking up the role of Lord Chancellor. The Bill is short—as hon. Members can see—and narrowly focused. It will deliver a small but important modernisation to allow Catholics to undertake the role of Lord High Commissioner.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I should declare an interest as a member of the Church of Scotland and an elder of the Kirk. I very much support the Bill, but the Minister will be aware that the Law Society of Scotland has suggested that it would have preferred consultation before the Bill was

introduced. Does he have any reflections on that? I think that its particular concern was about wider religious discrimination on the statute book that could have also been dealt with as part of this process.

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support for the Bill. I will come on to the timetable that, by necessity, we have had to adopt.

Legislation of this kind is not always preceded by a consultation. Some hon. Members may remember our late friend David Cairns, whose position in this House was facilitated by legislation removing barriers on ordained priests being elected to the House. As I understand it, that particular piece of legislation did not have a consultation before it either.

I turn to Lady Elish Angiolini, whose appointment as the Lord High Commissioner for this year will be facilitated by the passage of the Bill, if it proceeds. Lady Elish has a distinguished background in law, justice and academia. She was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for services to the administration of justice in 2011. In 2022, she was appointed by Her late Majesty the Queen to the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle, and in that role she participated in the coronation in 2023. Lady Elish has also been principal of St Hugh's College, Oxford since 2012 and was made a pro-vice chancellor of the University of Oxford in 2017.

The announcement Lady Elish's appointment as Lord High Commissioner has been widely welcomed in Scotland. The appointment would make her the first Catholic to undertake the role of Lord High Commissioner and would be a significant symbol of unity, good will and collaboration between the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland. It builds on the spirit of the St Margaret declaration, signed at Dunfermline abbey in 2022. That was a historic declaration of friendship between the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland, and the legislation before the House builds on the spirit of that.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) referred to the circumstances and the timetable. I say to the House that the Bill is on an accelerated timetable, which is necessary to ensure that Lady Elish's appointment can be finalised ahead of the General Assembly in May. We hope to have all the parliamentary stages completed by the end of next month when, subject to Royal Assent, the formalities of the appointment can begin. That process will include a formal commission for the office, accompanied by a royal warrant, and the speedy passage of the Bill is to allow the formalities necessary to enable Lady Elish to act as Lord High Commissioner and address the General Assembly at its opening and closing sessions in May.

Were the appointment not able to proceed, that would be a setback to recent progress and an outcome that I do not believe anyone wants. I therefore hope that the Bill can proceed today with the support of all parties in the House. While the Bill relates to the reserved matter of the Crown, I have spoken to the First Minister of Scotland and to representatives of both the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland about the Bill and the desire to facilitate the appointment of Lady Elish. I thank them all for their constructive and collaborative approach. I have also had the pleasure of

discussing the matter with Lady Elish directly, and I have no doubt that she will be an excellent Lord High Commissioner.

Moving on to the Bill itself, there are two clauses. Clause 1 makes provision to allow a person of the Roman Catholic faith to hold the office of the Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and clause 2 sets out the territorial extent of the Bill and its commencement, including that the Bill will commence on Royal Assent. It is a small step to remove a religious barrier. Without it, neither Lady Elish nor any other Catholic could take up the appointment by the sovereign. The Bill changes that and ensures that the announced appointment can go ahead. It is short and simple, but still in its own way an important Bill. I hope it will receive a broad welcome, and I commend it to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

4.24 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to rise to speak in this debate. In fact, it is a genuine pleasure to be speaking, as a member of the Church of Scotland, on an historically significant piece of legislation. It could be argued that this is the latest piece of the work that was begun with the passing of the very legislation that it seeks in part to repeal—the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829—to ensure full equality for Catholics in our public realm.

I grew up not quite a son of the manse—it was three doors down—but very much in and around the kirk, and in eight years as a Member of this place, this is the first debate on any issue regarding the governance or affairs of the Church of Scotland that I can remember. Given that it relates to one of the two established Churches of our United Kingdom, that is on the one hand surprising, especially when compared with the hours we spend debating governance and issues pertaining to the Anglican Church. But then, its privileged status as the established Church in Scotland—underpinned by the Acts of Union and the Protestant Religion and Presbyterian Church Act 1707—means that since 1921, when the Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland formed part of the Church of Scotland Act 1921, it has not required any UK or Scottish parliamentary oversight regarding church worship, governance, constitution, membership or office bearers. This makes today an even more significant moment in the history of the Church and the nation, so infrequently are matters of the Kirk discussed on the Floor of either of Scotland's two Parliaments.

Our relationship between Church and state in the United Kingdom is a brilliantly fashioned piece of British pragmatism—or possibly a fudge, as some might describe it. Only in Great Britain could we have a Head of state who, while being Supreme Governor of one established Church, the Anglican Church of England, is also an ordinary member of a completely separate Presbyterian Church, the Church of Scotland. But we do, and no questions are asked. It is a piece of ecclesiastical deftness that would be inconceivable in any other country. However, I think we would all agree that it was carried out with ease by the late Queen Elizabeth, who demonstrated her commitment to, interest in and knowledge of both Churches throughout her reign—an interest, passion and dedication now matched by our King.

Today, we see another brilliant piece of British pragmatism in what we are about to legislate for. To many in the outside world, the appointment of the brilliant Dame Elish Angiolini to one of the most significant roles in Scottish public life will rightly be seen as a well-deserved honour for one as successful as she has been in her field and in Scottish and British public life. When we think about it, however, it remains quite incredible that a practising Roman Catholic will represent our Protestant monarch, whose very first act as King, in accordance with the Act of Succession, was to take an oath to

“inviolably maintain and preserve the Settlement of the true Protestant Religion as established by the Laws made in Scotland in prosecution of the Claim of Right and particularly by an Act intituled ‘An Act for securing the Protestant Religion and Presbyterian Church Government’”.

Rightly, no questions will be asked about her appointment.

There may in fact be some who question the appointment, but I think it speaks well to us as a nation—our two nations—that we are so relaxed about such an appointment today. It speaks to just how much Scotland has changed. I wonder if the Scotland of my grandfathers' time—both of whom were born in Glasgow in the 1920s and both of whom went on to be Kirk elders—would have been as relaxed about such an appointment. Bear in mind that the Church of Scotland was formed out of the blood and fire of the Scottish reformation, with John Knox in his revolutionary zeal creating the only truly national Calvinist church. It dominated public life for centuries: for better, especially in the realm of public education; and for worse, given that for too long it excluded all other forms of Christianity and adherence to anything but the Kirk's form of Christianity from most positions of influence in public life in Scotland. The songs still sung at certain football grounds between fans of certain rival teams speak to a more difficult time in the history of Scotland and indeed the Churches in Scotland—one that, sadly, has not totally been consigned to the history books.

Scottish public life was until incredibly recently dominated by the Kirk. Its General Assembly was covered in the same way as the sitting of a Scottish Parliament—at that point not in existence—would have been. Its membership when I was born in the mid-1980s sat at around 1 million people, and its presence touched the lives of a great many more. It had daily five-minute slots on Scottish television, with “Late Call” being parodied so well by the late great Rikki Fulton, as well as the Boys' Brigade and the Women's Guild. So many people had so much interaction with the Church, but Scotland has changed, and in many ways for the better.

In many ways, however, the changes in Scotland have presented challenges for the Church. Church membership, which was just shy of 1 million when I was born, sits now at just over 200,000. The General Assembly, which for many years sat as the one national forum in Scotland at which issues of importance to people across Scotland could be aired in public and debated, was covered as a sitting of a Parliament would be. Since the creation of the Scottish Parliament, it has not engaged the same media interest as it did in the years preceding 1999. The decline in numbers entering the ministry and the reduction in footfall in church buildings across the country have led to difficult—at times, heartbreaking—decisions being taken to sell buildings and reduce the Church estate.

[Andrew Bowie]

Yet there are huge positives as well. In recent decades, we have seen the Kirk move with the people of Scotland and modernise. It allowed women to be ordained back in 1968, some 24 years before the Church of England did likewise, and that led to huge growth in the number of women in leadership roles in the Church. The Church has had multiple female Moderators of the General Assembly, the first being Alison Elliot in 2004. In 2015, the Church allowed congregations to appoint ministers who were in same-sex marriages or civil partnerships. That was followed by it officially approving those marriages, and it allowed ministers to conduct them in 2022. Whether it is through traditional church services, outreach in communities across Scotland and Europe, the Guild, CrossReach, or missionary work across the world, the Church of Scotland continues to touch and guide our national life in many ways.

Religion in Britain is a funny thing. On the one hand, we famously “don’t do God.” On the other, we have prayers before every meeting of our national Parliament. On the one hand, unlike other countries, we treat our religion as private. On the other, bishops of one of our established Churches sit in one of our legislatures, and our Head of State is the supreme governor of one of our two established Churches. What we are doing today will baffle most of those watching our proceedings, not least those who do not know that there are two established Churches in the United Kingdom, but it is important, and it has the official Opposition’s full support. It is a significant gesture of good will and unity between two of Scotland’s largest Churches, and builds on the St Margaret declaration of friendship between the Catholic Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland in 2022. It is yet another display of fantastic British pragmatism, and the sensibleness that has underpinned how Churches and the state have interacted over centuries.

It only remains for me, on behalf of His Majesty’s official Opposition, to wish the new Lord High Commissioner well in her role; to thank the outgoing Moderator of the Church, Dr Shaw Paterson, for his service over this year; to wish the Moderator Designate, Rev. Rosemary Frew, well as she takes up the role; and to wish all those attending the upcoming General Assembly wisdom and patience as they deliberate on matters that mean so much to the national life of Scotland.

4.31 pm

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Like so many in my constituency and across Scotland, I have a lifelong association with the Church of Scotland. For so many of us in Scotland, the stories of our families are intertwined with local Church of Scotland parishes, not just through attendance at church on a Sunday, but through our marking of important life events. That link is evidenced in so many ordinary aspects of community life—at local badminton club meetings in the church hall, and at summer fêtes, jumble sales and coffee mornings.

The Church belongs to all our communities. It assists the elderly and frail in the community, supports young mothers, runs youth clubs, and makes commitments to international aid. My great aunt was an organist in the church in Bishopton, and in Paisley in my constituency. My two children were baptised in the Church of Scotland

in Paisley, and my husband and I were married in Drumclog memorial kirk in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid).

My sense of belonging to the Church of Scotland is no barrier to my appreciation of other faiths and other Christian communities. Indeed, the Church of Scotland has demonstrated a sincere commitment to ecumenical dialogue. The Catholic Church has been a willing and active participant in that effort. For more than 40 years, that has led to a shared commitment to people from all faiths and none working together, notably in food banks and many other community support services.

I know that my life is enriched by friendship with people of other faiths; the Church of Scotland has been similarly enriched. Today, for historical reasons that may seem odd to those following the debate, there is a legislative restriction on a person of the Roman Catholic faith being appointed Lord High Commissioner by the sovereign to act as an observer on the sovereign’s behalf. Such restrictions do not apply to people of others faiths, or indeed to those of no faith.

A change in the legislation is long overdue. I am pleased to support the Government in removing this unnecessary and unwelcome impediment to a Roman Catholic serving as the representative of His Majesty the King at the upcoming General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

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

4.34 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor). In the almost eight years that I have been here, I do not think I have ever looked forward to a debate this much, or taken this much pleasure from one, not just because there is no real party divide to worry about, but because it feels as if the Church of Scotland—of which I was, but am no longer, a member—is finally standing up for the sort of Scotland that we all want to see and work towards.

I am no longer a member of the Church, but I was for many years, and my late husband was an elder in the Kirk, not so very far from the constituency of the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). The Church is still a huge part of community life in Scotland. The fact that it has taken this long to overturn the injustice of the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829—a piece of discrimination against Roman Catholics—is something that we should bear in mind, and we should promise never to allow this to happen again. Although it is important that we get this legislation through quickly, so that we can appoint Lady Elish Angiolini, I hope that we address the wider discrimination left in Scottish society.

This is an important day. Lady Elish has been a role model for so many young women in Scotland. She was the first female Solicitor General, Lord Advocate and Lord Clerk Register, and, as the Minister mentioned, she has been the principal of St Hugh’s College, Oxford, since 2012. The fact that she will be the first Roman Catholic to hold the post of Lord High Commissioner is significant, and further enhances her position as a role model. Everyone I have spoken to from the Church

is delighted that she will be in position. We Liberal Democrats completely support the Bill, and hope that it goes through quickly.

4.36 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): The fact that in 2025 we can say that no Roman Catholic has ever held the post of Lord High Commissioner seems slightly absurd. There are, of course, other positions in this nation that a Catholic has never occupied and, as matters stand, can never occupy. It is good that we can break down one of those barriers today and reflect the extremely friendly relationship between the Catholic Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland—and indeed, through the interfaith council, the Church's relationship with other faiths, too. The change is also a mark of the high regard in which people of good will hold Lady Elish Angiolini, and of the many qualities that make her a fitting representative of His Majesty.

As we have heard, by convention, the sovereign is not normally present at the General Assembly, as he or she is technically an ordinary member of the Church, not its supreme governor, as he or she is in England. Traditionally, the Lord High Commissioner represents the sovereign, and is an observer appointed under the royal prerogative, so, as we know, there is no need for parliamentary approval of the appointment, or for legislation. As the Lord High Commissioner is a representative to the General Assembly, rather than part of the assembly, it is not necessary for them to be a member of the Church of Scotland, or indeed of any other church. However, the legislation that we are considering is necessary because the holder of the office cannot currently be a Roman Catholic.

The Scottish Claim of Right Act 1689 set out restrictions on Catholics being appointed to public office. Paragraph 19 states:

“That by the law of this Kingdome no papist can be King or Queen of this realme nor bear any office whatsoever therein”.

Those are harsh words, if I may say so. The Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829 was the culmination of a long process, working towards giving Catholics relief from the many restrictions imposed on them in Great Britain and Ireland prior to the Union of 1801. However, although that Act retained some restrictions on Catholics, most of which have since been repealed, some significant ones remain. That is what we wish to amend today.

As the Law Society of Scotland has suggested, it is unfortunate that the Bill cannot also be amended to remove the reference to the Lord High Chancellor from the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829, so that the 1829 Act can be brought into conformity with the Lord Chancellor (Tenure of Office and Discharge of Ecclesiastical Functions) Act 1974.

There is clearly a long history surrounding the appointment, with the first Lord High Commissioner having been appointed in 1580. In the intervening five centuries, significant people have held the post, including a number of former colleagues of mine, and of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), and including Lord James Douglas Hamilton, Lord Wallace, Lord Steel and George Reid. Colleagues might have spotted that they have something in common: they were all men. It was not until 1970 that the late Peggy Herbison, a former MP, was appointed the first female Lord High Commissioner. We then had to wait

another 24 years, until the appointment of Lady Fraser, for the second. Since then, the Princess Royal has held the post twice, and it would be good to think that, following Lady Elish's appointment, we might see woman appointed more regularly.

The appointment is expected to be made, we are told, on the basis of the merit and contribution to society of the appointee, and Lady Elish certainly qualifies on both counts. I should declare an interest: I have known Lady Elish since we were both teenagers and members of our respective schools' debating societies. She was very much better than I was, and even then, it was clear that she was destined for a very significant future. I also served in Government with her when she was appointed by First Minister Jack McConnell as the first female Solicitor General. Elish went on to become the first female Lord Advocate. She held both positions with distinction and was highly regarded during her time in office. Since then, she has served in a number of legal posts, and is currently the principal of St Hugh's College, Oxford, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford. She is also the first woman to hold the position of Lord Clerk of Scotland, another first for a woman. Significantly, she chaired the public inquiry into the abduction, rape and murder of Sarah Everard. We can safely say that Lady Elish is an outstanding candidate for the post of Lord High Commissioner.

As I mentioned in opening, it is regrettable that in 2025 we still have such laws on the statute book, but ironically the relationship between the two Churches is in very good heart. The signing of the St Margaret's declaration in 2022 by the Moderator and Archbishop Cushley, the representative of the Catholic bishops conference, seeks to build on the common heritage of the two denominations in the Christian tradition. It recognises that divisions are still present, but seeks to mend those divisions and to focus on what the Churches have in common. With the passing of the Bill today and the appointment of Lady Elish to the post of Lord High Commissioner, we take another welcome step on the journey to ecumenicalism.

4.42 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson). Of course we welcome the Bill, and the Government can be assured that we will do whatever we can to assist its progress through the House, but as we have heard from many hon. Members, the fact that in 2025 the United Kingdom is still having to introduce legislation to remove anti-Catholic legislation from the statute book is pretty embarrassing. That people of the Roman Catholic faith are still explicitly legally barred from holding the position of Lord High Commissioner of the Church of Scotland—a post that can be held by people of all other faiths and those with no religious belief—is nonsense.

I do not blame the Government or the Minister one iota. I am quite sure that they were as surprised as anybody when, after having appointed Lady Elish Angiolini to the office of Lord High Commissioner, one of their lawyers appeared, blowing the cobwebs off the 1829 Act, to reveal the flaw in their plan. That does not take away from the fact that it is ridiculous that two centuries after the Act was passed, the Government are still having to introduce these narrowly focused Bills to correct historical wrongs as and when they appear.

[Brendan O'Hara]

While I can understand that the Government were caught on the hop with regard to this particular appointment, I share the frustrations of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who wondered whether it would not be better to bundle all this legislation together and remove all existing anti-Catholic discrimination, rather than just doing it piecemeal as and when circumstances arise. That may well not have been possible on this occasion, given the time constraints of Lady Elish's appointment, and so the Government are having to get around the problem in this fashion, but I hope that we never again find ourselves in this situation and that the Government will find time to bring forward legislation that, once and for all, removes all traces of anti-Catholic discrimination from UK law.

Were the Minister to approach his boss with such a proposal, I suspect that he would receive a fair hearing. As far back as 2002, an aspiring young barrister—now the Prime Minister—writing in *The Guardian*, described the UK's remaining anti-Catholic laws as “deeply offensive” and an offence to multicultural Britain. Should such a Bill be introduced, I would like to think that it would pass through this House quickly and without too much opposition.

It is important to point out that this situation has nothing whatsoever to do with the Church of Scotland, which, to its enormous credit, has viewed the appointment of Lady Elish to the post of Lord High Commissioner as completely uncontroversial. The Rev. Fiona Smith, principal clerk of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, has said:

“We are honoured that His Majesty has appointed Lady Elish Angiolini as Lord High Commissioner...We very much look forward to welcoming her to the General Assembly.”

As others have mentioned, that is a remarkable transformation, because not so long ago the idea of a Catholic female, particularly one of Irish descent, being the sovereign's official representative in the Church of Scotland would have been unthinkable to many in this Kirk.

Although I do not think that the Minister was there personally, I am sure he will remember that it was only in 1923 that the infamous report entitled “The Menace of the Irish Race to our Scottish Nationality” was presented to the General Assembly, so the appointment of a Catholic woman as Lord High Commissioner being welcomed by the Church of Scotland is a wonderful example of how far Scotland as a nation has travelled in recent decades.

As the Minister has said, and as others have repeated, it should come as no surprise to any of us that if there was a trail to blaze, Elish Angiolini was the person who was going to blaze it. Born Elish Frances McPhilomy in Glasgow and educated at Notre Dame high school and the University of Strathclyde, she became one of Scotland's most prominent lawyers, serving as Solicitor General, as we have heard, before becoming Lord Advocate. She served under both Labour and SNP Governments at Holyrood between 2006 and 2011, before being appointed to St Hugh's College the following year.

Lady Elish remained prominent in public life; as we have heard, she chaired several Government inquiries into deaths in police custody and the investigation and

prosecution of rape. In 2020 she published a report on her review of the handling of complaints against Police Scotland, before becoming chair of the board of trustees at Reprieve, a charity made up of lawyers, investigators and campaigners fighting for justice for people facing human rights abuses, often at the hands of powerful Governments.

As if to cement her trailblazing reputation, in October 2023 Lady Elish became the first woman to be sworn in as the new Lord Clerk Register of Scotland—one of the oldest remaining great offices of state, with origins going back to the 13th century. Given the circumstances, I do not think that there could be a more appropriate appointment to the role of Lord High Commissioner of the Church of Scotland than that of Elish Angiolini, but, as I have said, it is deeply regrettable that because of her religious beliefs, we have had to pass a Bill in this House to allow it to happen.

Finally, given that this Bill is welcome but long overdue, I am delighted to inform the Government that should Lady Elish decide not to take up the role for any reason whatsoever, from this day on I, too, am available for selection.

4.49 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): The hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) has provided a most eloquent job application.

I was very pleased to read of the upcoming appointment of Lady Elish Angiolini. Not only would Lady Elish be the first Roman Catholic to hold the office of Lord High Commissioner, but she is incredibly well qualified—speaking as a recovering Scots lawyer, someone who has held the posts of Lord Advocate and Solicitor General with such accomplishment is clearly incredibly well qualified for the role. She is an example, as are some Members of this House, of the excellent education you can get from state schools in Glasgow.

The current law means that, at present, a Roman Catholic cannot be Lord High Commissioner. The Bill removes the legal impediments to that, and therefore I fully support it. Lady Elish Angiolini is a practising Roman Catholic, and much work has been done to build closer links between the Catholic Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland, including the St Margaret declaration signed in 2022. However, as importantly—if not more importantly—much work has taken place between local Catholic and Church of Scotland congregations. I have seen much of that work in Glasgow at first hand, pretty much every Sunday, and it is an absolute joy to behold.

More widely, Lady Elish's appointment is another very good example of the progress made between the two Churches. She has said the following of her appointment, which is something quite profound that we in this House should pause and reflect on:

“It is really important that people of all religions and faiths come together. The world is a scary place these days and it is important that people of all faiths meet, share, and promote peace and harmony. This is a good example of that.”

I could not agree more.

I say that this Bill is important, because it is a demonstration of people of different religions and faiths coming together in Scotland and putting aside their differences. In Glasgow, in Scotland and across our

family of nations, people of different faiths, and of no faith, work very well together for the good of our communities. In Glasgow, we see many examples of that. We have one of the oldest Muslim populations in Scotland, which gives greatly to people in Glasgow; we have a vibrant Sikh population, which dedicates itself to the service of the poorest in Glasgow; and the annual Holocaust memorial lecture at the University of Glasgow brings large and diverse audiences, including many of our Jewish brothers and sisters, to reflect on the terror of the Holocaust. People in Glasgow and in Scotland work hard to understand each other, and religious diversity is a source of joy, energy, strength and beauty in Glasgow's 850th year. The appointment of Lady Elish is a profound moment in this year.

All this speaks to the words of the St Margaret declaration:

“what we hold in common is often greater than what divides us.”

In these times, as Lady Elish suggests, it is important that we redouble our efforts for dialogue and understanding between people of faiths, as well as people of no faith. At this moment, we should also celebrate the real progress we have made in that regard across our family of nations. This Bill is one very good example, and I for one am proud to live in a family of nations that has had a Muslim First Minister and a Hindu Prime Minister. I am proud to see this Bill make progress through this House.

4.52 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr Douglas Alexander): It is a genuine pleasure to close this important debate. I should begin, as others have done, by declaring an interest, in that I myself am a member of the Church of Scotland. I give my thanks to hon. Members on both sides of the House for their thoughtful, measured and constructive contributions, in addition to their substantive support for this worthwhile piece of legislation.

As we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, this important Bill will facilitate the appointment of Lady Elish Angiolini as the first Roman Catholic to hold the historic office of Lord High Commissioner. The Bill will put an end to the statutory constraint that prevents someone from being appointed to that position solely on the basis of their religion. In this debate, we have heard a number of views and contributions from hon. Members, to which I will now turn.

First, I thank the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), for both his substantive support and the spirit of his speech to the House today. When it comes to the ecclesiastical deftness of which he spoke, the appropriate acknowledgment of the Kirk's place in our national life is surely more tablet than fudge—by which I mean tablet, rather than *The Tablet*, the esteemed Catholic newspaper. In all seriousness, the powerful case he made for ecumenical understanding in modern Scotland was well judged and surely commands support across the House. As he stated, thankfully Scotland has changed. As a fellow communicant member, he spoke with knowledge, understanding and empathy of the Kirk's continuing work and witness, guiding our national life.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) spoke movingly of the huge contribution made by the Church of Scotland, not just in the now renamed Clyde presbytery, but in local parishes right across our nation. I can personally attest to that. My grandfather, the Rev. Douglas Alexander, was a parish minister in Eaglesham in East Renfrewshire, and my father—also the Rev. Douglas Alexander—was, as my hon. Friend knows, a parish minister in Bishopton. She spoke of her family ties there, and I am proud to say that Bishopton is now in her constituency. My father served in that parish for almost 30 years. It is right to recognise the huge contribution of the Kirk to the life and work of communities right across our nation, and I am happy to do so from this Dispatch Box today.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) brought a zest and enthusiasm to this debate that I had not fully anticipated, but it seems merited in the light of the contributions we have heard. As the Liberal Democrat spokesman for Scotland, she described this Bill accurately as an action standing up for the Scotland that we all want to see. That is a sentiment with which we would all surely agree. She also spoke generously and accurately about Lady Elish Angiolini's genuinely pioneering role in our national life. That is a sentiment with which we would concur on this side of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) brings to this House her experience of serving in the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Cabinet. That experience was reflected in her remarks in this Chamber this afternoon, where she spoke with warmth and insight—in part born from a similar schooling at Notre Dame—about the suitability of Lady Elish Angiolini for the high office of Lord High Commissioner. I thank my hon. Friend for sharing those insights, and I concur with her view that Lady Elish is indeed very well qualified for the role.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West made an observation about why this Bill does not remove the reference to the Lord High Commissioner from the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829. I can offer her the assurance that that was made obsolete by the 1974 Act. While I can understand the desire for legislative tidying-up, the scope of this Bill is necessarily limited to the role of the Lord High Commissioner, and the position is clear: following this Bill, there will be no restriction on a Catholic holding either role.

The hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) offered his support and that of this party for the Bill, and we are grateful for that. Cross-party support in this House is a powerful symbol of our shared commitment to cross-denomination and cross-faith understanding in modern Scotland. He rightly recognised the time constraints under which we are necessarily operating today to ensure that Lady Elish Angiolini can take up this office in time for the gathering of the Kirk's General Assembly in the spring. Despite smuggling into his speech a late and, I have to say, rather unexpected job application, he rightly recognised Lady Elish's cross-party credentials as a genuine trailblazer in Scottish national life.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) described with characteristic eloquence how, to quote him, people in Glasgow

[Mr Douglas Alexander]

“work hard to understand each other, and religious diversity is a source of joy, energy, strength and beauty in Glasgow’s 850th year.”

In that, he is correct. I should perhaps declare another interest, in that Glasgow is the city of my birth, but it is right to recognise that after an at times troubled history of sectarian and religious intolerance, today people make Glasgow, and those people are comprised of all faiths and none. I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful advocacy for dialogue and understanding, which brought to mind Jo Cox, lately of this House. I thank him for his understanding and contribution to the debate today. His speech was very much in keeping with the spirit of the St Margaret declaration.

The debate has indicated that there is support for this legislation across the House. I look forward to hearing further from hon. Members in the remaining stages of the Bill, due to follow shortly. With the support of the House, I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Church of Scotland (Lord High Commissioner) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[Ms NUSRAT GHANI *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

HOLDING OF OFFICE OF LORD HIGH COMMISSIONER
BY ROMAN CATHOLIC

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I remind Members that in Committee they should not address the Chair as “Madam Deputy Speaker”. I ask them please to use our names; alternatively, “Madam Chair” or “Madam Chairman” is acceptable.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider clause 2.

5 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr Douglas Alexander): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani.

I hope that I will not detain the Committee for long in dealing with the two clauses. The purpose of clause 1 is to make provision to allow a person of the Roman Catholic faith to hold the office of Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The Lord Chancellor (Tenure of Office and Discharge of Ecclesiastical Functions) Act 1974 removed restrictions on individuals taking up the office of Lord Chancellor, and, similarly, the Bill removes the restriction on the Lord High Commissioner from the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829. Clause 2 sets out the extent, commencement and short title of the Bill: it extends to England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It will come into force on Royal Assent, which will ensure that the upcoming appointment of Lady Angiolini as the Lord High Commissioner goes ahead in the run-up to the General Assembly in May.

It is clear that the Bill commands a broad consensus, and I am grateful to colleagues for their approach to it. I look forward to the rest of the debate today, and to seeing the Bill on the statute book soon.

The Chairman: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I, too, will not detain the Committee for long, having already expressed the full support of His Majesty’s official Opposition for the Bill, and it will come as no surprise that we are not proposing any amendments in Committee. I do, however, have two questions for the Minister. When does he expect the Bill to go to the House of Lords, and can he assure the Committee and, indeed, the Church of Scotland that everything possible will be done to secure its swift passage to Royal Assent so that it is passed in time for the upcoming General Assembly of the Church of Scotland?

Mr Alexander: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we want progress to be expeditious. I shall be happy to write to him once we know the exact date on which it will be introduced in the House of Lords, contingent on support in this Chamber today, but I can assure him that,

as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster made clear, we have been engaging in regular dialogue with the Church of Scotland and the other relevant offices, and we have every confidence, on the basis of the support we have seen today and will hopefully see in the other place, that we will be able to provide a timetable ensuring that Lady Angiolini is able to take up her position by the time of the General Assembly in May.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

King's consent signified.

5.4 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Given the mood in the House, I do not intend to detain people for long. By now we know the purpose of the Bill: to allow Catholics to be appointed to the role of Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. That is the Bill in a nutshell. Today's debates have demonstrated that there is wide support for the Bill across the House.

I thank the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church and the Scottish Government for their engagement and collaboration in the development of the legislation. I also thank all those who spoke in our debates, including the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor), the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara), my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office. I am grateful to all of them.

As we have said, at the signing of the St Margaret's declaration at Dunfermline abbey in 2022, both the Catholic Church and the Church of Scotland declared that what they hold in common is far greater than what divides them, and that they would commit to continue working towards greater unity. I hope that this Bill, in its small way, will continue in that spirit.

The hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber referred to 1923 and asked if I was there. I was not there, but in the same year W. B. Yeats wrote that "peace comes dropping slow". Maybe equality sometimes comes dropping slow too, but today we have taken a small and important step, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

5.6 pm

Andrew Bowie: I would like to record the thanks of the Opposition to those who have made possible this Bill, which will hopefully soon become an Act, and to Members from across the House for their contributions. I am grateful for the engagement with the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church and Lady Elish herself.

I think we can all agree that the Bill is a positive step and speaks well to the type of country that Scotland is today, which was certainly not the case 100 years ago. I express yet again my best wishes to the new Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly, and to all those attending its deliberations in its upcoming meeting in May.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker: With the leave of the House, I will put motions 5 to 7 together.

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

RATING AND VALUATION

That the draft Non-Domestic Rating (Levy and Safety Net) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration (Biometric Information etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration and Nationality (Fees) (Amendment) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Question agreed to.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

[Relevant Document: First Report of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, Re-appointment of an Electoral Commissioner, HC 740.]

Ordered,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, praying that His Majesty will re-appoint Dame Elan Closs Stephens as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 13 March 2025 for the period ending on 12 March 2027.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

HOUSE OF COMMONS MEMBERS' FUND

Ordered,

That—

(1) the sum to be deducted from the salaries of Members of the House of Commons in pursuance of section 4(1) and (2) of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 2016 shall be 0.03% of the salary of each Member of the House of Commons; and

(2) that sum shall be deducted from the beginning of the financial year starting on 1 April 2025 and for each subsequent financial year thereafter (subject to any further resolution of the House of Commons under section 4(2) of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 2016).—(*Chris Elmore.*)

MODERNISATION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mike Amesbury be discharged from the Modernisation Committee and Chris Vince be added.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

Trade Diversion and Windsor Framework

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

5.8 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The issue of diversion of trade is becoming an increasing problem of manifold proportions for Northern Ireland. Before the protocol, goods could be moved from Birmingham to Belfast as easily as they could be moved from Gloucester to Glasgow, but no more. The resulting Irish sea border, and all that comes with it, has caused a huge and increasing diversion of trade.

We can get an insight into how things naturally should be and how business wishes them to be by looking at the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency figures of recent years. If we look at the pre-protocol days, we see that in 2018, for example, the volume of goods purchased from the Irish Republic was £2.8 billion, but the amount purchased from GB was five times that—£13.4 billion. There we have a snapshot of the natural inclination of trade in Northern Ireland, particularly for our raw materials.

Before Brexit, there was a similar situation. Indeed, we could say—and some may say—that that is a better reflection of whether there has been trade diversion. Before Brexit, we could as readily buy our goods from the Republic as we could from GB, because we were all in the EU single market. Even then, the predominant trading of choice was from GB. That is no surprise because for decades Northern Ireland has been a particularly integrated part of the UK economy.

However, along came the protocol, which requires Northern Ireland to be subject to a foreign customs code—that of the EU—which of course treats GB as if it is a foreign country. Therefore, when goods come from outside the EU into the EU, and we in Northern Ireland are regarded as being in the EU for these purposes, those goods have to be checked, with customs declarations, documentary checks and physical checks on, for example, all our raw materials. So it is no surprise that that is inevitably bound to cause diversion of trade.

We were told, as part of the spin of selling the protocol, “Oh, there are protections against the diversion of trade, and it wouldn’t be allowed to happen”. Article 16 of the protocol, we were told, was our safety net:

“If the application of this Protocol leads to...diversion of trade...the United Kingdom may unilaterally take appropriate safeguard measures.”

It has led to the diversion of trade, but the United Kingdom Government have not taken unilateral action in that regard.

The fact of the diversion of trade is a challenge to the protocol’s proponents. It is a challenge to those who put this upon us, and it is one that they have to meet, but which I fear they will not meet. Where is the proof, some may ask, of the diversion of trade? Again, it is in the NISRA statistics. Dr Esmond Birnie, a renowned economist in Northern Ireland, has done a succession of studies of the NISRA statistics. He wrote back on 11 December 2024 that the data

“provides further evidence that the NI economy is becoming more trade integrated with the Republic”,

and of

“North-South trade growing at very rapid rates at the expense of what previously was an inflow of goods from GB.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Jim Allister: Perhaps in a moment.

We also see that in the purchase of goods figures that NISRA reports. It has given us figures from 2020, contrasting them in a table with those for 2023. The year 2023 was only the beginning of things getting difficult, as the Irish sea border did not in effect come into place until October 2023 because of the grace periods. However, those NISRA figures show that Northern Ireland’s purchases of goods increased from 2020 to 2023—of course, it was a period of inflation—by 24% from GB, but by 50% from the Republic of Ireland, meaning twice the growth rate in the buying of goods into Northern Ireland that would previously have come from our integrated United Kingdom economy.

The Office for National Statistics business insights and conditions survey states that 13.1% of currently trading manufacturers based in GB had sent goods to Northern Ireland in the past 12 months. That was at the end of 2024. But in January 2021, 20% of manufacturers in GB were sending goods to Northern Ireland. So, in just those four years there has been a dramatic fall in the number of manufacturers supplying goods to Northern Ireland. It has nearly halved in four years. The ONS data for 2024 tells us more: 11.7% of companies tell us they have stopped trading with Northern Ireland. Why? Because of the bureaucracy, because they have to make customs declarations, because they have to have them checked, and because they have to employ extra staff to do all that. Many companies, particularly in smaller sectors, have simply said that they are not going to do it.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Jim Allister: In a moment, perhaps. I need to make sure I get through what I need to say.

It is beyond doubt, I would respectfully say, that there has been trade diversion. Back in September, the Road Haulage Association gave evidence to a parliamentary Committee of this House. It told the Committee that 30% of haulage lorries that take goods to GB are returning empty. Why? Because GB companies have stopped supplying. Now, that is an incredible thing to contemplate. Trade works on the basis that you take goods out, and then you fill your lorry and bring goods back. That is how you make it viable and how the economy works. That 30% of lorries now returning to Northern Ireland are returning empty is an incredible indictment of the operation of the protocol.

And things are getting worse. The EU regulation on general product safety now puts more burdens on companies selling into Northern Ireland, because they have to meet enhanced EU product safety regulations. I have mentioned the craft sector in this House before. Recently, 11 suppliers in that niche market stopped supplying Northern Ireland. It will get worse, because the partial border is coming and they will have to do more paperwork and make more declarations about sending simple parcels from GB to Northern Ireland.

Tesco has slides that it shows to its own suppliers stating that they should now buy from the Republic of Ireland because it is easier to supply from there than from GB. The same is happening in veterinary medicines and in every sector.

Why does that matter? It matters for a very pertinent political reason. The whole idea of trade diversion and the whole purpose of the protocol was and is to build an all-Ireland economy: to dismantle the economic links between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and enhance links with the Irish Republic, thereby creating stepping stones out of the United Kingdom into an all-Ireland for Northern Ireland. That was the determination that lay behind the protocol.

We do not need a protocol to govern trade. It is demonstrable that if we can organise trade through Northern Ireland to GB without border checks in the Irish sea, and if, as the Government now say is possible, we can do it with checks away from the border, then equally we could do it in the other direction, through mutual enforcement. That would mean recognising that if we are going to export from one territory to another, our manufacturers must produce goods to the standards of the other, and we would enforce that by making it a criminal offence to do otherwise. That is the essence of mutual enforcement. It would work, but it is not allowed to work, because the political agenda of the protocol is to ensure this reorientation and realignment.

We are told that we now have Intertrade UK, but it has no staff and no budget, in comparison with InterTradeIreland, which has more than 50 staff and a budget of £6.5 million a year and is active across the whole area. Intertrade UK has been set up as a shadow, but it is not able to compete in any sense.

This Government have allowed the economy of Northern Ireland to drift out of the United Kingdom. I believe those who are protocol enthusiasts want that to happen. Now it is happening, the onus is back on the Government to do something about it.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before the hon. and learned Gentleman takes the intervention, I know that he was anxious about getting through his speech, but, because the Adjournment debate started early, he does have until 7.30 pm. [*Laughter.*] I believe he was about to take an intervention—does he want to continue with that?

Jim Allister: I will give way.

Sammy Wilson: You shouldn't encourage him, Madam Deputy Speaker—he will take to 7.30 pm and beyond, because this is such an important subject.

Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the diversion of trade has not only political but economic implications for Northern Ireland? There are increased transport costs, because lorries do not come both ways with goods in them; there is the fact that many people chose suppliers in England because they are cheaper, better-quality and so on, and now manufacturers in Northern Ireland are having to go to the second-best suppliers; and there is also the additional paperwork that is involved. That all adds to costs and makes the Northern Ireland economy less competitive, which therefore makes it more difficult for it to be viable.

Jim Allister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Business is like water: it follows the easiest course. When we were an integrated part of the UK economy, the easiest and cheapest course was to do the greater bulk of our trade with GB. That, historically, has been our basic supply market for our raw materials and everything else. However, when a fettering of trade is imposed, naturally, business will follow the easiest route. The easiest route now, sadly, is to cease trading from GB and accentuate trading with the EU, and most particularly the Republic of Ireland.

The United Kingdom was built on two pillars, according to the Acts of Union. The first was a political union, with article 3 establishing this House as one sovereign Parliament for the whole United Kingdom; the second was an economic union, through article 6, which established unfettered trade between and within all parts of the United Kingdom. That was what article 6 said—that there should be unfettered trade. But along came the protocol, which fettered trade, leaving the Supreme Court with no choice but to accept that the protocol had therefore subjugated article 6. The very foundation of our economic union, article 6, which says that there shall be unfettered trade, is in suspension. It is no wonder that the consequence of that fettering of trade is a diversion of trade.

Robin Swann: I thank the hon. and learned Member for giving way. It is on that diversion of trade that I wish to speak. He and most Northern Ireland MPs will know of the fantastic Colemans Garden Centre in my constituency of South Antrim. It supplies quite a number of people across Northern Ireland who have had difficulty in getting plants and fruit brought across from their main supplier, McIntyre Fruit, in Scotland. Just before this debate, the manager of Colemans Garden Centre told me that he had been in contact with Stuart McIntyre who said that he had just picked up a contract to supply a firm in Japan. He said that, bureaucracy-wise and administration-wise, it is easier for a supplier in Scotland to supply into Japan than it is to supply across the 14-mile stretch of water into Northern Ireland.

Jim Allister: That is the absurdity of where we have got to, and it has been accentuated by our subjection to the EU's general product safety regulations. Those regulations provide that if a company is supplying into Northern Ireland from outside the EU—in other words, from GB—it must have an agent resident within the EU. The company must complete the paperwork on the origin of its goods and on the customs declarations, and it cannot do so without employing an agent within the EU. Anyone who knows anything about business will know that that is added cost that will cause many businesses to say, "Northern Ireland is not a huge market to start with, so I shall just not bother with it." That is what all our businesses in Northern Ireland are suffering from.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. and learned Member on securing this debate. Small businesses in my constituency have told me that they are now having to pay His Majesty's Revenue and Customs a duty for buying goods from English suppliers and then selling the same goods in Northern Ireland to the Northern Ireland consumer, remaining within the internal market. Last Friday, one trader told me that he is now having to

[*Jim Shannon*]

pay more in duties to HMRC than the invoice was for the goods. That is because HMRC does not trust that the goods will remain, but assumes that they will be sold into the EU. Does the hon. and learned Member not agree that the same HMRC displays greater trust and acceptance of VAT declarations, on the premise that they will be checked at random, than it does for internal trade within the United Kingdom? What a backward step that is.

Jim Allister: I agree. Let us just think about the Irish sea border. Given the infinitesimal amount of goods and trade that cross that border—infinitesimal when compared with the proportion of EU trade—it is incredible that it has 20% of all the checks across the whole of the EU. That infinitesimal amount when set against the totality of EU trade warrants 20% of all the checks in the EU. It would be easier to bring in goods from Belarus into the EU than it is to bring goods from GB into Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. and learned Member talks about that trade being infinitesimal—0.4% of EU trade crosses that border, yet it accounts for 20% of checks. Does he agree that that will not be the story of the future? In my constituency, we are already building a £140 million EU control post on a 10-acre site. Once that is open, there will be much more scope to check goods to an even greater degree. If that is not the point of having such a large EU border post in the middle of the United Kingdom, what is?

Jim Allister: That is the point, because it is an EU border. EU trade laws govern the Irish sea border. EU officials, under the protocol, have the right to supervise checking. When we have the full panoply of facilities that are being built at Larne and at other ports, I fear that we will see the muscle of EU inspections. The protocol gives the EU, which boasted that the price of Brexit would be Northern Ireland, the upper hand in that regard.

I return to the point that the protocol is imbued with a political motivation, and that motivation is not to get Northern Ireland the best of both worlds. My goodness, what a con that idea is. The protocol was supposed to make Northern Ireland a Mecca, a Singapore of the west, but we now know that there has been no uplift whatsoever in foreign direct investment. Why? Because a manufacturer coming to Northern Ireland is interested not just in selling goods out of Northern Ireland, but in where it is getting its raw materials. When a manufacturer is told that its basic supply line has to pass through an international customs border controlled by the EU, the shine soon goes off the prospect of investing in Northern Ireland.

We are in a pretty dire situation, which is getting worse, and which has massive constitutional and economic implications, but I fear that the Government are deaf and blind to the issues, because they do not want to face the consequences. They are hand in glove with the EU, dismantling Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom, and setting us on a course for the economics marrying with the politics, and Northern Ireland ceasing to be.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): We were told by the previous Administration that with the new green lane and the Windsor framework, all would be glorious—it could be the best of both worlds. Did the previous Administration mislead the House?

Jim Allister: Not just the previous Administration; I think there has been gross, calculated and deliberate misleading about the protocol from day one. We were told that the green lane was gone. It has not. We still have to do customs declarations. We still have document checks, but all our raw materials must, by dint of the protocol, come through the red lane, so they must be subject to all the rigour of the EU's international border. That is what will cripple our economy. We have seen it in small craft sectors. Niche sectors that depend on small suppliers are giving up. When that bites, as it will, we will see that right across our economy.

The Government need to find some dignity and stand up for this United Kingdom, which is not just Great Britain but includes Northern Ireland. It is time to put some mettle into defending that position, and to row back from the disastrous destructive elements that the protocol has brought us.

5.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) on securing the debate. The House, once again, has been left in no doubt but that he speaks about Northern Ireland's trading arrangements with fervour and sincerity, as he did in the Westminster Hall debate in November, to which I responded, and in the debate on his private Member's Bill in December, to which the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland replied on the Government's behalf. On the Windsor framework, his position is quite clear: he is opposed to it.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State has outlined that on a number of occasions, both he and the Under-Secretary have responded to issues that the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) has raised. He will be aware that I wrote to him about a month ago about the problems with horticultural industry trade between Scotland and Northern Ireland, but I have yet to get a response.

Hilary Benn: I can only apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I try hard to be punctilious about responding to correspondence. Those watching will have noted what he said, and he can, I hope, anticipate receiving a reply from me very soon.

For the Government's part, I want to be equally clear. We needed to have a system in place for managing a unique set of circumstances. The system we have is the inevitable result of leaving the European Union. That is where this all began; if that had not happened, we would not be having this discussion. What did that result in? Two trading entities—the United Kingdom and the European Union—with different rules, but an open border between them. That is to be found nowhere else in the world. In other words, all of us together—everyone has to take responsibility for what they argued for, and for the consequence of that—faced the question: how do we deal with the unique situation of two trading entities with different rules having an open border between them?

Jim Allister: The way not to deal with it is to say, “We, the United Kingdom, will hand over part of our territory to EU jurisdiction. We will put it under the EU’s customs code, which will decree the rest of the United Kingdom a foreign territory. We will subject that part of our territory to having 300 areas of its law not made in the United Kingdom; law in those areas cannot even be amended in the United Kingdom. It will be foreign law imposed.” This could have been dealt with by mutual enforcement. We could have said, “We want to trade with each other, and we want to be neighbourly, so we will guarantee, on pain of criminal conviction, that anything we send into your territory meets your standards and vice versa.” Why did things have to be made complicated, at the expense of jettisoning Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom economically and constitutionally?

Hilary Benn: The hon. and learned Gentleman argues in favour of what he calls mutual enforcement, but that is not a credible basis for resolving the dilemma created by our leaving the European Union.

Jim Allister *indicated dissent.*

Hilary Benn: The hon. and learned Gentleman may disagree. I am expressing the Government’s view, which is that it is not a credible basis. One thing is absolutely clear: the answer was never to try to wish the dilemma away and pretend that it did not exist. I am afraid that, at times, it has appeared as though that argument has been advanced.

The first go at trying to find an answer was the Chequers plan, which did not get support. The Northern Ireland protocol was the second go, but that was never going to work—I made that argument as an Opposition Back Bencher—so the Windsor framework was negotiated. There is no denying that the Windsor framework represents a huge improvement on the prospect created by the Northern Ireland protocol.

Sammy Wilson: The Secretary of State says that the situation is unprecedented, and that unique arrangements have therefore been put in place. The Government recently recognised that the flow of trade from the Irish Republic through Northern Ireland into GB could cause a situation where goods had to be checked to safeguard the GB market, yet they have been able to put in place arrangements, without all this elaboration, that do not require laws to apply to traders in the Irish Republic; they are simply checks away from the border. If the unique situation of trade from GB into Northern Ireland, which has a non-check border with the Republic, has to be dealt with through a labyrinth of regulations, why is it possible to avoid that in the other direction? If such arrangements can work from Northern Ireland to GB, why can they not work from GB to Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: The answer is this: as a sovereign country, it falls to us to decide how we check goods that arrive in our territory. For quite a period after our leaving the European Union, the last Government were not checking stuff coming across the channel, first, because there was nowhere to do the checks, and secondly, because they were concerned about delays, shortages and added costs for the consumer. They repeatedly put off implementing checks. At the same time, British exporters were experiencing the full impact of checks on the goods that they sent the

other way, across the channel to Calais and the rest of the European Union. It is for sovereign countries to determine what checks they apply. The same truth applies to the European Union; it has a single market.

We are a responsible country. Some may argue that we should be irresponsible and say, “Well, this is not our problem; let us leave it to the EU to sort it out.” In the end, we had to have a negotiated answer to the question created by our departure from the European Union on the goods that cross that non-existent border. The one thing that almost everybody agreed on during the Brexit debates was that the border needed to remain as it was. That open border is important for a whole host of reasons, not least the extraordinary progress that Northern Ireland has made in the 26 years since the signing of the Good Friday agreement. The question, therefore, was: how does the EU ensure that goods that cross that border and come into the Republic, and go on to France, Germany or Greece, meet the rules? In exactly the same way, we would ask: how do we know that goods coming into the United Kingdom meet our laws? The only way to do that was with a negotiation.

Richard Tice: The right hon. Gentleman said that it is up to a sovereign nation to look after its own borders and determine its own checks. Does he accept that there has been trade diversion within the United Kingdom? If so, does he accept that it is within the Government’s remit to use article 16 or drop the checks to protect trade within our sovereign borders?

Hilary Benn: I have only just begun my remarks, but if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I shall shortly come to the point that he raises.

The Windsor framework protects the UK internal market, while, as I argued a moment ago, enabling the EU to be confident that its rules will be respected. The Government’s view and my view is that that was the responsible thing to do in the circumstances, because this Government support sustainable arrangements for Northern Ireland that respect its particular circumstances—indeed, they are unique—and its place in the Union, and that uphold the Good Friday agreement. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim’s central argument this evening is that we should trigger article 16, the unilateral safeguard in the Windsor framework. To do that would be contrary to Northern Ireland having stable arrangements for trade, now and in future. It would disregard the benefits that the Windsor framework offers for businesses—indeed, the benefits that are actively relied upon by businesses, including those that are taking advantage of Northern Ireland’s unique access to the UK and EU markets—[*Interruption.*] The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim shakes his head, but I have met businesses that have told me how they are taking advantage of that dual market access. I meet businesses in my constituency that can see what Northern Ireland has got out of these unique arrangements.

Those benefits will be enhanced by the UK internal market “facilitations”—that is the phrase—that will come into force in the near future, and that will, on a durable and legally binding basis, support the smooth flow of goods across the whole of the UK when the next phase of the UK internal market system is implemented this year, without, for example, unnecessary international customs paperwork.

[Hilary Benn]

We have seen the benefits of negotiating a way forward. There is unilateralism, as the hon. and learned Gentleman argues, and there are the benefits of negotiation. In respect of agrifood and sanitary and phytosanitary measures, we have been able to lift the old ban on the movement of seed potatoes. Not all those problems have been solved—I am the first to acknowledge that—but it is an improvement compared with the situation before. We are now able to apply UK public health and safety standards to agrifoods on the basis of primacy for goods staying in the United Kingdom moving under the Windsor framework schemes. We have reached agreements with the EU on tariff rate quotas, enabling businesses from Northern Ireland to import steel and agrifood products under UK tariff rates.

We also have an active Assembly that is scrutinising the regulations and raising its views—[Laughter.] Well, I will come back to that point later on. Medicines for the whole of the UK are now authorised by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, and we have ensured that Northern Ireland benefits from the same VAT, alcohol duty and other taxes as the rest of the UK.

All of those are undoubted benefits for Northern Ireland. They are benefits of the framework that supports Northern Ireland's access to the two markets, and from which this integral part of the United Kingdom, which Northern Ireland is, uniquely benefits. This is possible because we have a lawful and sustainable agreement, in stark contrast to what the hon. and learned Gentleman has proposed as a way forward.

I would be the first to acknowledge from this Dispatch Box that the Windsor framework is not perfect. We all know that. Where problems arise with the practical operation of the framework, this Government and the EU have tried to show that we can work through them in a constructive and pragmatic way, because that is what we have to do. For example, having listened to businesses, we took a pragmatic decision to extend on the timetable for implementing the new arrangements on parcels. One of the consequences of doing that was that the introduction of the new, less onerous customs arrangement was put off, because the EU's view was that we needed to do the parcels at the same time in order for the new customs arrangements to come in.

Another example is the horticultural sector, where, in the last month the restrictions on the movement of two species of plant were removed. If we are talking about trees, I think that takes it up to 23, including our beloved silver birch and, I am advised, a number of varieties of cherry tree that were sorted out at the end of last year.

On the question of the Stormont brake, we acted on the concerns that the Northern Ireland Assembly raised about the potential implications of the new rules on chemical labels, font sizes and so on by committing to consult on taking forward measures across the UK that will protect the UK internal market. I would just point out—because the hon. Gentleman looks slightly sceptical—that there is a high bar to be met for the Stormont brake. When I received the application as Secretary of State, I was under a legal obligation to consider the application under the rules of the Stormont brake, and I made the decision that I did. In the end, what the Government announced was moving towards the same

outcome that those who had raised the concerns in the first place wanted, just by different means than they had sought. In the end, the Stormont brake process actually worked to achieve the outcome that the Assembly wanted.

Jim Allister: I think the Secretary of State should listen to himself. What he is saying to the House is that we should be grateful for some sort of dud mechanism to deal with the situation whereby the right to make laws in 300 areas has been gifted to a foreign power, and that people elected in Northern Ireland can have no say in those laws and cannot amend, move or bring them into effect. He says that we should be grateful that, in those 300 areas of law, we might be able to go to the EU and say, "Please, Sir, would you ever mind just making that a little better?" Really? Where is the sense of dignity from this United Kingdom, that we should so prostrate ourselves to a foreign unelected jurisdiction—elected by no one in the United Kingdom—allow them to make our laws, and then claim as a victory the fact that we have a right to go and ask them to make some changes? But the Secretary of State has failed to answer the question. There is trade diversion—what is he going to do about it?

Hilary Benn: I am not asking anyone to be grateful for anything; I am simply pointing out to the House the problem that was created in the first place when we left the European Union.

Jim Allister: It is punishment.

Hilary Benn: If I heard the hon. and learned Gentleman correctly, from a sedentary position he said, "punishment". I could not disagree more. I would encourage him to reflect on what he has said, because I do not think that he acknowledges that there was an issue there that had to be addressed, and wishing it away was never going to work.

Jim Shannon: I am reminded of the wee song we used to sing in Sunday school many years ago:

"So high, you can't get over it,
So low, you can't get under it".

The Stormont brake does not work because it is too high and too low; it is just not functional. In my intervention on the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), I referred to the HMRC cost. To give the Secretary of State an example, last week a business said that the HMRC charges have got to the stage where they are even more expensive than the goods the business is bringing in. There has to be something wrong when it gets to the stage where it is not the issue of getting the product across but the cost factor. Could the Secretary of State look at that, because there is something wrong with a system that ends up costing us more, when it did not cost that amount before the Brexit system came in?

Hilary Benn: If the hon. Gentleman wishes to provide me with further information about the particular example he has raised, I will of course look at it.

On trade, I have a slightly different set of figures from those that the hon. and learned Gentleman used. From 2020 to 2023, purchases in Northern Ireland from GB went from £13.4 billion to £16.2 billion—an increase of 20.7%. Sales to the year ending December 2023 from Northern Ireland to GB rose by 12.4%, to £17.1 billion. He used a phrase at the beginning of his speech—I hope

I wrote it down correctly—the “natural inclination of trade”. I would simply observe that the inclination of trade is a consequence of decisions that individuals and firms make, and those patterns change over time depending on what they want to buy or sell and what the market itself looks like.

The point I was making, without seeking gratitude, is that in every one of the examples I have just given, the Government worked to resolve the challenges we faced, working with stakeholders in Northern Ireland and with the EU, in what I think is a constructive and mutually beneficial way. That is what a responsible Government do, including abiding by commitments in international law on the world stage. The hon. and learned Gentleman advocates triggering article 16. That measure refers both to trade and to instances where serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties are liable to persist. Given that most goods are flowing relatively smoothly between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, how can it be argued that we are facing those difficulties?

I would just make the point that if one goes to the port, the lorries come off and most of them go on their way—the goods are moving. That is in contrast to the argument that the hon. and learned Gentleman put towards the end of his speech, when he used the phrase “cripple” in relation to the Northern Ireland economy. I have seen no evidence that the Northern Ireland economy, which, by the way, has the lowest unemployment in the whole of the United Kingdom, is being crippled by the matters that we are discussing.

Mr Campbell *rose*—

Hilary Benn: I will give way, but then I will make progress.

Mr Campbell: The Secretary of State is being very generous with his time. He just said most goods are flowing freely. Does he not agree that he should amend that to say, “In certain sectors, most goods are flowing freely, but in certain other sectors, they most certainly are not”?

Hilary Benn: It depends on the hon. Gentleman’s definition of “freely.” There are requirements that certain goods must meet. There is the retail movement scheme and the horticultural scheme, and certain paperwork and documents are required, looking forward to the customs requirements being reduced later this year—hopefully when the new arrangements come in—but the goods move, and I do not think that anyone in the debate can stand up and say that the goods are not moving in those circumstances.

As I have indicated, the Windsor framework represents a step forward. Although I respect the sincerity with which the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim makes his argument, I do not believe that current circumstances meet the article 16 test. Pulling that lever in the current circumstances would actually throw away the progress secured by the framework and damage the good faith that has been built up in taking the framework forward. We all need to remember that, not long ago, we had a Government who signed an international agreement and then set about showing that they had no intention of honouring it. That did extraordinary damage to the United Kingdom’s international reputation.

Jim Allister *rose*—

Hilary Benn: The hon. and learned Gentleman has had quite a lot to say and I have given way to him three times, so I hope he will bear with me while I continue my remarks.

In the past, the idea that the UK would be a country that signed an international agreement and then reneged upon it would have been extraordinary to us all in this House, but that is what happened in very recent living memory, and it is why I put this point to the hon. and learned Gentleman.

The last Government negotiated the Windsor framework. I stood up in the House and supported it. The Opposition supported it at that time, and I voted for it because I genuinely believed that it represented a significant step forward. But if we do not honour the most recent agreement that we have signed with the European Union, why would it wish to reach agreement on what this Government are currently seeking, in particular on an SPS veterinary and agrifood agreement? This Government have come in saying that we want to do that, while the last Government appeared to say, “Well, the trade and co-operation agreement is all we want—we don’t want anything else.” This Government have a very different view: we want to negotiate an SPS veterinary and agrifood agreement, and that would help considerably with some of the issues that have been raised during the debate. The Government will continue to listen to the concerns of businesses and respond pragmatically.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I have listened intently to the Secretary of State’s contribution and I am somewhat bemused by some of what he said. He speaks of businesses in his constituency that are jealous of what Northern Ireland businesses have. What we have in Northern Ireland is increased costs, increased paperwork and impediments to trade. It is increasingly difficult for engineering, agrifood and horticultural businesses in my constituency. I have invited the Secretary of State to visit those businesses, but I am still waiting. I encourage him to come to Northern Ireland and listen to the businesses that are impacted by the protocol and the Windsor framework on a daily basis. I also heard today about two plants that have been added to the ever-lengthening list of plants that are not available to Northern Ireland, well whoop-de-do-da-day—how brilliant and great for Northern Ireland. When are we going to get real and address the real problems that exist with the protocol and the Windsor framework?

Hilary Benn: Kind though it is of the hon. Member to encourage me to come to Northern Ireland, as she knows I am in Northern Ireland on a very regular basis and a little while ago I had a meeting with her and two organisations, at her request. I meet businesses on a very regular basis. I met the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry Brexit working group and I always do my level best to respond to requests for visits from colleagues in the House of Commons, including the hon. Lady, but there are only so many hours in the day.

I wanted to point out that the independent monitoring panel, which I met for the first time yesterday, has started its work. Establishing the panel was a commitment made in the safeguarding the Union Command Paper. Its job will be on the basis of the evidence and it will be provided with data on the flow of goods between Great

[*Hilary Benn*]

Britain and Northern Ireland to say whether the UK internal market guarantee is being met. The first six-month reporting period commenced on 1 January and will conclude on 30 June 2025, following which the IMP will publish its assessment and any recommendations. I commit to the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim, and all those who contributed to the debate, that I shall consider the report with the same attention to detail that he has shown in forwarding his argument today.

To conclude, this Government are committed to Northern Ireland. They are committed to the United Kingdom and to implementing the Windsor framework in a manner that is consistent with protecting Northern Ireland's place within our internal market.

Question put and agreed to.

6.3 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 4 March 2025

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

Market Towns: Cultural Heritage

9.30 am

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cultural heritage of market towns.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank everyone here today for attending and showing their interest in this very important debate, and for contributing to and supporting it. I welcome all Members who represent market towns old and new.

Historically, a market town is a town that has hosted markets and is usually granted that privilege by a royal charter. These towns evolved into economic hubs where local farmers, merchants and traders could sell their goods and produce, and where residents from the local area could pick up essentials. Because of the trade that took place, these towns became the centre of development, with houses, fire stations, stables and mechanics' premises surrounding them. Notably, market towns can develop not just through royal charter but through and with population growth and economic activity. Where we have developed infrastructure and connectivity, with better roads, trains and river crossings, that has allowed for more trade, in turn encouraging market towns to develop. Local authorities can also classify an area as a market town based on commercial importance.

For me, markets offer vibrancy and opportunity. They are a mini showreel of an area's special characteristics. I was born on Green Street in east London and grew up with markets all around me, with friends and family owning market stalls. I also worked part time on a fruit and veg stall in Stratford market as a schoolboy. Not only do I have a keen nostalgic and personal interest in market towns and markets specifically; I also have some experience of reanimating markets. Before entering Westminster, I owned and ran a number of independent markets over the years, including fashion, art, artisan and food markets, due to my professional background in events and hospitality.

Commissioned by the London borough of Hackney, I was involved in the successful regeneration of Hoxton Street market, one of Europe's oldest street markets, dating back to 1687. Hoxton Street had lost its way and required repositioning. As part of the town centre master plan, my team and I oversaw a stakeholder engagement strategy that encompassed existing traders, local shop operators, surrounding community shops and groups, various council departments and, most importantly, local residents. The key thing was that the work on giving that local community asset its historic vigour back included the local community. That was not only the right approach to take, but also the authentic route. Now, some 10 years later, Hoxton Street market as a community asset is still vibrant and, crucially, locally led, thereby adding to the local area's sense of place, civic pride and local economy.

Let me give a sense of the market town I proudly represent. Rochford is surrounded by historic villages such as Great Wakering, Canewdon, Paglesham, Barling and Stambridge, all of which fall within Rochford district. I will keep it brief, as I have limited time, but if any Members would like to talk about history with me, I would love to have that conversation separately.

Rochford market was created in the mid 13th century, and a charter was awarded by King Henry III to Sir Guy de Rochford in 1247, with the aim of generating income and developing new towns. At the heart of Rochford lies the medieval market square. The square hosted a weekly cattle and livestock sale every Tuesday, Thursday and Whitsun. At the time it was the only market for 20 miles, which made it particularly popular. Nowadays there is a bit more competition but the market is still going strong.

With trade came industry. A wooden market house was built in 1707 to house the livestock, a barber's shop and a mechanic's opened, a fire station was built, and there were many taverns packed with residents enjoying the weekly market.

That brings me to the present. As hon. Members can imagine, the market square is incredibly different now. I regularly enjoy going to Rochford square to buy local goods, meet businesses, take my family out for lunch and hold surgeries, so I know how much potential the area has and the wealth of cultural heritage it had in times gone by. Most historic market towns have buildings of significance that shaped the town's history. In Rochford, we have the Freight House building—a Victorian train workshop that helped move the town into the industrial age. Such cultural buildings provide a heritage footprint that market towns thrive on.

On the challenges and the context, it is fair to say that market towns are up against it and are often at the sharp end of economic downturns. We have 1,300 market towns that serve populations that range from 2,000 to 30,000 people. Over the past two decades, industry has been hollowed out and market towns have suffered. Shop vacancies have increased and footfall has decreased as consumer habits have changed; there has been a greater use of retail parks and online shopping. That change has led to a void at the heart of those communities, and often a rise in antisocial behaviour as there is less opportunity. Although the problem is not limited to market towns—we see that pattern across high streets and city centres—they often feel it acutely. It is also a structural issue.

Historic England's research on heritage and the economy outlines that local authorities' historic environment teams have shrunk considerably over the past decade: between 2006 and 2018, the number of conservation and archaeological specialists fell by 35%. Heritage indicators similarly demonstrate decreases in local authority spending on services for the historic environment, including a 34% decrease in museums and galleries, a 35% decrease in heritage, a 38% decrease in archives and a 57% decrease in development control by 2021-22. That means that local authorities no longer have the required expertise to protect the cultural heritage of market towns, let alone maximise the part they play in our constituencies.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): That point is incredibly important. I serve the Tamworth constituency, which has a historic market town and 1,000 years of history; it is known for its castle. It is really important that heritage

[Sarah Edwards]

is used for regeneration. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's £4.85 million heritage revival fund will help towns such as Tamworth and those that he mentioned to focus on how assets can be maximised by the community, and to focus on heritage as a regenerative tool?

Mr Alaba: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: that sort of resource helps under-resourced councils. As I said, councils have lost specialist infrastructure and staff, and that has a huge impact on their ability to shape how the local economies grow.

The lack of expertise, compounded by shrinking budgets, means that casework is growing, listed buildings are crumbling and the opportunity for economic growth continues to be missed. The Office for National Statistics estimates that in 2022 there were 33,000 visits to Southend-on-Sea from abroad. That figure has been broadly similar since the VisitBritain data began in 2009. Similarly, ONS data shows that in 2023, 504,000 visits were made to Essex from abroad: people stayed 3.5 million nights and spent a total of £193 million. The data shows that the numbers have been broadly similar, except during covid. Evidence from the annual visitor attractions survey shows that in 2023, seven out of 10 of the most popular paid visitor attractions in England were heritage attractions. Indeed, 63% of us visited heritage sites last year—three times the number who attended football matches.

The tourism industry as a whole is worth £74 billion to the economy and 4% of gross value added, and has huge potential to support the Government's plans for growth. The visitor economy is one of the biggest best-performing sectors. That should not be underestimated. Each visit to a heritage site means pounds spent in the local economy. That supports jobs and the vibrancy of high streets, increases well-paid jobs, regenerates communities and creates pride of place. Heritage sites also make fabulous locations for filming TV series such as "Bridgerton", "Downton Abbey" and "Broadchurch". I am delighted by the Minister's ambition to welcome 50 million international visitors by 2035 and the establishment of a national visitor economy strategy, which will be launched next autumn, outlining plans to support the tourism industry's growth. Market towns will be a key driver to achieving that mission.

We know that there is a real appetite to enjoy our cultural heritage domestically and from international visitors. However, it is essential that we drive those visitors to every UK region, where there is immense cultural heritage. Boosting tourism to every region will fundamentally improve living standards by bringing growth to local economies, jobs, and an increased sense of place and diversity to high streets and town centres.

These communities and cultural assets need to be more accessible. The accessibility increases market towns' appeal and, by default, their viability. Market towns also hold a unique space for creative industries and owner operators. From having a long career owning a hospitality business and being pivotal in the regeneration of areas in east London such as Shoreditch, Dalston and Hoxton, I know how central owner operators are to regeneration, to increasing the footfall of an area, and to making an area more attractive to visitors by being key champions of place. Independent traders, family-run

businesses and local producers are the lifeblood of our market towns, high streets and coastal communities. It is those businesses that provide unique goods and services that sustain both our local economies and the cultural heritage of an area.

Southend and Rochford have a high number of micro and small businesses. In fact, we have over 3,300—disproportionately higher than the number in identical communities. When we look at what drives tourism and trade, often it is the heritage sites and the local offer, made up of a diverse range of owner operators, that provide that. We need to empower our own operators and creatives as they not just offer livelihoods, but help to maintain the very character of our historic market towns. That will not only boost local economies, but create sustainable economies all year round. From my experience, through working with owner operators, local communities and grassroots organisations, markets can be vibrant all year round.

How do we fix this? Central to Labour's plan for change is the transformation of infrastructure and connectivity. For too long the UK has lagged behind our European partners. Reliable public transport and better infrastructure are necessary so that market towns, villages and local economic hubs can fully participate in our modern economy. By investing in our public transport and improving connectivity, we will enable businesses to grow, attract new investment and create jobs, while allowing local residents to access their towns with ease.

I am currently working on introducing a later trains facility on Fridays and Saturdays in Southend, so that the evening and hospitality sectors in my constituency can thrive again; that commitment to infrastructure and connectivity helps to preserve the historic charm, but also unlocks their full potential for future generations.

Our Labour Government have had to make tough choices to stabilise the economy and invest in public services. I cannot commend too highly measures such as high street rental auctions and ending the scourge of late payments to facilitate us to begin to regenerate our high streets. More recently from the Minister's Department, there was the announcement of Labour's plan for change and major investments from the Arts Everywhere fund to boost growth and cement Britain's place as a cultural powerhouse. In my constituency, Southchurch Hall has recently been granted £423,000 for repairs and protection from water damage. I know the Secretary of State is determined that arts will be for everyone, everywhere. Those strategies are crucial steps in Labour's plan for change.

In October 2023, writer and regeneration consultant, John P. Houghton wrote in his article "Down Market—Reviving England's market towns", that there were a few reasons why market towns have not been on the Government agenda. He believes, and I concur, that central Government have in recent times largely neglected those communities. I will read a small extract from John's piece, which illuminates the situation well.

"There was a brief flurry of intervention in market towns in the early 2000s. The Market Towns Initiative was launched in 2000 and rolled out across England from 2001. It was funded and administered by the Countryside Agency, the successor body to the Rural Development Commission.

Through the initiative, partnerships of local agencies and community groups were awarded funding to: undertake a 'health check' of a town's strengths and weaknesses; develop a practical action plan; and appoint co-ordinators and project managers to deliver the plan.

The health checks were the first sign that things were starting to go wrong in market towns. A meta-analysis of health checks in the West Midlands, conducted by KPMG, highlighted many of the problems identified in the previous section: house prices rising beyond the budget of local people; poor transport links; retail trends away from traditional high streets and town centres; and an ageing population placing greater demands on public services with already limited capacity.

The Market Towns Initiative could and should have been the first step in a sequence of measures to deal with these problems. Instead, the programme was closed down [under austerity] and nothing took its place. The Countryside Agency warned that ‘as no single organisation is championing the cause of market towns’ they could be forgotten.”

There has not been sufficient Government policy on market towns, but I believe devolution and local government reform will help to bring a more strategic vision to regions, with local leaders bringing the focus that those amazing communities deserve. A few things need to be considered, the first being changing the planning system. The planning system should allow a place to grow, develop and encourage adaptive reuse of both nationally important and locally valued heritage sites.

The Government are working closely with Historic England to streamline the planning system, ensuring heritage protection is not watered down. By streamlining the application process further, we can improve speed, consistency and quality of decision making. There could be fewer applications made and greater clarity among regulators over the type of work that does not require consent, which would lead to greater efficiencies.

Some streamlining requires no new policies but more use of existing powers, such as using enforcement powers to address neglect. Other streamlining would require policy change, such as empowering local authorities to delegate authority to qualified professionals to sign off conditions attached to planning and listed building consent. That would reduce the frustration of waiting for the council’s conservation officer to be available, which can cause costly delays and unhelpful inconvenience to occupiers.

Secondly, as mentioned, local authorities’ heritage spend has decreased significantly, and there has been a massive loss of expertise and specialist knowledge. At the same time, heritage attractions and tourism continue to contribute considerably to the economy. I ask the Minister to consider how her Department could work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education and Skills England to encourage a strategy for the protection of cultural heritage on local plans, and to look at how to fill the gaps in the industry.

Thirdly, I am excited to see the outcome of the review by Historic England, Government Departments, developers and heritage organisations focused on protection and the development of new ideas. The economic, social and environmental benefits of heritage should be assessed with as little struggle as possible, by setting the right balance between sustaining what is significant and ensuring that buildings and places can continue to adapt, grow and meet our economic, social and environmental needs, while remaining well-loved and used parts of our communities for years to come.

Furthermore, while heritage is among the smallest components of local authority spending, it has a disproportionately positive impact on local pride and wellbeing.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. On the issue of pride in local market towns, in my area there is a small market town called Limavady. Over 100 years ago, a family called Massey emigrated from there to New Zealand, and their son became the Prime Minister of New Zealand before, during and after the first world war, playing a key role in the Commonwealth’s response to that war. In a few weeks’ time we mark the centenary of his death. Such things need to be marked in small market towns so that they are not forgotten, and people can take pride in what their forebears achieved in the past.

Mr Alaba: I agree. That is one of the reasons we are all here: we are talking about the unique offer and appeal of our communities. All and any history regarding families and individuals who have helped to shape, and shown commitment to, our communities should be cherished and showcased. I see how that example shows the uniqueness of the hon. Member’s own community.

The key to the development and maintenance of successful place management is governance structures that support effective decision making and give a voice to the variety of stakeholders that engage in places. This is particularly important for many market towns, where proactive engagement is required to stimulate renewal. That is why I am excited about the devolution White Paper and the strengthening of business improvement districts. However, those districts are not active in all areas; therefore, in some places this function could be provided through the development of community improvement districts. That would provide a structure through which community views can be heard and used to shape decision making.

Fourthly, while I cannot thank the Department and the Government enough for their capital funding projects, such as Southchurch Hall in Southend and the Maritime museum in Liverpool, I would like to work on a strategy that encourages small and medium-sized enterprises to invest in skills and developers of assets to create investable propositions that involve repairs. A targeted approach to capital investment for heritage and culture would achieve better outcomes by allowing the growth of skills and the supply chains required to deliver the maintenance and repair of historic buildings and places over the long term, improving the quality of delivered schemes, dampening inflationary pressures and ensuring that the recipients of funding—especially local government—are investment ready. They know where, when and how to make best use of the funding for the benefit of the communities they serve.

I could talk for quite some time but I am sure hon. Members are keen for me to shut up.

Hon. Members: No.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): Speak for yourself!

Mr Alaba: Oh, guys. I am more excited to hear the thoughts of other Members present, because I know that they bring insights into their communities from which we can all benefit.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I thank the hon. Member for introducing the debate. I remind all Back-Bench Members that if they want to contribute, they should keep bobbing so I know. I am afraid insights will have to be limited to about two and a half minutes if we are to get everyone in.

9.54 am

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Sir Jeremy. The points I want to make will probably cover all the market towns with important heritage in my constituency of Wetherby and Easingwold. I will give just a couple of examples, but what I say will be relevant to them all.

Let me begin with Boroughbridge, a traditional market town. There is an ecosystem to market towns, which are the subject of the debate; I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) on securing it. In the countryside, farmers' markets and the whole ecosystem of the trade that takes place is reliant on farming communities, which the towns often grew from. The blunt truth is that there is growing concern about the effect on small family farms, which contribute directly to market towns. A lot of the produce on sale in them comes from an ecosystem that covers the entire rural economy. There is a real concern that goes beyond what we have been talking about. Food supply and the farm inheritance tax can directly impact those areas.

The hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford outlined the investment that is needed in market towns, and there are things that we can do. Wetherby in my constituency has a lot of important cultural buildings. Such towns are full of buildings that have been there for centuries. There is no way that they will reach the C grade on an energy performance certificate. That policy, brought in by the last Government, needs to be reviewed because when businesses leave, their premises will not be re-rented unless they meet performance C. That is a real problem because it is almost impossible to get that performance certificate.

A range of policies, whether it is taxation on farms, which contribute directly to the ecosystem of local communities, or net zero contributions that make premises impossible to rehire, will have the effect of hollowing out vital parts of the community. All those issues need to be addressed.

9.56 am

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) for securing this debate.

I am proud to represent Hertford and Stortford, home to a number of significant market towns steeped in such history that many of them appeared in the Domesday Book. Hertford is my home; I am privileged to have grown up there. My parents moved to Hertford in the late 1990s because they wanted me to have the very best start in life. Parliamentary scholars will know that when plague overran London in the 1500s, Parliament moved to Hertford castle, where the gatehouse is now home to Hertford town council, on which I proudly once served.

Hertford's old Corn Exchange, which once linked us to the corn markets of London, has been reborn as a live music venue called simply the Corn Exchange,

servicing the lively local music and arts scene that produced talents like George Ezra and Rupert Grint. Residents are proud of our weekly charter market in Salisbury Square. Our town centre, in which I found my first job, is home to a diverse offering of independent shops, pubs and restaurants.

Bishop's Stortford has contributed more than its fair share of musical talent, with famous musicians including Sam Smith and Charli XCX attending local schools. Bishop's Stortford has contributed its fair share to this Parliament, too. Upon election I became aware of at least four Members of this House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), who attended local schools in Bishop's Stortford.

Stansted airport, the largest single site employer in the east of England, sits right on our doorstep, offering opportunities for work, skills training and lifelong learning to our residents in Bishop's Stortford. The direct train line between the two means that our community is readily connected to the rest of the world.

For reasons of time I cannot go into detail on all the market towns in my constituency, but there are others, including Ware and Sawbridgeworth, of which we are deeply proud. But our towns are not without challenge, so I would be grateful if the Minister could, in her response, touch on the support that the Labour Government are providing for high streets in semi-rural communities and market towns to ensure that residents can readily access vital in-person services. Also, will she touch on the support that the Government are providing for live music venues such as the Corn Exchange in Hertford, of which our residents are deeply proud?

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I am grateful for the exemplary time discipline so far.

9.59 am

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is good to see you in the Chair this morning, Sir Jeremy. Since last year's election, I have added another market town to my constituency—Brigg in northern Lincolnshire. Along the beautiful paved streets of Brigg there are a number of excellent independently owned shops and boutiques, as well as a fantastic range of clothing stores, eateries and other attractions. These independent retailers retain the traditional character of the town—some of the shops have served the good people of Brigg for over 100 years. Under the excellent leadership of Councillor Rob Waltham, North Lincolnshire council has made it a key policy to ensure two hours of free parking in Brigg and across the area, which is a vital component of ensuring that our high streets survive.

A number of historical buildings in the town centre remain in use, some dating back as far as the 1700s. The centre of the town is a conservation area. One such building is the Angel, a 17th-century coaching inn. The building has been refurbished and is now a library and café. It is home to the Brigg heritage centre, which is free to enter and tells the story of how Brigg developed as an important crossing point on the River Ancholme.

The most notable attraction is the Brigg raft. This 3,000-year-old flat-bottomed oak boat was discovered in Brigg in the 1880s and moved to the National Maritime Museum, but it was returned to Brigg in 2013.

Brigg is home to a number of weekly outdoor markets. A street market runs every Thursday, providing fresh fruit, vegetables, flowers and the like.

Barton-upon-Humber, in the northern part of my constituency, has a rich history. The name is derived from Beretun, meaning “barley town”—a testament to Barton’s importance for brewing beer. At the time of the Domesday Book, Barton was considered to be the most important town in the area, with two important churches. St Peter’s church closed in 1970. Chad Varah, the founder of the Samaritans, was born in Barton in 1911, when his father was the vicar of St Peter’s. Another notable person is Ted Lewis, the author whose book was famously adapted into the film “Get Carter”. Like Brigg, Barton has kept its traditional charm. People can visit the Wilderspin school to see how school life was in Victorian times.

Both towns have a town council and a mayor. In these days of devolution when we are creating much larger authorities, which I broadly support, it is important that we retain the civic pride to which local town councils and mayors can contribute.

10.2 am

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) for securing this debate.

I must start with a confession: Carlisle is a city, albeit a small one. However, its population size and look and feel, and indeed its charter, make it more closely resemble a market town than perhaps many cities.

However, my constituency includes two market towns to the north and north-east—Longtown and Brampton. Longtown lies on the English-Scottish border in an area known as the debatable lands, because for many centuries the kingdoms of England and Scotland could not quite agree on who had ownership and claim to Longtown and the debatable lands. Arthuret church on the outskirts of Longtown dates from 1150 and is said to be the resting place of the legendary King Arthur.

Not to be outdone on history and heritage, the original church of the market town of Brampton stands on the site of a Stanegate Roman fort built around 80 AD. During the Jacobite rising of 1745, Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, summoned the mayor of Carlisle to surrender the city. Those familiar with the rising will know that it did not end well, at least for the Jacobite soldiers who were hanged from the Capon tree in Brampton’s town centre. A memorial commemorating that act remains.

The great border city of Carlisle is the final resting place of a further 33 Jacobite soldiers who were hanged, drawn and quartered following the unsuccessful rebellion. We only have to look at the regal lion that sits atop Carlisle’s market cross to understand that Carlisle’s loyalty, and that of its citizens, has largely always been to the English Crown.

Carlisle received its charter in 1158, confirming its status as a trading hub for the north of England, and much of that trading happened in the Greenmarket in the city centre. However, in the late 19th century the market stalls were moved indoors, into Carlisle’s new market hall, which is one of the few Victorian market halls that people can still see. Its impressive ironwork was made by the local engineers Cowans and Sheldon.

In the following years, the market hall established itself not just as a market but as a venue and concert hall for some of the world’s greatest acts. However, like many places we have heard about today, the fortunes of our market have ebbed and flowed. The market hall’s future looks bright once again, and the former Greenmarket is undergoing a multimillion-pound transformation.

As I look forward to Cumbrian devolution and all that it promises for Carlisle and the surrounding area, including its two market towns, I look forward to reimagining and rejuvenating Carlisle city centre, so that it thrives for many years to come under the watchful eye of the regal lion atop the market cross.

10.6 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) on securing this debate. It is always a pleasure to speak about Strangford. We have constituency heritage across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and our culture, while sometimes different, is worth celebrating.

Northern Ireland is rich in cultural heritage, and there is a list of market towns across my borough. In Strangford, I have Newtownards, Comber and Ballynahinch. These towns have historically hosted markets and continue to do so today. Newtownards market is run every Saturday by shop owner Clive O’Neill. The town of Comber hosts mini-markets, most notably Comber farmers’ market and the Comber earlies, which celebrates the town’s agricultural history. Comber is famous for the Comber spud, which we all know. Indeed, we are probably in awe of it, because it is definitely the best potato in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, if not further afield.

I am fortunate to have had a constituency office in Newtownards for some 26 years. I celebrate, respect and love the culture of my town, and all its unique historical attributes. Newtownards came into being in 1613 under James I. The town has much older roots, having been developed on the site of an older settlement. Its location on the Ards peninsula, where I live, means that it has always played a key role in growth, trade, agriculture and fishing.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that market towns are a crucial part of our culture, not only here in England but in Northern Ireland, too. In my constituency, King John granted Bingley’s first market charter back in 1212 and the Bingley butter cross still stands to this day. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that thriving market towns are as vital to the future of our economy as they were to the past?

Jim Shannon: I absolutely agree, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. It is great to have history. I love history, which is one of my favourite subjects. Indeed, it was probably the only subject at school in which I excelled, but that is by the way.

The Stewarts erected the Market House, which is now the town hall, in 1765, and the bottom floor was used as a market. It is where I have my annual coffee morning for the Soldiers’, Sailors’ and Airmen’s Families Association. The town hall also hosts numerous council-run events.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Conway Square, a historical public seating area outside the town hall, has a statue of Paddy Mayne, demonstrating our rich history and ancestry, which we remember.

Market towns are crucial to our society and our local economy. When it seems that everything can be done online, market towns give us a real sense of community and allow face-to-face social contact, which is important. It is important for children and grandchildren, as those who once visited the market as children now return with their own families. In the towns I represent, it is often said, “Everybody knows everybody here.” Of course, that is absolutely true. At communal events and local markets, it is normal to say hello to the people we know from our town.

Market towns highlight our impressive nature, and their history is worth remembering. It is important to maintain that history, not just for the current generation but for future generations, including for my children, my grandchildren and—whenever they come—my great-grandchildren. It is the history of the fantastic towns in which we grew up.

I conclude by calling on the Government to engage further with their counterparts and with local councils and to commit to protecting the rich history of our towns, which adds greatly to the United Kingdom. Furthermore, Northern Ireland’s great market town history must be protected.

10.9 am

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) for securing this important debate. Like him, I have the privilege of representing the historic market town of Dartford, where a great market still operates on Thursdays and Saturdays in the town centre.

Dartford and its surrounding villages have a proud cultural heritage, with the borough council running its own blue plaque scheme to celebrate historical events and figures from around the borough. This includes Dartford football club, with a plaque at the site of the original entrance to its Watling Street ground. It also includes the Rolling Stones. I am sure the music aficionados here know that Mick Jagger and Keith Richards met as teenagers on platform 2 of Dartford’s railway station in 1961—a year before forming the band. The iconic duo is immortalised in the town, with a pair of statues unveiled in 2023.

Dartford football club is an integral part of the town’s cultural heritage, having been founded over 130 years ago by members of Dartford working men’s club. It currently sits proudly at the top of the Isthmian league. The club was saved by supporters in the early 1990s, and the team now play at the fantastic Princes Park on the edge of the town.

Another proud part of Dartford’s heritage is the Orchard theatre, which was built in the early 1980s and has hosted comedians, musicals and pantos ever since. Sadly, it is currently beset with RAAC in its roof and has been closed, with a temporary theatre created to hold performances in the interim. Additional work is needed on fire safety, and we look forward to the theatre being open again in 2026, which is sadly a year later than planned.

As others have stressed, pubs are an important part of our cultural heritage. Historical pubs are a key part of an area’s social infrastructure. In Dartford, the Royal Victoria and Bull pub on High Street is a leading example. The Lads of the Village pub in Stone was built in 1793 and has recently closed. The parish council has successfully campaigned to get the pub listed as an asset of community value, but despite the council offering the full asking price, the owner is refusing to negotiate, leaving the site in limbo with the parish powerless. I warmly welcome the Government’s commitment in the “English Devolution” White Paper to a strong new right to buy to maintain beloved assets. That cannot come soon enough.

I hope the Government will continue with their plans to revitalise our high streets and historic market towns, looking at how business rates can be reformed. Again, I welcome the commitment in the devolution White Paper to support high streets by strengthening business improvement districts. Let us all work together over this Parliament to ensure that our market towns can thrive.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): In the spirit of working together, I will call the Front Benchers at 10.28 am. There are still eight people who want to speak, so I am afraid speeches will have to be less than two minutes or someone will be disappointed.

10.13 am

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), not least because I represent six market towns in my constituency—Honiton, Axminster, Ottery St Mary, Sidmouth, Seaton and Cullompton; I will probably have about 20 seconds for each of them.

To draw the strings together, I will say that our heritage affects us not just locally but nationally. I will give an example. In 2022, Mr Speaker visited Honiton’s Allhallows Museum, where he told us how he would be proud to wear the jabot and cuffs made by Honiton lacemakers in times gone by. He visited Patricia Perryman, who made the jabot and cuffs out of Honiton lace. He told us that he would be using them in the future, and so it was. For the King’s coronation, people in east Devon were proud to see Mr Speaker wearing those items.

I cannot do justice to those amazing market towns in the time available to me. Members will, I am sure, have heard of Axminster Carpets; of Ottery St Mary’s tar barrels festival; of the fashionable seaside resort of Sidmouth and its folk festival; of Seaton, once a coastal trading hub, which today has a tramway in place of a railway; and of Cullompton, with its wool heritage and absent railway station. We really need to reinstall the station to reinvigorate the town and bring back some of our more recent cultural heritage. To summarise, these market towns tell a story of a resilient, creative and proud community.

10.15 am

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) for bringing forward this debate. When people think of Swindon North they do not necessarily think of market towns, but my constituency happens to

have one of the most beautiful market towns in the country. Some people call it “the gateway to the Cotswolds”; I prefer to call it “the entrance to Swindon”. That truly beautiful town is Highworth. I am short on time, but I give a massive thanks to Highworth town council, and mainly to the mayor, Julie, for her hard work in keeping its cultural heritage.

I want to talk about the importance of development. Although I welcome Labour’s plan to build 1.5 million houses, I am keen that we do that responsibly and ensure that the developments have the infrastructure to support market towns, making them more accessible but not taking away their independence. I thank all the hon. Members who have spoken in this interesting debate. My big ask for the Government is to build those houses responsibly and to support communities.

10.16 am

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I have 10 market towns in my constituency, but—do not panic—I am not going to talk about them all. They include Caerfyrddin, which is the oldest town in Wales and has the amphitheatre to prove it. Honestly, though, people there are still struggling to recover after covid.

A few years ago, the council decided to inject around £100,000 into each of those towns, and each town brought forward plans. Some wanted better parking and some wanted improved leisure facilities for their youngsters, but all chose exactly what they wanted and how they wanted to move their towns forward. With shared prosperity fund money and other available grants, it had a threefold multiplier. That allowed Llandovery, for example, to improve its tourism offer, Llandeilo to build a BMX park for its youngsters, and Newcastle Emlyn to reopen the old amphitheatre to stage open-air concerts. On top of that, money from the SPF pot has been allocated to refurbishing shop fronts—many businesses have utilised that—and to creating smart towns, a concept that can help businesses to attract footfall.

I want to talk about footfall, because car parking remains an issue for many of our towns. Laugharne and Whitland, for example, want more space, but paying for parking is also an issue. No councils can afford to pay for free parking while paying business rates on those car parks—that cannot be the answer. If the Government are serious about revitalising our cultural and historic market towns, they need to abolish the business rates on our car parks. Not one council across the UK can support free parking while paying millions to the Government in business rates.

Free parking would help our town centres, as it helps in the retail parks that have been placed all around our town centres. The Government have a choice: either they abolish the rates payable to our local authorities or they continue to allow our town centres to deteriorate.

10.19 am

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) on securing this debate. The medieval market fair in Scarborough has entered world culture thanks to Simon and Garfunkel, who popularised the medieval English folk song, although we all know that that was not the subject of the song.

In fact, Scarborough fair was an important event for merchants all over Europe as it attracted buyers and sellers who, as well as being entertained by local minstrels and fortune tellers, had to be kept in food and drink.

Although the Scarborough fair had died out by the end of the 18th century, that same mixture remains central to the current market hall and vaults, which were built in 1853 and renovated in 2016. On the ground floor there are traditional market stalls offering meat, fruit and vegetables, such as our wonderful butcher Mark Nockels, Solange Bakery and Deli Delicious—a café I make a beeline for whenever I can. In the gallery and vaults, there are more cafés alongside quirky independent shops.

It remains a challenging time for retailers, so I am pleased that the Government have committed to permanently reducing business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties from 2026, funded by a tax rise for the largest business properties such as online sales warehouses. The Labour Government are also investing in Scarborough with our plan for neighbourhoods, through which about £20 million will go towards regenerating our town centres, supporting parks and libraries, and building stronger communities. That is a welcome boost to protecting our cultural heritage for the future.

The original Scarborough fair has been reimaged in a stunning year-round series of festivals such as Scarborough Lights, Scarborough Art and Scarborough Streets. They increase local pride, enhance aspirations and provide wonderful entertainment for locals—as well as a treat for the thousands of visitors who flock to Scarborough every year. The new Scarborough Fair links to the heritage, geography, culture and people of our town in a way that articulates our story. The story of Scarborough is in the future, not the past.

10.21 am

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I will briefly touch on the market towns in my constituency, including Hexham itself, which has Hexham abbey, England’s first purpose-built jail, the Victorian Queen’s Hall—which, to declare an interest, now has my office in it—as well as a local arts centre and dancehall.

Market towns define Northumberland. Hon. Members have touched eloquently on many of the challenges facing them, but one of the main challenges is a lack of transport, especially accessible transport, sometimes caused by potholes in some of our more rural roads. That isolates people who are trying to get from places such as Allendale or Otterburn into Hexham, which is a central point for much of Northumberland’s rural economy, as it has a large farmers mart.

Hexham is also ill-served by frequently delayed and cancelled rail and bus services that, to be honest, are not entirely fit for purpose. The Conservative-run Northumberland county council sometimes forgets that the west of Northumberland exists. It is fair to say that my constituents are frequently angered when investment is shifted away from them in the west of the county, because that simply fails to address the problems. I am frequently confronted by potholes on my roads that we are told have been fixed but then open up again a week later. Those bread and butter concerns hold back market towns from their true potential.

[Joe Morris]

I will briefly touch on the creative industry and its contribution to market towns. That is one of the few industries in the local economy that does not always rely on getting a delayed bus or a delayed train, or not hitting a pothole. It includes the poets, writers and artists who contribute so much to the character of each of our towns. They frequently contact me with concerns about AI and the potential damage that it could do to the rural economy, so I would like the Minister to acknowledge that in her response.

10.23 am

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) on securing this important debate. I represent the town of Rugby, which has perhaps the ultimate origin story in a sport that carries our name across the globe, but our great town is about much more than the sport. I will take a little canter around it, as I did when I joined Ken on the volunteer-run walking tour of Rugby.

Rugby has so much to offer. To take the music scene, for example, we have the Rococo players, the Bilton brass band, Boldfest in Newbold, Rugbylele—our own ukulele band—as well as great bands such as Courthouse, singer-songwriter Jessie May and much more. In the arts sector, we have Art at the Alex, a former pub, which is now a community-run arts organisation. We also have a wonderful art gallery and museum that currently has a fantastic exhibition from the Ingram Collection, and also runs a superb exhibition on a history of Rugby in 50 objects—I thoroughly recommend it to anyone who wants to come and have a look.

Rugby has a wonderful literary heritage, including being the birthplace of Rupert Brooke. It has a fantastic, vibrant sports sector, and Rugby borough women's football team narrowly lost, unfortunately, to Liverpool in the FA cup recently. It has a wonderful industrial heritage, with British Thomson-Houston and Willans Works factories covering aviation, maritime and automotive. The inventor of helium was born in Rugby, holography was invented there, and Sir Frank Whittle first tested the jet engine in Rugby. We had the incredible radio masts at Hillmorton. Today, GE Vernova provides high-tech jobs.

This debate is about the future. There is such huge potential in small market towns that needs to be unleashed, so I wonder whether the Minister might consider a campaign to encourage people to visit small market towns such as Rugby. If we go to the VisitBritain website, we see a lot about cities, but we do not see much about towns. All too often, smaller towns are forgotten by officialdom—they are not forgotten by politicians, as everyone can see from this debate, but they are often forgotten by officialdom. We must invest in our small towns, our people and the potential. Cultural heritage is about the past, the present and, most importantly, the future.

10.25 am

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) for securing this important debate.

My constituency of Watford is a town with borough status in Hertfordshire. It is an historic market town, having been granted a charter in the 12th century, and the town grew as a result of the Grand Junction canal and railway expansion. The vibrancy and therefore, over time, the cultural heritage of Watford as a market town can excite, stimulate and trigger fond nostalgia. As a child, my friends and I would race around Watford market, which was at the time a place I would have understood to be brutalist in its architectural style—that has nothing to do with the skinheads who also frequented the area.

Sustained by an iced bun or doughnut as a special treat, we would explore, weaving between market stalls and diving into adjacent shops like WHSmith, with its records and computer department. That market in Watford no longer exists. Its site has become part of a more contemporary shopping experience—more Zara than zaniness. Tastes and fashions change, of course, but we adored it, and as I grew older and became familiar with markets in other towns and places—Amersham, Kensington market, the Birmingham Bullring—the memories of Watford and its market embedded themselves. That is important. The cultural heritage of market towns can easily be misrepresented as a narrow strand of admittedly delightful “traditional” market towns, but the fun and the cultural heritage of what Watford market once offered should be celebrated as part of that heritage, too. It attests to the validity of that period of history.

Watford market does still exist in a different location. Spilling out on to the high street, it offers food, shopping and other experiences for residents. In challenging times and circumstances, the new Watford market endeavours to deliver the experience of socialising of an evening, lunches for busy workers and shoppers, and new ways to create memories for people exploring and wandering through.

This Labour Government are determined to deliver growth and housing. Let us hope that, as part of their drive to stabilise the housing market, the plan for new towns will include markets, as we build our future and cultural heritage.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): If she can limit herself to one minute, I call Catherine Fookes.

10.28 am

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Sir Jeremy. In Monmouthshire, we are really lucky: we have not one, two or three but five market towns. I thought that would be a record, but it is not, because there is a constituency with 10. Our largest town is Abergavenny, which Members might be familiar with, and it is beautiful. It has an iconic town and market hall built in 1869, which is home to the market, the Borough theatre, the library and our world-famous Abergavenny food festival, which has been described as the Glastonbury of food festivals. The Beatles played there in 1963, which I think trumps all the other bands we have heard mention of today.

The Welsh Government have done really well in supporting our market towns and our culture. They have just announced an extra £4.4 million to support our arts and culture sectors. They have used the transforming towns grant to support our market towns,

and the upcoming Budget commits to a £335 million package of non-domestic rates support for businesses, which will be hugely important for our businesses. I will close by asking the Minister to share how she will work with our Welsh Government colleagues to ensure that our market towns continue to flourish.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank all colleagues for their brevity. We now move to the Front Benchers.

10.29 am

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) on securing this debate.

Market towns are essential to our national heritage. Taunton and Wellington have been markets since 904—not 9.04 am—and 1215, when they got their respective charters, and a market structure for Colchester has been traced back to the first century. Outside bigger cities, market towns are the basic unit of local community—the natural centre to which every local area looks—and have provided the seats of district councils for hundreds of years. However, the withdrawal of essential services in recent years has had challenging consequences for residents, particularly older people, those without digital access and small businesses.

The Government are currently imposing council reorganisation, which too often exacerbates those problems by taking local decision making from our proud market towns and the jobs and resources that go with it. Ancient cities such as Colchester and Winchester will have their councils cancelled, as district councils are effectively being abolished. The Liberal Democrats reject the taking of power away from our towns. Councils should reflect natural communities, and local communities should sit at the top of decision making, not at the bottom.

It is therefore time for the Government to support market towns better and the markets they provide. Promoting local markets increases footfall in our town centres, creates community spirit in our all-too-often online world and provides an outlet for local produce, which travels fewer food miles to get there.

For the shops, pubs and other venues in market towns, we were disappointed that the Government did not go further to reform business rates in the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill, and we were disappointed with the reduction in discounts available to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. The Bill will not scrap business rates or deliver the fundamental reform to business rates that the Liberal Democrats have called for to benefit small businesses and those in our cultural sector. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy and the heart of local communities, and they create the jobs that we all rely on.

The Liberal Democrats are fighting for small businesses, starting with a call for more support for their energy costs and a complete overhaul of the unfair business rates system. Business rates are harmful to the economy because they directly tax capital investment in structures and equipment, rather than the profits or the fixed stock of land. To benefit small businesses, we would therefore abolish business rates and replace them with a commercial landowner levy so that investment in shops and buildings is no longer disincentivised, as it is now.

That leads to far too many remaining empty on our high streets, as business rates are one of the biggest obstacles to letting commercial premises. As a result, the most deprived areas will see the biggest fall in amounts paid in business rates, whereas some big shops in high-value areas will see increases.

The change to national insurance contributions will be completely counterproductive for businesses in market towns, and particularly small businesses. Businesses in Taunton and Wellington town centres, including our theatres and museums, as elsewhere, face a triple whammy of increasing business rates, increasing wage bills and higher national insurance costs for every person they employ. That comes after years of trying to survive the pandemic and some of the highest rates of inflation and interest that have ever been seen in this country under the previous Conservative Government. It is no wonder, as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has shown, that this new jobs tax means that firms are planning to reduce their headcount through redundancies or by recruiting fewer workers.

Every market town has its care homes and private care providers. For older people, the cultural heritage of market towns and town centres often make them great places to live. Last week, I was delighted to host Somerset's Registered Care Providers Association and Linden House here in Parliament. They are struggling with the increased cost of care due to the increase in national insurance contributions. We therefore urge the Government to accept the amendment passed in the House of Lords, proposed by my noble Friend Baroness Barker, to exempt care providers from those increases, because it will be vulnerable people and their loved ones who have to pay.

The Government claim that the national insurance hike will result in additional revenue of £25 billion, but the Office for Budget Responsibility clearly states that after employers in the public sector are compensated and other employers change their employment habits by reducing headcount or pay, the Treasury will be left with revenue closer to only £10 billion a year. The Government could have raised that amount through a number of other fairer tax changes, such as those we put in our manifesto. Reversing the Conservative tax cuts handed to the big banks would generate an extra £4.2 billion every year, and increasing the digital services tax to 6% would generate another £2 billion a year. They could have introduced a fair reform to capital gains tax so that the 0.1% of ultra-wealthy individuals pay their fair share, while keeping things the same or even cutting tax for other capital gains tax payers to generate another £5.2 billion per year.

The OBR makes it clear that, precisely because this tax rise will be passed on to people's salaries, it will have a negative effect on living conditions. This comes after five years under the Conservative party that saw living standards fall year on year. The last thing people need now is a reduction in their incomes. We recognise the new Government have been left to make difficult choices, but they must not allow the burden of fixing the Conservatives' mess to fall on working people and small businesses in market towns and elsewhere.

We also need to support market towns with better public transport. The increase in the fare cap to £3 is a bus tax that will hit working people, rural communities and people on low incomes most especially. Delaying station projects such as the new stations proposed to

[*Gideon Amos*]

serve the market towns of Wellington in my constituency and Cullompton in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) is also a mistake for the economic growth and new housing the Government want to see. Those decisions will both make congestion worse and travel by public transport more expensive. Of course, for rural communities, it does not matter if the bus fare cap is £2 or £3 if they do not have a bus service in the first place. Market towns need proper rail and bus services if they are to thrive and survive. At the very least, the bus fare hike should be scrapped.

Other initiatives are needed to boost our market towns, to properly fund local councils, especially when it comes to social care, so they can focus on other things to support market towns and businesses, to support more planning and conservation officers, which the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford spoke eloquently about, to introduce free parking periods to enable town centres to compete with out-of-town and online retailers, to grant permitted development rights under planning controls for outdoor markets, and, with the ending of the rural services delivery grant, to provide rural councils with a funding settlement that properly reflects the impact of rurality and sparsity on the areas they serve through the application of a fair funding formula. But fundamentally our market towns and the businesses that sustain them need three things: an end to business rates that punish our town centres and high streets; good public transport; and an end to loading taxes on small businesses, which we need to provide the seeds of recovery in our great economy. The Liberal Democrats will do all three.

10.37 am

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Jeremy. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and long may it continue.

It is a privilege to take part in this debate on the cultural heritage of market towns. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) on securing the debate and thank him for his remarks, which were well placed; he made lots of good points. We have had some excellent speeches. Unfortunately, I will not be able to canter through them all, but I particularly want to recognise some of the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), which I will address, and my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for his comments. He has just inherited a new market town—he seems to be collecting them. Although I will not be able to recognise all the Members for their contributions, I particularly want to call out the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean), who reminded everyone how, during the plague, Parliament decanted to Hertford Castle. While decanting is not something I advocate in the current debate, it is always nice to know that we have options. I thank Members who have raised venues that relate to food. As I fast through Ramadan in the month ahead, I will certainly be thinking of them.

Throughout history, market towns have been a defining feature of economic and social life. Informal markets have existed since before Roman times, and trade was a

hallmark of the interaction between Celtic, Roman and Saxon peoples. It was trade that spurred on the development of urban centres and the exchange of knowledge and ideas, as well as goods and services.

Our network of medieval market towns is the most enduring example of that history. A royal charter to hold a market was a jealously fought for privilege. The earliest date to over 1,000 years ago and some remain in force today, as we have heard. The fortunes of many of our great historic towns were won and lost by their right to host a market and to reap the rewards that commerce brought.

Market towns brought ordinary working people together to engage in civic and economic life. Evidence of that can still be seen today in the architecture of our market towns, with market crosses standing proudly in the centre of grand open squares and market stalls nestled among guildhalls and churches. It is striking just how much continuity there has been in the history of market towns, with even 20th century new towns designed around the principles from medieval times.

Preserving that wonderful heritage is no mean feat, and it is vital that we recognise the work of Historic England and other organisations in doing so. Its role in providing a voice for historic places, managing England's national heritage list and educating us on the benefits of our cultural heritage is invaluable in supporting market towns and in raising awareness of their contributions to our society.

It has been deeply encouraging to see the success of Historic England's heritage action zones, from the Dewsbury living market town to the north Lowestoft heritage quarter. The scheme has seen local partnerships work tirelessly to improve the quality of life in market towns across England. To date, 20 historic places and market towns have been revitalised through the scheme, and 157 historic buildings have been brought back into use through restoration.

Equally encouraging has been the success of the high streets heritage action zones: 67 historic high streets across England have received new investment, more community engagement and hosted more cultural events through the scheme, with more than 460 shopfronts and 224 historic homes restored. The fact that over 2.7 million people took part in those cultural events, hosted by historic high streets, is a testament to how the scheme has renewed people's pride in local market towns, as well as providing a much-needed boost to high street businesses and local communities.

It is vital to create the conditions to allow market towns to thrive, embracing their rich heritage as well as new opportunities for growth. An area with particular success in combining history with innovation is the revitalising of historic market squares and the hosting of outdoor markets through permitted development rights introduced by the previous Government.

Permitted development rights have allowed historic market towns to host markets in their public spaces and sell food and drink in marquees at listed buildings, without the need for planning permission, providing a regular business outlet for local craftspeople, farmers and traders, who might otherwise lack large indoor spaces. Those development rights have given local businesses and market towns the flexibility to make the most of their cultural heritage.

It is vital that we do not allow the new planning proposals put forward by the Labour Government to create huge headaches for local communities in and around market towns. With many rural communities near market towns concerned about the impact of housing targets, it is essential that the Government listen to the concerns of local people and ensure that there is sufficient infrastructure to deal with a rising population, a point made by numerous hon. Members today.

Many people are already stuck on long waiting lists for GP appointments, are struggling to get their kids into the best schools and are seeing road networks take even more strain. Will the Minister confirm that our market towns will continue to be supported properly when their populations are likely to increase? Will the voices of local communities be taken into account, as we are concerned that they are being written out of that legislation? Does she recognise that the Government's proposal to rapidly expand housing could risk market towns losing their identity and sense of community, a point that was made earlier? How will Labour's planning laws protect the heritage of our beautiful historical market towns?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold made an eloquent point about family farms and our concerns about the impact of changes to business property relief and agricultural property relief. Those farms play a huge part in the future of our historic market towns. I previously raised the issue of the impact of changes to business property relief and APR on the future of stately homes, which are essential to many market towns. The Conservative party has committed to reversing those changes to APR and BPR.

It is welcome to see that Historic England recognises the benefits that permitted development rights have brought market towns. Historic England notes how outdoor markets support

“the cultural heritage offer and the economic future for historic high streets”

and that revitalising market squares

“benefits those historic centres whose unique character is a product of a long market tradition.”

I urge the Government to continue the work begun under the previous Government, to ensure that permitted development rights become permanent, providing certainty for the future of traditional markets.

Inhabitants of market towns are not the only ones to recognise the cultural heritage on offer; millions of tourists visit them each year. VisitBritain's research into international tourism highlights the importance of market towns and other historical places that attract visitors from overseas: 78% of tourists said they value a destination having history and heritage to explore. That shows the value of our historic market towns and what they do to bring tourism and promote our culture.

Although I welcome the Government's commitment to growing tourism outside London and the south-east, I question whether the business rates relief reduction to 40% for retail, hospitality and leisure will help our market towns to prosper. Perhaps the Minister could answer that point. There is also concern about the increase in the cost of electronic travel authorisations for those visiting the UK. I hope the Government can provide more clarity on the impact that that will have on the tourism that many market towns rely on. At the most recent oral questions, I asked for an impact

assessment—not from this Minister, I should add. I know that she is stepping in today, but perhaps she can discuss the impact assessment, if indeed there is one.

Our historic market towns face many of the same pressures affecting high streets and town centres across the UK. While traditional markets have an enduring appeal, there is no denying that many have also been affected by online shopping, developments in out-of-town centres and recent policy decisions. Thriving market towns need a strong local economy and a strong local community to maintain them.

Small businesses are the bedrock of local communities. That has to be more than just a slogan, and it is equally true of our market towns. It is our historic pubs, our crafts and shops that give historic market towns so much of their character. Yet so many are now unsure whether they can continue under the burden that is being placed on them by the current Government. In particular, the increase in employer national insurance contributions, the reduction in retail, hospitality and leisure relief on business rates, as I have mentioned, and the increase in the national living wage are all going to weigh heavily on those small businesses. I urge the Government to reconsider those policies in the context of our historic market towns, which we are at risk of losing to closure and decline.

Ensuring that market towns continue to perform their traditional civic functions is as important as preserving their heritage. Making more public services such as libraries and social mixed-use spaces available could go a long way in shaping the appeal of market towns. The House of Lords Built Environment Committee has led important research in reversing high street decline. It is important that its findings are reflected in the decisions taken by the Government in the context of market towns.

Historic market towns are an irreplaceable part of our cultural heritage. It is vital that the Government understand their contribution to our country's heritage and do not push policies that actively harm their future. I urge the Government to consider the costs of their decisions that will be imposed on market towns, and to ensure that our cultural heritage is not lost in the decline of our local businesses and town centres.

10.46 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Sir Jeremy. I am pleased to be responding to this debate. I begin, of course, by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) on securing it, especially on the eve of Heritage Day. I thought he made a really thoughtful speech, as have Members from parties across the House.

I will briefly respond to some of the questions that have been put to me, and I will go into a little more detail in my speech when time allows. There have been a number of questions from the shadow Minister and others, including my hon. Friend who secured the debate, about changes to the planning system for national and local buildings of importance and access to local services. They also asked about a strategy on heritage for market towns and mentioned a number of Departments. I will refer those questions to the Departments responsible. I have heard the questions and concerns.

[Stephanie Peacock]

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) asked about high streets, as did a number of Members, and live music venues. From the spring, a new £85 million creative foundations fund is available for urgent capital works to keep venues going. That was part of the arts everywhere fund, announced at the Jennie Lee lecture, which I will touch on later in my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) referenced the devolution White Paper with specific reference to pubs. I was really pleased to speak at the British Beer and Pub Association event in Parliament a few weeks ago.

I look forward to meeting my Welsh counterparts—I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) raised that point. I am very familiar with Abergavenny as my cousin grew up and went to school there. I look forward to visiting Cardiff soon. I meet my counterparts in the devolved nations very regularly.

I will turn to the substantive part of my speech, but go into more detail on those questions as part of that. Market towns are a proud part of our national story. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford, and other Members from across the House, are passionate advocates for everything that they represent. As he said, in the past, market towns might have been defined as places with a historic market or a market square and a royal charter, but they are more than that. They are part of how a community sees itself.

Every market town has its own unique character and story, and their importance goes beyond the cultural heritage and identity they give to an area. A bustling market or an iconic market square helps to support the economy of these towns in the here and now, drawing in tourists, supporting local trade and sustaining connections between local people.

I am very proud to represent Barnsley in South Yorkshire, a market town with a bustling indoor and outdoor market. My own constituency of Barnsley South is home to a number of historic market towns, including Hoyland, where my constituency office is located, and Wombwell, which dates all the way back to the Domesday Book.

I am not the Minister responsible for this area—that is the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant)—but as a Government, we want to see market towns thrive long into the future and we take the future of these places extremely seriously. In the previous Parliament, I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on industrial heritage. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) touched on that; perhaps he can pick up the mantle. Of course, that is a slightly different topic from today's debate, but our work covered some aspects of market towns. By working with the likes of Historic England and visiting restored heritage sites, from the Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings—an incredible transformation—to Battersea power station just down the road, I saw at first hand how regeneration can keep culture alive while boosting the local community and economy in the here and now.

I plan to use my speech to bring together the various ways in which the Government are looking to support market towns and nurture the cultural heritage they

represent. I will focus on the specific support that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport gives in this area, although of course it is a cross-Government endeavour, as a number of Members have reflected on; as I said, I will relay their questions to the Ministers responsible for the relevant areas.

Let me start with heritage funding. Members may have seen that we marked the 60th anniversary of the first ever arts White Paper. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport spoke about her determination to

“revive culture in places where it is disappearing,”

and the arts everywhere fund will provide £270 million for arts venues, museums, libraries and heritage. A significant part of how we plan to do that is by getting behind local community organisations—the groups that know their areas the best—that want to breathe fresh life into local heritage.

Anna Dixon: In our market square in Bingley, we have Bingley arts centre and, next to it, Bingley town hall, which is ripe for redevelopment. The community would love to make it into a creative arts centre. Will my hon. Friend ensure that I and members of the local community can meet the relevant Minister to see what opportunities there are to access the huge amount of funding that Ministers have announced for arts and culture?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's contribution. I drove through her constituency at the weekend. It is a beautiful part of the world, and I am very happy to offer a meeting with my hon. Friend the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism.

Through the heritage at risk capital fund and the heritage revival fund, we are making an extra £20 million of investment available to the sector, to repair our most at-risk heritage sites and support groups who are ready to bring derelict old buildings back into good use. The heritage at risk capital fund will account for £15 million from this spring, and it lives up to its name: it is all about providing grants for repairs and conservation for heritage buildings at risk, with a particular focus on those sites that need it most. It could help all sorts of different types of heritage—shops, pubs, parks and town halls.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I know the Minister's Yorkshire constituency very well. There are many great old buildings, but one problem will be getting their energy performance certificates to band C. It is all very well investing the capital so that they can be reused, but if they are not meeting band C, they cannot be used. Will she take back to the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism the point that this area needs to be reviewed, because I think the policy of the last Government was a mistake?

Stephanie Peacock: I very much heard the points that the right hon. Member made. I commit to taking them back to the Minister responsible, and I will ensure that he writes to the right hon. Member in good time.

The heritage revival fund is a new scheme altogether, and one that is designed to put local people in the driving seat. The Government recognise that restoring buildings that once stood as visible symbols of progress

is an important way of restoring people's pride in their area and empowering local people to take control of their own destiny again. The fund will build on the previous transforming places through heritage fund, which provided support to market towns in places such as Lancashire, Suffolk and West Yorkshire. For example, it gave more than £120,000 to the Bridgwater Baptist church in Somerset, a grade II* listed church built in 1837, enabling it to be converted to a multi-purpose space supporting wider community use and providing workspaces for businesses. That fund provided a really useful model for how Government backing for local community organisations can help to unlock further backing from the private sector, such as commercial loans and other grants.

On top of our heritage capital funding, my Department delivers the listed places of worship scheme, which gives grants towards VAT paid on repairs and renovations to listed sites of worship across the UK. My colleague the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism recently set out in a debate in this Chamber how the scheme is playing an important role in keeping culture alive and well in our communities, providing facilities and meeting points for local residents. In addition to providing places to worship, many of these buildings act as music venues, food banks and community halls, all of which contribute to the cultural heritage of a place. We know that the scheme is making a difference in market towns and local areas up and down the country, which is why we are making £23 million-worth of funding available between 2025 and 2026.

Support is not just limited to central Government Departments such as DCMS; our arm's length bodies and executive agencies also play a key role. Arts Council England, the national funding body for the arts, provides a range of supports for villages, towns and cities up and down the country. The Arts Council recognises how important it is that funding gets to places that need it most, and over 60% of its investments are now outside London, with more support for regional venues and cultural assets in market towns.

Through its national portfolio programme, Arts Council England is supporting initiatives such as the Essex Cultural Diversity Project, which has a main office in Rochford in my hon. Friend's constituency and aims to boost cultural diversity in the arts and heritage through local projects. The Arts Council has given £300,000 to Rochford alone since 2020, which includes some vital support during the pandemic.

DCMS also makes public funding available through the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Last year that fund invested more than £293 million of money raised by national lottery players in almost 1,300 heritage projects across the UK. It has backed a range of community heritage projects, including schemes such as the Rochford Town Team, which is promoting a heritage trail around the market town. I will not list every project, but hon. Members will know that the National Lottery Heritage Fund gives grants that will make a visible difference in an area.

I will briefly touch on the importance of market towns to our visitor economy and tourism sectors. As all Members here today know, many market towns are

magnets for tourists who want to visit, soak in the culture and spend their money on local hospitality. From the historic streets of Stamford to the literary heritage of Stratford-upon-Avon—I always remember my granddad taking me there when we were growing up—we have so many examples across Britain.

My colleague the tourism Minister's goal is 50 million international visitors by 2030; we need to ensure that the benefits of UK tourism are being felt well beyond our major cities and in places such as market towns. To match those words with action, we are working in partnership with VisitBritain, VisitEngland and local visitor economy partnerships to put market towns at the heart of our tourism strategy.

I would love to say more on that, but in the interests of time I will move on to say that, although I have spoken to DCMS's contribution, I am pleased to confirm that the Deputy Prime Minister has today launched the Government's new plan for neighbourhoods programme. The plan for neighbourhoods will provide £1.5 billion to 75 communities across the UK over the next decade, including a number of market towns.

In each place, the Government will help set up a new neighbourhood board, bringing together residents, local businesses and grassroots campaigners to draw up and implement a new vision for their neighbourhood. In consultation with their community, each board will be given the freedom to decide how to spend £2 million a year to deliver the priorities of local people, whether by regenerating their historical high streets, supporting new and historical open-air markets or unlocking further local investment. Our new approach puts communities at the heart of delivery and is aimed at revitalising local areas and fighting deprivation at its root by zeroing in on three strategic objectives of building thriving places, strengthening communities and empowering people to take back control of their local areas.

Taken together, the support we are making available to market towns will help to deliver what we all want to see: thriving market towns that can look forward to a prosperous future. We want to preserve the heritage that gives those towns their identity, to make them central to our tourism sector and visitor economy, and to sustain the local cultural assets that inspire this generation and the next.

10.58 am

Mr Alaba: To summarise our debate, it is fair to say that market towns are up against it and often feel the sharp end of economic downturns. I know at first hand how local communities' involvement in decision making creates thriving economies all year round and a long-term sustainable protection for cultural heritage. By harnessing the unique character of cultural heritage in our market towns, we can help to achieve local growth across the country, with all the benefits that come with that. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate and thank the Minister for her response.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cultural heritage of market towns.

Community Sport Facilities

11 am

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I will call Andy MacNae to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for a 30-minute debate.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered community sport facilities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I am grateful for the Minister's attendance today, and for all the work that she and the Government are doing to champion community sports facilities. I and many colleagues believe that easily accessible sports facilities have a huge untapped potential to contribute not just to the vibrancy of communities, but to the missions that the Government have set out to achieve. To deliver on that, we need to align funding and partnerships with need, opportunity and impact.

As a non-statutory service, local leisure provision has been disproportionately hit by years of austerity. That is especially true in the case of smaller local authorities, which lack the capacity and resilience to mitigate the cuts. The impact is particularly felt in our small towns, where hollowed-out local services amplify the feeling of being left behind. Young people in small towns rightly say, "There is nothing here for us to do," looking with envy towards distant big towns and cities and asking, "Why do they always seem to get the money?" In this debate I will argue that we must have an approach to sports and leisure that properly values the benefits of active lives while addressing the increasing inequality of provision and being agile enough to respond to opportunity when it comes. I will start by considering the wide-ranging benefits and impacts in support of our missions.

First, well-tailored sports programmes centred around local facilities can help to drive economic growth and unlock opportunity. We know that sport builds confidence and resilience in young people, equipping them for work and helping them to break down the barriers to opportunity. If we want to see the next generation thrive, they need the confidence to seize the opportunities before them. Regular sports and physical activity provide an excellent way of embedding that confidence while growing teamwork and leadership skills. The Youth Sport Trust has provided strong evidence for that, demonstrating that sport is a key predictor of children's self-confidence and resilience, with girls receiving an even greater positive impact from sports than boys.

The trust finds that the economic value of providing physical activity in primary schools alone is worth at least £4 billion under the Treasury's wellbeing measures, but the economic benefits of physical activity through improving health, wellbeing and resilience are doubled for children who are either disabled or receiving free school meals. In addition, sports can provide strong and unique incentives for people to continue coming to school. RugbyWorks supports young people excluded from mainstream education; its term-time programme offers participation in key stage 3 and key stage 4, with a year-long intervention underpinned by the four pillars of its theory of change, including developing life skills, raising aspirations, improving physical wellbeing and focusing on mental wellbeing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing this debate. He is absolutely right to set the scene very clearly for community sports facilities. Obesity seems to be rising in the United Kingdom. Does he feel that access to sporting facilities would reduce obesity? Rural bus connections to the community centres are also part of the issue, because if people cannot get there, the centres will not be much good to anybody.

Andy MacNae: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. That is a hugely important point. Connectivity and accessibility of local facilities are vital. That is the point I am making about small towns that feel cut off—not only do they not have the facilities themselves, but they are unable to get to facilities in the towns nearby. It is a crucial part of the mix, and of course young people are particularly reliant on bus services to get to those sorts of opportunities.

The RugbyWorks programme can be delivered as a preventive programme in a mainstream setting, or with children in alternative provision who have been excluded from school. Some 89% of programme graduates progressed into sustained education, employment or training. For young people in alternative provision, the national average is just 62%, so that shows a massive impact. Overall, sport can help to engage young people in education and motivate them to gain the confidence and skills that they will need in a growing economy.

For those who have fallen out of work, sport can be a route back. We have nearly 1 million 16 to 24-year-olds out of work—a record number, representing nearly one in seven young people. Poor mental health is by far the most commonly cited reason. For each individual, that is a tragedy, because being in work or training, with the potential to learn and progress, is crucial to getting a good start in life; on a societal level, it undermines our economic growth and puts huge pressure on our finances. The cost of poor mental health alone is estimated at £56 billion per year, with the total economic cost of economically inactive 18 to 65-year-olds coming in close to £300 billion a year. If we get a grip on that, we can really start to turn things around.

Sport can play a vital role in starting individuals on the route back to work. There are many examples of how that works well, including one close to my home: Rossendale Works is a partnership between Active Lancashire, Rossendale borough council and the Department for Work and Pensions, through the local job centre. The project works with individual suffering from entrenched worklessness and low self-esteem to understand what may be preventing a return to work. It develops a tailored work plan to address those barriers and includes a focus on sport and physical activities to boost confidence, health and wellbeing. Delivered through council leisure facilities, it has proved very effective in inspiring participants, getting them off the streets and work-ready, and reducing demand on local health services.

Importantly, there is also a process of job matching and close relationships with local employers with skills needs. The idea is that there is at the very least a guaranteed interview at the end of the process, and support is maintained through the interview and the work placement. Since the project kicked off in 2018, it has supported hundreds of Rossendale residents and

has proved really effective at getting them into employment. For instance, 203 people with multiple issues were supported in 2022-23, with 68 getting into employment as a result.

Despite that, the project has remained under constant funding pressure. Over the past few years, funding has been predominantly via the shared prosperity fund on a year-by-year basis. The current programme comes to an end this month, with the council seeking a one-year extension. Such continual uncertainty undermines the benefits that a fully secure programme could deliver. Once again, we see a disconnect between funding structures and programme benefits, with small councils such as Rossendale least able to bridge any gaps.

Moving on to our health mission, accessible and engaged sports facilities play a crucial role in the health of our communities, preventing and mitigating illnesses and, in doing so, easing the pressure on our NHS. The “Healthy Britain” report, by my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), highlights that obesity alone is estimated to cost the UK economy at least £58 billion a year. The British Heart Foundation estimates the annual cost to the economy of cardiovascular disease at £19 billion. The NHS spends more than £10 billion a year—or 10% of its budget—on diabetes. Sport has a massive potential to address those and other conditions. Even with our current provision, Sport England found that over 600,000 cases of type 2 diabetes, 150,000 cases of heart disease, and 1.3 million cases of depression were prevented through sport in 2023-24. As it stands, it estimates that sport activities provide at least £10 billion of savings for the NHS.

Looking specifically at mental health, overall there is a 20% to 30% lower risk of mental illness for those taking part in daily physical activity. In 2019, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee report “Changing Lives” noted:

“Living Streets reported that 80% of participants on their programme for older people felt less stressed or anxious and 76% felt fitter or healthier as a result, while parkrun told us 95% of people doing free timed runs in their local park said that they felt both healthier and happier and 97% said they felt more positive as a result. Crawley Town Community Foundation used football coaching and other activities to support people experiencing or at risk of experiencing mental health problems, with 78% of participants strongly agreeing that the project had given them a positive activity to focus on.”

Similarly, Sport in Mind, a charity that works specifically to support people with mental health issues with regular sport interventions, found that after six months 94% of attendees had improved mental wellbeing, 91% reported higher self-esteem, and 82% showed reduced symptoms of depression.

Sport really does work. Overall, for every £1 we invest in sport, we get £4 in return in social and health benefits. That incredible effect led the chief medical officer to note in 2019 that if exercise “were a drug, we would refer to it as a miracle cure”.

With better-equipped, more accessible sports facilities and an increase in social prescribing, we have the opportunity to significantly improve the physical and mental health of this nation, boosting our economy and helping the NHS. However, for that to be a true game changer, we must do it at scale and with real ambition.

Locally led and well-targeted sport-based interventions could also make our streets safer. The College of Policing has investigated the effect of sport-based intervention

programmes, which are often aimed at young people in deprived areas who are at risk of falling into crime, but can also be targeted to support those who are in prison or leaving prison. The combined effect of strong communities, good role models, challenging physical activity and healthy competition has been shown to be effective at lowering crime rates. On average, sports programmes result in an increase in psychological wellbeing for 31% for the cohort and a lower reconviction rate of 14%.

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that community asset transfers offer a real opportunity for grassroots clubs such as mine in Warrington South, allowing for the enhancement of community facilities while also giving local people a stake in how their clubs are run, putting people over profit and retaining an identity rooted in the community?

Andy MacNae: I absolutely agree. Of course, communities know best. Communities know what works; local people know what works, and empowering them to get involved in their local sports facilities is a hugely beneficial approach.

I will highlight the Sunderland Community Action Group’s “Night Riders” initiative, which specifically targets people in antisocial behaviour hotspots through detached youth workers. In the evenings, kids are taken from hotspot areas to cycling hubs, where they take part in a fun group cycling activity and are given bikes and helmets covered in LED lights. It takes people away from hotspots and puts them in a controlled, safe environment, with good mentors to work with them.

We know that sport-based interventions are an excellent way of tackling the causes of crime and antisocial behaviour. Through introducing young people to new experiences and new peer groups, their impact is long-lasting. Again, however, to make a real difference, we must take the best practice, mainstream it and do it at scale.

Finally, investment in modern and well-maintained sports facilities, and encouraging people to go cycling and walking, can help us to meet our net zero targets. Older, poorly maintained sports facilities can be difficult both to heat and to run. This is a huge issue, with 63% of sports halls and swimming pools now over 10 years old; indeed, nearly a quarter have not been refurbished in over 20 years. The Local Government Association has also found that leisure facilities produce between 10% and 40% of district and unitary councils’ direct carbon emissions. Inevitably, with those come higher running costs. Investing in modern, well-maintained facilities, ideally with renewable energy generation, is a route to environmental and financial sustainability.

Walking or cycling rather than driving to work or school delivers multiple benefits—a key benefit, of course, being reduced emissions and better air quality. Indeed, a University of Oxford study found that those people who switched just one trip per day from car to cycling reduced their carbon footprint by about half a tonne over a year.

Yet despite the great potential to support the delivery of such a wide range of benefits, after 14 years of Conservative cuts and the impact of covid, community sports facilities are struggling to survive. Many have been forced to close and many remain at risk of closure.

[Andy MacNae]

It has been particularly difficult for small councils, without the reserve spending powers or bid capacity of larger councils, to maintain leisure facilities. Despite the best efforts of their officers, it is incredibly difficult to maintain facilities, let alone open new ones.

My Rossendale and Darwen constituency is a good example: we have four small towns, with populations ranging from 15,000 to 25,000. The borough council budget is less than £9 million a year. For the past 15 years, there has been some pretty heroic work by council officers, councillors and volunteers to try to keep our leisure facilities open, but despite that work we are now in a situation where two of our four towns have no significant public sector leisure provision.

Despite having a clear forward plan to deliver the facilities that we need, along with innovative and high-impact projects, at present the council, with dwindling reserves and myriad cost pressures, has no realistic way of funding it or indeed of match funding any potential capital grants—so we fall ever further behind. Yet the irony is that these are exactly the kind of small-town communities, often lacking opportunity and with serious patches of deprivation, that are most in need of the benefits that local sports and leisure facilities can offer.

I am pleased by this Government's commitment of £123 million for funding to grassroots facilities in the current year and I am sure that we will see equally significant commitments in the future. However, I ask the Minister how we can ensure that we do not leave behind small towns and struggling councils, and how we make sure that we focus support where it is needed, and not just where the voices are loudest or the match funding pockets are deepest.

The need to ensure that funding is structured to recognise particular challenges and opportunities in small towns is one part of the equation; responding to opportunity and maximising impact is another. Our country is full of innovative people and local organisations who are keen to get together and make a difference. Our funding structures should embrace this reality and not put up barriers by pretending that central Government know best. I have already given the example Rossendale Works; for seven years now this locally designed programme that has been helping long-term unemployed people into work, yet it has been reduced in ambition and remains reliant on short-term funding.

Let me give an equally exciting example in Darwen: a top-class BMX and skatepark facility called Junction 4 Skatepark. Next to it is Darwen Vale high school, which is run by the Aldridge academy trust. Drawing on its experience of delivering the Aldridge Cricket Academy in Brighton, which has delivered excellent academic and sporting outcomes, the trust has come up with an innovative proposal for Britain's first BMX and skateboard academy.

This approach would give students the chance to develop sporting talent and academic qualifications together, rather than having to choose between the two. More broadly, it is a chance to target pupils who have not engaged well with education and are at risk, and to give them a powerful reason for getting positively engaged in school life. At the same time, the skate park has been developing innovative proposals to add media and creative elements to their offer. As well as learning to ride,

young people can learn about filming, content development, photography, event organisation and so on—all skills that could lead to excellent careers.

The academy trust and skate park are currently working on a business plan to pilot this approach. The only funding gap is likely to be revenue to cover the sports coaching elements, yet as things stand there is no obvious way of addressing it. I ask the Minister to consider how we can support such innovative approaches, responding to opportunity where it comes and mainstreaming what works, and I invite her to visit the facility and see what they can do.

The evidence for how sport can positively impact our missions seems crystal clear. Indeed, Chris Boardman would say we are “drowning in evidence”. We have plenty of examples of how to deliver on this potential with local authorities and sporting and community organisations that have initiatives ready to go. Yet under the previous Government, interventions were piecemeal, short-term and small scale, usually subject to competitive bidding and the need to fit with predetermined outcomes. At the same time, community and leisure facilities were closing at an unprecedented rate. That has led to pockets of good practice, constantly under threat of funding running out and with very limited impact nationally. That then leads to a key question. When we have an approach like this one, which is clearly capable of delivering an excellent return on investment and a positive impact that supports the objectives of multiple Departments—such as DWP, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Home Office, as well as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport—how do we properly value these benefits? How do we mainstream these programmes at scale, with an appropriate level of support to deliver nationwide impact? How do we ensure that our small towns and left-behind places equally benefit from any such approach? I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley has a saying that,

“Whatever the problem, sport can be the solution.”

We know the benefits and power of sport and physical activity, and its awesome, unarguable return on investment. However, the previous Government let our community facilities wither, leaving young people in small towns like mine with nothing to do and nowhere to go. With our focus on prevention and our commitment to left-behind communities, I hope and believe that our new Government will grasp this opportunity and empower our local authorities, sports clubs and volunteer organisations to put sport back at the heart of our communities.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again so swiftly, Sir Jeremy. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on securing this important debate. I know he has a great interest and passion for this subject, having already met him and discussed it. I will touch on some of his work later in my remarks.

Grassroots sports clubs are at the heart of communities up and down the country. They are places where millions of people play sport and get active every week, families share lifelong memories, barriers are broken down and

friendships are made. High-quality, inclusive facilities are central to that. This Government are committed to ensuring that every community across the country has access to outstanding community sports facilities.

The benefits of being physically active and participating in sport are well known. We know that even relatively small increases in physical activity can contribute to improved health and quality of life, and that it is good for both our physical and mental health. More than that, we know that community sport can play a major role in building confidence and teamwork, supporting life skills for future generations and improving community cohesion. As things stand, not enough people are active or participating in sport. This Government are committed to getting more people active, regardless of their backgrounds, maximising the power of sport to empower diverse local communities.

It was great to attend the Football Association's Made for this Game event in Parliament last week, part of their campaign to empower girls in schools across the country to get involved in sport. I am also looking forward to supporting the FA's campaign next Friday, closer to home in Barnsley, for their fourth annual Biggest Ever Football Session. These are great examples of grassroots sports being open and accessible for all.

To ensure solid foundations, the Government have committed to investment in facilities that support local communities to take part in sport and physical activity, and to a review of the school curriculum that will consider the future of physical education and school sport. The Government's approach brings in a range of Departments and public sector organisations. Sport has a central role to play in delivering in our missions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen mentioned. The health and the opportunity mission boards are bringing Departments together to ensure that action is taken around preventive health and ensuring that all children have equal opportunity, to support the country to be more physically active. My Department is representing the voice of community sport in these discussions.

The public leisure sector plays an important role in the delivery of sport, physical activity and leisure across the country. It does so through vital community assets and infrastructure, such as swimming pools, sports halls, pitches and community spaces. It can help to create a sense of pride in place and improve community cohesion, whether through team sports, gym classes or children's swimming lessons. We know that it helps to address and prevent long-term health inequalities, both mental and physical. It helps to combat loneliness, grow the local economy and provide jobs and purpose.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen knows that. Today and in previous months, he has made a powerful and passionate case for the important role that high-quality and accessible community facilities can play in his constituency. By securing the debate, he has illustrated his commitment. He works closely with his local councils and takes a keen interest in their ambitions to improve the community facilities for his constituents, as evidenced in the recent sport and physical activity strategy, published by Rossendale borough council. I understand that like other local authorities—including my own—it is facing significant pressures after the past 14 years. I heard my hon. Friend's thoughts about funding and deprivation. While local authorities are

responsible for decisions about sport and leisure provision in their areas, we recognise the challenges they face, especially smaller councils, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out.

The Government are taking immediate action to begin to address those challenges by ensuring, in the latest local Government finance settlement, that funding goes to the places that need it most. Overall, the provisional settlement ensured that in core spending power, local government will receive a real-terms increase of about 3.2%, and I am committed to working to support our leisure sector up and down the country.

My Department is responsible for the overall approach to sport and leisure provision across the country. We work closely with Sport England, the Government's arm's length body for community sport, to invest more than £250 million of national lottery and Government money annually into some of the most deprived areas of the country to help to increase physical activity levels. Sport England has taken a place-based investment approach, working with local authorities and active partnerships, to encourage system-wide change, and we have recently announced plans to extend its work into a further 53 communities across the country to ensure that those in greatest need can be active.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen will agree that it is great to see that his constituency is part of Sport England's Pennine Lancashire place partnership. That work places the community at the heart of decision making, including those small-town communities that my hon. Friend champions. He gave some great examples and kindly invited me to visit them; I would be delighted to accept.

The benefits of investing in community sport and physical activity were brought to life last week, when Sport England announced new figures showing that every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity generates more than £4 for the English economy and society. The Government recognise that high-quality, inclusive facilities help ensure that everyone has access to sport. We will continue to support grassroots sport, including through the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, which has involved investing £123 million across the UK in this financial year, and which leverages significant funding contributions from both the FA and the premier league. That funding is structured to prioritise areas that need it the most, taking into account local inactivity rates and deprivation.

Funding from the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme continues to be invested in England through Sport England and our delivery partner, the Football Foundation, which plan their investment pipeline based on local football facility plans. Those plans have been developed in partnership with local authorities and are in the process of being refreshed to reflect the current landscape.

While facilities are no doubt vital for community sport, it is the people who really make the difference. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the thousands of volunteers who give up their time, whatever the weather, to make community sport happen. Volunteers are the lifeblood of sport and physical activity. Every day, night and weekend, people can learn, play sport and get active, thanks to others giving up their time to facilitate it. Volunteers are vital to achieving a vibrant and resilient civil society, and sport accounts for more

[Stephanie Peacock]

than 50% of all volunteering in the UK. One volunteer creates the capacity for at least eight and a half more people to participate—a fabulous statistic. Volunteering connects communities and is an essential means of supporting grassroots sport. As well as providing the capacity for people to take part in sport, volunteering also benefits the health and wellbeing of volunteers themselves.

Sport and physical activity are central to preventive health, and the biggest health gain comes from supporting those who are inactive, or less active, to move more. There is an evidenced direct correlation of increased activity levels in the areas of the country with the highest density of accessible facilities that are safe, inclusive and affordable. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen that we must, therefore, ensure that those facilities exist and are accessible, as a key lever to getting people active and to help in tackling health inequalities. Around 23% of people in Rossendale and Darwen are inactive, and we want to see that figure come down; I know it is higher in my own area of Barnsley. Physical activity interventions contribute an immense saving to the NHS, preventing 900,000 cases of diabetes and 93,000 cases of dementia every year. For publicly accessible sport and leisure facilities, we want to look at the potential to support communities on health needs in particular. We are looking at how co-location between sport and health services could help inactive groups.

I recently saw co-location in action in Essex, where local council leaders are working in partnership with Active Essex, local health services and leisure providers to knit services together. They are building strong links between the health and leisure sectors, including by co-locating services so that people have easy access to a wide range of physical activity opportunities. It means that, for example, people with long-term health conditions can access activities that not only improve their physical health but are fun and social. I heard some amazing stories on my visit there. I have also seen the impact of community facilities in my constituency of Barnsley

South. Your Space Hoyland, for example, is just up the road from my office and I have visited a number of times. It provides swimming, football, badminton and a range of services that support my constituents.

There are multiple examples of similar work around the country. GoodGym is adapting to tackle the increase in isolation and loneliness by offering opportunities to combine physical exercise with volunteering and providing ongoing support to individuals. As the Minister responsible for tackling loneliness, I am keen to see what more the Government can do in this space. I recently held a roundtable with a number of organisations working on loneliness, and I will work to drive further progress in the coming months.

My Department will continue to look at ways to support such thinking as we look ahead to future policy around community sport and leisure facilities, as they contribute towards genuinely tackling a range of different issues, whether that be inactivity and inequality, health, or crime and antisocial behaviour, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen. Across all those examples, one thing is clear: having high-quality, safe, affordable facilities is vital. But more importantly, it is the people who make those facilities genuine community hubs, and this Government are committed to ensuring that facilities are built with the community at their heart.

We appreciate the huge contribution that publicly accessible sport and leisure facilities make to health and wellbeing. I am hugely passionate about that agenda; I know that being physically active and playing sport is genuinely life-changing. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen has made an important contribution today, championing his area, and I thank him for that.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank the Minister, who has worked a double shift this morning.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Palestinian Rights: Government Support

[SIR JOHN HAYES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for Palestinian rights.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. This will be a very personal speech. I declare that, with a number of colleagues from all parties, I have just returned from a trip to Israel and the west bank organised by Yachad, a moderate Jewish group that seeks to promote peace between Arab and Jew. I refer to my declaration of interests.

We went to a couple of the kibbutzim that were attacked on 7 October, which was of course incredibly moving. I want to start, in order to have a fair balance, by unequivocally condemning Hamas and all their dealings, and the way they even killed women and babies. It is not my purpose to apportion blame or take sides. I am pro-Israeli and pro-Jew, and I am pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian.

What was most moving about the trip was to be in a kibbutz listening to an 80-year-old lady. On that day in October she was cowering with her husband; her daughter was down the road. Next door to her daughter, people in their eighties were deliberately burned to death. What did that woman say to us? She said, "All my life, I've striven for peace, and I will go on striving for peace. I even took my driving test in Gaza. I have many friends in Gaza." What an inspiring moment that was.

Later, we talked to another Israeli woman, whose son had been shot dead by a Palestinian sniper when he was simply doing his military service. She too said, "I'm absolutely dedicated to peace." We talked to the brother of a hostage who was a conscript dragged from his tank—he is still a hostage—and he also talked of peace. We talked to a youngish Palestinian, whose father is very well known and has been imprisoned by the Israelis for a very long time, and they also talked of peace. We talked to the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, who also talked of peace.

The purpose of this debate, if we have any moral authority at all, is to convince our moderate Israeli friends that it is simply not in the long-term interests of Israel to hold down in occupation some 5 million Palestinians—2 million in Gaza and 3 million in the west bank. There are many moderate Israeli citizens—I would say a majority—who agree with that supposition. However, there are some extremist settlers who have the completely wrong idea that somehow they can expel people who have lived for centuries in the west bank from their ancestral homelands. That is something that I know our Government and everybody in this debate will unequivocally condemn.

On our visit, we spent time in the west bank. It was incredibly moving to visit a small Palestinian settlement on dry lands to see how they were coping. We saw a beautifully turned-out little girl, the same age as my granddaughter, living in those appalling conditions. In that very hot and dry climate, they traditionally sheltered in caves to protect themselves from the heat, and from the cold in winter, and extremist settlers had deliberately smashed the caves. We went to another village nearby where

the hall had been deliberately smashed. The moment that we turned up, two young settlers—I can only describe them as punks—turned up with sub-machine-guns, in a clear act of intimidation.

The purpose of this debate—and I agree that our influence is only moral—is to draw attention to what is happening on the west bank, because so many eyes are fixed on Gaza. I will not talk a lot about Gaza; it is incredibly important, but I have very little time and I want to talk about the west bank.

Data from the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs suggests that there were 1,800 incidents of settler violence on the west bank between 7 October 2023 and 31 December 2024, which is an average of four a day. With the whole world's attention on Gaza, perhaps there has been too little attention on the west bank. The Nablus governorate saw 411 incidents. These incidents vary in nature; they include up-front violence but also other forms of harassment.

The olive harvest in October and November has been a particular time of tension. Harvests have been interfered with and crops damaged. Often the police, army and armed settlers, organised as civilian security co-ordinators, are either physically present or alleged participants. Settlers and soldiers have attacked, beaten or threatened harvesters. There are even eight cases of live fire being directed at Palestinian farmers. Soldiers shot and killed a 59-year-old Palestinian woman from the village of Faqu'a. Agricultural equipment has been stolen, property damaged, and crops taken or destroyed.

The west bank is economically precarious, and destroying crops or preventing a harvest is extremely damaging. Hundreds of Palestinian-owned olive trees have been torched, sawed down or destroyed. Because of the deployment of Israeli troops in Gaza and Lebanon, settlers have been drafted into the army to protect other settlers. As a consequence, some settlers have committed violence while in Israel Defence Forces uniform.

A delegation of British rabbis organised by Yachad witnessed young settlers spitting at and kicking a Palestinian woman in Hebron. And so it goes on. We went to Hebron; again, it was unbelievably moving. On the main road, right in the middle of this ancient city, it is completely deserted. A small settler movement has moved into Hebron and there are 800 Israeli soldiers protecting them. The Palestinians are prevented from even walking down the main road in their own town.

It was moving, when we went to Ramallah, to talk to a grandmother—actually, she is a very distinguished banker—who cannot even see her grandson in Nablus, because although it is a very quick drive to Nablus from Ramallah, there are so many checkpoints that it takes seven or eight hours to get there. Everywhere in the west bank, there are checkpoints.

Virtually every application—over 90% of them—to build or extend a settlement is granted, but virtually every application by Palestinians to build is rejected. This is totally one-sided. It is intolerable, and we should speak out about it in this Parliament. That is what I want to do today.

I know that it has become unfashionable to talk about the two-state solution; people say that it is just western politicians going on about it and it is never going to happen. It must happen. There is no solution other

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

than a two-state solution. As a young MP 40 years ago, I sat in the office of Abba Eban, a distinguished former Israeli foreign minister. He said, “It is completely absurd and ridiculous for us to hold down 5 million people.” That was his view, but unfortunately there are now people in the Israeli Government who actually believe that Palestinians can be ejected.

There is a role for us, and it is not just moral. We had a very good meeting with our Foreign Office civil servants in the West Bank Protection Consortium. I say to the Minister that I hope he will give them more resources, because they are doing a tremendous job in calling out some of this settler violence.

We were anxious to get both sides of this issue, so we also had a meeting with the Israeli foreign service. They were very reasonable and charming people. They knew all about us—fair enough. Of course, I raised the issue of settler violence—why would I not? They said, “Oh, it’s illegal.” Of course it is illegal, but the Israeli Government could stop it tomorrow. They choose not to.

So many people make suggestions, but if I may make one, it is in the absolute interest of Israel to try to calm this down, to clamp down on illegal settlers, to stop all new settlements and to come to a settlement. I will end on that point. It is in our interest to go on encouraging this process, to have the moral courage to remember these people and to say that this debate is about peace. I know that everybody is depressed and full of doom and gloom that it will never happen, but people often thought that way in history. People thought the Soviet Union would last forever. I am confident that, eventually, logic and peace will break out, and these two great peoples—Arab and Jew, Palestinian and Israeli—can live side by side in peace.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they need to bob in order to be called—although, by the look of it, they do not need reminding.

2.41 pm

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for securing this important debate.

Last month, I was with the Father of the House as part of a cross-party group of MPs who visited the occupied west bank and Israel. While in southern Israel, we also had the chance to look towards Gaza from a distance. We stood up high on a viewing platform that looked toward the Mediterranean and, through a telescope—and a close-up on an hon. Friend’s iPhone—what emerged was the stark image of the bombed-out buildings and smashed streets of a war-torn city. It was truly a vision of hell.

Just this week, Israel has suspended aid deliveries to Gaza—a move that is all the more devastating during the holy month of Ramadan, when food has particular significance. The latest blockade confirms that the Netanyahu Government see humanitarian aid as a bargaining chip; it is a callous tactic of political leverage. It lays bare that this Israeli Government do not see aid as their legal duty to help the most vulnerable in a conflict zone.

On our trip we visited the site of the Nova music festival—a very moving sight indeed—where nearly 800 young Israelis were murdered on that horrific night of 7 October. We also met Yotam Cohen, brother of Nimrod Cohen, who was taken hostage by Hamas and remains with them. Yotam Cohen’s cold anger at the Netanyahu Government was palpable to everyone who met him. He felt that the Government could have freed his brother, along with all the other hostages, much sooner—many months ago.

But while the tens of thousands of deaths in Gaza rightly deserve our attention, on our trip to the west bank, as the Father of the House has just said, we became very conscious of the fact that a future Palestinian state is being slowly suffocated by extremist Israeli settlers enabled and protected by the Israeli police and armed forces.

As the Labour and Co-operative MP for Rochdale, what heartened me was how the co-operative movement has deep roots in both the Israeli kibbutzim movement and the Palestinian economy. In Ramallah, I met the general union of Palestinian co-operatives, which shared with me video footage showing how, miraculously, amid the rubble of Gaza, the agricultural co-op is growing seedlings for strawberries, peppers and aubergines, and trying to rebuild an income for all those who have been devastated by the war. These are literally green shoots of hope amid all the darkness and despair.

Our trip, organised by Yachad—a British Jewish group that campaigns for a political resolution of the conflict—allowed us to see the trauma on all sides, and talk to many Palestinian and Israeli peacebuilders who believe that there is still hope. We met Roni Keidar, a resident of Netiv HaAsara in southern Israel who, as the Father of the House said, had to hide in her house as Hamas fighters murdered 20 people in her village. When we asked her for a message to the British people about the state of Israeli and Palestinian relations, Roni said: “Tell them there are many people like me who do think there is room for both of us... If we keep saying ‘it is either us or them’, eventually there will be neither us nor them.”

Throughout our visit, the resilience of the Palestinian people was evident. Arab Barghouti, son of the jailed Palestinian politician Marwan Barghouti, told us that his people’s very existence is itself an act of resilience and resistance. Mohammad Mustafa, the Palestinian Prime Minister, perhaps put it best when he told us, “Being hopeless is not a privilege we Palestinians can have.” It is our job in the UK and in this Parliament to make sure that we do everything we can, locally and nationally, to fuel that hope with practical action and diplomacy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I see a lot of Members are standing. I will not impose a formal time limit, but if people stick to about three minutes, everyone will get in. I discourage interventions.

2.45 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is an honour and privilege to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for securing this critical debate.

Together with other Members speaking today, I have just returned from a cross-party visit to Israel and the west bank—a journey that brought us face to face with the human cost of war and violence for Israelis and Palestinians. We met so many people of all ages, from all sides and at all levels of power, who are working daily to try to bring about the conditions for a lasting peace in spite of the unspeakable and ongoing trauma. On the one hand are the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October, killing over 1,200 people and taking hundreds of hostages, with 60 still held captive. On the other hand is the brutal war in Gaza, killing 45,000 Palestinians, including 18,000 children, displacing thousands and imprisoning many.

A different kind of violence extends to the west bank. It is not new and it did not start on 7 October. It has been ongoing and escalating since the ceasefire agreement. During our visit, we were witness to the impacts of daily violence by extremist settlers in the occupied territories and of the policies that continue to erode the rights and dignity of the Palestinian people. That includes the rights of the young Palestinian schoolgirl and her family, whom we visited in their village of Susya. She told us how, on a nightly basis, she is woken up terrified by marauding settlers who have set up their outpost nearby. Just a couple of nights before we arrived, late at night, she heard the sound of stones being thrown at the window of her home. That night, the settlers also smashed the window of her father's car and slashed the car tyre. She can name them, describe them and point to where they live.

We visited the nearby primary school, built with UK and European aid funding, that had been completely demolished by the settlers. Desks were mangled and educational picture books were strewn in the rubble. Through a remaining window, we had a clear view of the settler outpost. From there, a quad bike came rushing towards us with two settler youths, grins on their faces, swagger in their steps and a sub-machine-gun slung over their shoulder. For us, it was just harassment. As anyone can imagine, however, for Nasser's daughter and the families in the village, it is a terrifying ordeal.

That is why many people, Israeli and international, offer to provide what is called a protective presence for Palestinian schoolchildren in the rural areas in their villages to try to ensure that they have the basic right of safety as they walk to school. They also provide a protective presence for Palestinian farmers to harvest their crops.

That same night, after we left the village, between 3 am and 5 am there was a settler incursion during which the neighbour's car was torched with a petrol bomb. The police attended at the request of the village, but the main outcome was that two of the internationals, staying overnight as a protective presence, were arrested. They were then in Jerusalem with a two-week ban on visiting the west bank.

There is impunity for the perpetrators, and the removal of the equal rights of Israelis and Palestinians in the law and in the protection of the police. In fact, since 2005, only 3% of investigations into ideologically motivated crime against Palestinians in the west bank led to a full or partial conviction. It is not just the violation of Palestinian rights through the actions of a few extremist settlers.

There has been a huge increase in settlement and settler violence since the Hamas attacks on 7 October. With attention focused on Gaza and the hostage crisis in Israel, it has given settlers an opportunity to attack with increasing impunity. At least 1,860 incidents of settler violence in the occupied west bank were recorded.

The suffering we witnessed compels us to act, speak out and ensure that the rights of those who have long been marginalised are protected. The face and future of Nasser's daughter at the mercy of marauding extremist settlers haunts us. We also heard from Roni Keidar, as the right hon. Member for Gainsborough mentioned, whom we met at Netiv HaAsara. On the day we met, Roni had just received the English translation of her new biography. I remember her words so vividly—that either the Israeli and Palestinian people find a way to live together, or they will die together.

I ask the Government to reassure us with, first, a clear and public renunciation of President Trump's Riviera proposals as ethnic cleansing—the forcible transfer of the over 2 million people of Gaza would constitute a crime against humanity; secondly, the UK Government's recognition of a Palestinian state and commitment to a two-state solution, because everyone needs a political horizon to have hope; and thirdly, extending the sanctions that the UK already has to regional councils in the west bank, which are responsible for funding the construction and the supply of services to illegal and violent outposts.

2.51 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I congratulate the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), on securing this important debate. We are discussing the rights of Palestinians, but when our constituents watch on television or their smartphones what is happening in Gaza and the west bank, they would be forgiven for thinking that the Palestinian people have no rights at all.

We need absolute clarity in this House that every single Palestinian man, woman and child has the right to life and the right to a decent existence, and that Palestinians have a right to a state. The Father of the House is correct: a two-state solution is often talked about, but we have to be careful that that does not just become a ritual—we want to see it happen in practice. What we see is an Israeli Government allowing the settlements so that a two-state solution becomes a practical and geographical impossibility. We cannot allow that to happen.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister quite rightly said that Putin's invasion of Ukraine was "vile". We want that moral clarity in relation to the actions of Netanyahu's Government. What that Government have done to the people of Gaza and the people of the west bank is vile. A war crime is a war crime, whoever commits it—whether it be Putin, Netanyahu or anyone else. Many of our constituents look at what goes on in this place, and look at what goes on in the world, and think that there are double standards. All lives are equal, and international law applies to all. Where does that leave us as a Parliament? Where does that leave us as a state?

Quite often, the Government have called for the right things. I am pleased about that, but I am afraid that Netanyahu does not listen, so action is required. In relation

[Richard Burgon]

to the unlawful invasion of Ukraine and Russia's war crimes, the Government have shown that they know how to introduce widespread sanctions, and they have rightly done so.

We need widespread sanctions to be brought against Israel until it complies with international law and stops the war crimes. We see the rulings of the international courts, including the International Court of Justice; there is no legal or moral reason not to. In fact, there are legal and moral imperatives for our Government to take action with specific sanctions, including imposing targeted sanctions against state actors, banning the import of illegal settlement products, a total and immediate arms ban, and the suspension of the trade agreement with Israel.

All too often, it is easy to think that the voices in Parliament for peace, international law and a just outcome are minority voices on the world stage. In fact, that is not the case. The position of the United States and, historically, a number of UK Governments, has been out of step with the international community. We need to get in step with the international community.

I will conclude by referring to a meeting that took place in Parliament just last week with the chair of The Hague Group. I was lucky enough to go, along with others, to the launch of the group—nine nations that have taken practical action to uphold the international court rulings and bring practical sanctions against Israel—at The Hague. If we do not do that, our words will not mean enough. Words, I am afraid, are not enough to relieve the suffering, death and horrendous experiences that are going on in the west bank and Gaza on a daily basis.

2.56 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am delighted that we are having this debate. I compliment the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) not just for securing the debate, but for the decent, human way that he presented the case for people who want peace in the region. That must be the message that we all put forward today. The images that we have seen and heard about today are unbelievably horrific; I can relate to many of them, having visited Israel, the west bank and Gaza many times and seen those horrific images for myself.

People's thirst to gain peace, and in particular peace through justice, has led to a search for peace through international law, hence the application that was made by South Africa to the International Court of Justice and the application that was made to the International Criminal Court. It was my pleasure to go to the International Court of Justice with the South Africans to observe the proceedings there.

I was recently in The Hague, alongside the hon. Members for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), for the launch of The Hague Group. The group is made up of a number of nations that have determined to proselytise on every global stage for the carrying out of international law, with respect to the illegal nature of the occupation and the bombardment of Gaza, as well as the continuing bombardment of the west bank.

As Members of Parliament, we have been elected and we are all very proud to be here. Our primary function is to hold the UK Government to account and to demand policies of our Government that are appropriate to a given occasion. I wrote yesterday to the Prime Minister to ask that he initiate a Chilcot-style inquiry into the whole gamut of policies in relation to Israel, Palestine and the conduct of this war. I think that we, as a country, need examine ourselves in this, and what we have actually done over the past few years. I say that with respect to both the current and previous Governments, because some of us were in the previous Parliament or previous Parliaments before that. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough and myself have been here for an equal length of time; it is just that he signed the book 15 minutes earlier than I did on that fateful day in 1983. I compliment him on his speech.

In my letter, I put the following points to the Prime Minister. History is repeating itself. Today, the death toll in Gaza has exceeded 61,000; two Israeli officials are now warranted by the ICC for war crimes; and Britain has played a highly influential role in all of that. A recent report by the British Palestinian Committee outlined the extent of that relationship, including the sale of weapons, the supply of intelligence and the use of RAF bases in Cyprus. Many of us have repeatedly objected to the use of those bases, and the continuing supply of weapons. We must pursue all the avenues that we can for an independent inquiry and some transparency about what is going on.

Our Government—both the current and previous Governments—have supplied weapons, have supplied intelligence and have allowed the use of the RAF bases in Akrotiri. Some 61,000 people are already dead in Gaza, there is a rising death toll in the west bank and, as the right hon. Member for Gainsborough pointed out, the Israeli Government are encouraging the settlement policy. Let us have some transparency and let us hold our Government to account so that we can play our part in bringing about peace and justice for the people of the region.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I thank Members for their abbreviated remarks. If people keep going in that way, everyone will get in.

2.59 pm

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for moving the motion. The remarks we have heard today have been powerful.

Last week, as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I travelled to the west bank—to the Occupied Palestinian Territories—and passed through area C. We also visited Saudi, where we met leaders to discuss their plans and hopes for peace. We went to Jordan, where we met Ministers, and again discussed their plans and their hopes for peace. Finally, we went to Tel Aviv and to East and West Jerusalem. We went into the heart of the Knesset and met our counterparts on the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee.

It was a sobering trip, but I believe in the invaluable power of diplomacy and the immeasurable importance of seeing places in person, so that we can come back

and speak authentically about the reality of what is happening on the ground. As the daughter of a community who have faced persecution and fled armed conflict, I found it a particularly emotional and tough trip. In Israel and Palestine, the depth and strength of feeling on both sides is palpable.

The United Kingdom and our Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff on the ground in the region are putting in painstaking and tireless diplomatic efforts; our ambassadors are an unsung testament to Britain's efforts to find peace. That is why UK politicians must not inflame tensions, and must genuinely commit to working to find a peaceful way forward, while holding people to account for the atrocities we all know are happening.

I have come home determined to redouble my efforts to find peace, as well as to stand up and be a voice for the things I have seen. In Israel, it is evident that the release of the hostages and the return of the bodies is paramount, and the issue seems to be hampering any chance of progress. The nation is in deep collective trauma and grief. Every single person has a story of being touched by the terror of 7 October and Hamas.

I met former hostage families who are themselves calling for peace, and who feel the pain of what is happening on the Palestinian side. Still they want our hand of peace and friendship, and they want us to understand what they are going through. I was there on the day of the Bibas family funerals—a mother and her two young babies, who were killed. Grief permeates that society, which I fear may never recover. We must show that, as global partners, we understand that grief.

The frustrations of people in Israel are palpable, and those frustrations are with their political class. Sitting down with counterparts in the Knesset, I saw no will or desire to push forward for peace. That was sobering and, frankly, quite depressing. Without breaking diplomatic protocol, I will say that some of what was openly said to us—members of the UK Foreign Affairs Committee—was sobering. I certainly would not say things like that in Parliament; it is not acceptable, and we must call it out at every turn.

Some people we talked to are not willing to accept the hand of support from stable regions in the middle east, and I fear that that will hamper their efforts. Normalisation with Saudi is key to finding a way forward. However, I also met brave Israelis working in non-governmental organisations who are putting their lives on the line, pushing for peace and trying to find a path forward. We must remember that they, too, are struggling against a Government that do not seem to be listening to them.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, I was the only Member of Parliament who was able to go and meet Bedouin women and their children. I do not care to repeat some of what they showed me on their phones; the Bedouin—particularly the women and children—face unfathomable settler violence, and we must call it out. The community's wider conditions are stark: their access to electricity is limited, and their access to water is hampered. There is a stream within touching distance, but they are unable to use it: above it there is a sign, with a Star of David, that makes it very clear that they may not drink or even touch the water. It is terrifying and shocking.

I was there as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee with full diplomatic protection, security and a reinforced 4x4, and we still had guns pointed in our faces. We were still terrified, and our drivers would still not take us any further into area C, for fear of what would happen to us. I was there as a British Member of Parliament. Can you imagine what the Bedouin people face day in, day out? Can you imagine the settler violence they face? The IDF turn up and the police turn up, and they let it happen. It is sanctioned by the state, it is sanctioned by the IDF and it is sanctioned by the police. The intimidation and violation is around the clock. The reality of settler violence is not going away, and we must call it out.

In the Old City, the arbitrary demolishing of family homes from generations past is stark; it was shown to me by a brave Palestinian man and a brave Israeli NGO worker who walked us around, and who told me he expected to get a call from the security services the minute we left because, as we know, this is the most surveilled place on Earth, with cameras at every turn. I walked past the rubble of family homes and of lives once lived, and I felt the fear of those still living. Despite that, their resilience and their determination to stand for their homes and their land is unwavering.

The UK must continue to push for unhindered access to and provision of aid. We must resist the Knesset's crippling restrictions on NGOs and foreign aid workers. We must resist its ability to block foreign reporters from reporting on what is happening on the ground. We must allow humanitarian aid access into the west bank and, crucially, into Gaza. I ask the Minister what our Government's response is to the settler violence, and call for them to consider sanctions on settlement goods. We know that Israel is now stopping the entry of all aid into Gaza, and we must condemn that at every level.

Hamas's military capabilities need to be eliminated. An ideology is much harder to root out, but with time, peace and education it is possible. The Palestinian Authority need political reform, so that they have the confidence of the Palestinian people. It is clear that neither side can do it alone; international allies and allies in the region have a seismic role to play, and so do we in this room.

I will not forget what I have seen for the rest of my life, and I promise that, now that I have come back, I will redouble my efforts to be a strong voice here and to work with partners globally to push forward so that the region finally sees peace, Palestinians have their statehood and Israel can be safe and secure.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I appreciate that the debate is arousing strong feelings, and I want to get everyone in. Please work with me. If Members speak for a couple of minutes each, we will get you all in.

3.7 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I want to say a special thank you to the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for his compassionate and humane speech. It was extremely touching.

[Shockat Adam]

I want to speak about a certain aspect of this conflict. Last Monday, 24 February, a piercing shrill broke the silence of the night. It was a mother crying because her two-month-old baby, Sham, had frozen to death. These are the real human costs of this conflict. Sham joins five other children who have frozen to death in the past month, joining the 116 other Palestinians who have been killed since the ceasefire began. Like many other Members here, I have spoken about this issue countless times here in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber, and nothing seems to change. We sit here and discuss the rights and wrongs, but as the Father of the House said, this conflict keeps nobody safe, including the Israelis.

I want to be a little more forthright than the hon. Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran), who could not repeat what she heard in the Knesset. There are sentiments that have been openly declared and that, unlike any BBC show, require no translation. Let us take a glimpse into the minds of many Israeli Ministers. Nissim Vaturi, who is the Deputy Speaker of the House, said that Palestinians are “scoundrels” and “subhumans”, and that Israel must

“separate the children and women and kill the adults in Gaza. We are being too considerate.”

He has previously called for the complete erasure of the Gaza strip. The Israeli Heritage Minister, Amichai Eliyahu, openly suggested that Israel drop a nuclear bomb on Gaza and said that there were no “uninvolved civilians in Gaza”. The then Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, who announced a “complete siege” of Gaza, said Israel was fighting “human animals”. And, of course, we have Benjamin Netanyahu himself, who—reciting the Hebrew Bible—said:

“Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

We rightly ask about the impartiality of the BBC, but I do not recall the same level of hysteria about the open sentiments expressed by Israeli Ministers that demonise, dehumanise and destroy two-month-old babies. The BBC’s infamous documentary merely gives us a glimpse into the blighted lives of Palestinian children, at a time when no independent journalist is allowed into Gaza and over 160 journalists have been killed.

All I ask the Minister is this: when will the Government call out the atrocities as war crimes and as genocide, and when will they do that with the same conviction as we call out other conflicts? Or are Palestinian lives simply not as important?

3.10 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I congratulate the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), on securing the debate. It was a privilege to join him recently on the delegation organised by Yachad to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

At the outset, I must share my horror at the Israeli Government’s most recent action in stopping all aid going into Gaza. It is paramount that both Israel and

Hamas move to the second phase of the ceasefire so that we can secure the return of all hostages and a long-term peace.

Visiting the west bank and the Gaza envelope was an honour, and it brings a perspective I will never forget. While we were in the west bank, we heard directly from Palestinian families who have been victims of settler violence. It is estimated that there are around 250 settlements in the west bank and East Jerusalem—settlements that have led to Palestinian families being attacked, Palestinian children being harassed on the way to and from school, cars being burned and damaged, houses and schools being destroyed, access to water and roads being blocked, and families being prevented from working their land to make a living and feed themselves.

Not only did we hear about settler violence, but we witnessed it at first hand when we were approached by two armed settlers in the south Hebron hills. An even more alarming incident occurred last week, when Yachad organised a trip for a group of British rabbis on a similar visit to ours. A settler drove his car towards the delegation, threatening to run into it on several occasions, blocking the participants from leaving the area and then driving into the side of their bus, as well as the car that was accompanying them with the photographer. The same delegation of rabbis—British Jewish leaders who care about Israel and who want peace—saw at first hand how settler youths attacked Palestinian women in Hebron, spitting at them and kicking them until the military intervened. No punitive action was taken. It is clear that, in the west bank, settlers control the land.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for speaking so passionately about her visit. I worked as a human rights observer in Hebron several years ago, and one thing that is too little understood in this place and the other place is the day-to-day humiliation and degradation that Palestinians are put through, in addition to the horrific violence. Does my hon. Friend agree that that day-to-day humiliation and degradation are just as unacceptable?

Tracy Gilbert: I absolutely agree that the challenge the Palestinian people face just trying to live their day-to-day lives is completely intolerable.

Luckily, to return to the incident I was describing, no one was hurt on this occasion—but that is not the case on every occasion. Those are just a few examples of the threats of violence that Israeli settlers inflict on Palestinians every day.

The situation of Palestinians in the west bank and Gaza is desperate. In July 2024, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion declaring Israel’s occupation of the west bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza strip to be unlawful under international law. The court emphasised that Israel’s prolonged occupation and settlement activities violate the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination and contravene international legal principles. It also stated that all states are obligated to ensure that they are not in any way aiding or assisting the maintenance of the continued presence of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

As a democratic country committed to the rule of law and human rights, the UK must consider the gravity of that ruling and how it will affect UK-Israeli relations. In particular, it must examine whether continuing to allow

goods produced in settlements in the west bank into the UK market would be considered assisting and prolonging the occupation, hence denying basic rights to the Palestinian people. I welcome the sanctions put in place last October, but I am keen to hear from the Minister what impact they have had and what further actions the Government can take. For example, they could extend sanctions to regional councils in the west bank that are responsible for funding illegal and violent outposts.

I will close with the powerful remarks made by Roni Keidar, whom our delegation met, as colleagues have pointed to. As a woman who has lived on the Gaza border most of her life and survived the attacks on 7 October, she said that

“either the Israeli and Palestinian people find a way to live together, or they will die together.”

3.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for setting the scene.

The topic of Government support for Palestinian rights cannot be discussed without acknowledging Israel's right to exist as a secure and democratic homeland for the Jewish people. That is a non-negotiable principle for me, and for many others in this Chamber. Israel has the right, and the duty, to defend herself against the terrorists Hamas, who have long inflicted violence on innocent civilians. We must remember that it is Hamas, with their acts of barbarity and their deliberate targeting of civilians, who have led to the consequences of retaliatory warfare that we see today.

The acts of 7 October were despicable, but more recently we saw the celebrations around the coffins containing women and children who were Israeli hostages. The awful, inhuman celebration, which made a mockery of the innocent lives contained within those coffins, would have been cause for further Israeli action. I thank the Israelis for their strength in the face of further pain, hurt and provocation.

However, although I remain unwavering in my support for Israel's right to defend herself, I also recognise the need for compassion and empathy for the Palestinian people. Many Palestinian civilians are victims of violence, deprived of necessities and subjected to an increasingly precarious living situation through the acts of Hamas, whom they have no ability to evict from their own communities. The collapse of infrastructure and diversion of aid, which is intended for civilians but has been used by militants, exacerbates the almost impossible life lived by the families in Gaza who wish for nothing more than peace and a safe place to raise their children.

Acknowledging the Palestinian people's suffering does not diminish my support for Israel. We must advocate for a compassionate end to this dreadful conflict that recognises both the needs of those innocent Palestinians who are victims of the terrorists Hamas within their communities, and Israel's right to security and safety. Were it not for the fêted Iron Dome, the simple fact is that Israel would have been wiped off the map, and the genocide of its people, which is the aim of Hamas and all other interested parties, would have been completed. Of course, Hamas have been baby killers. They have raped women and they have murdered everyone.

The suffering of women and children are realities that cannot be ignored, which is why we are all in this Chamber today to advocate for peace, a new way forward and hope for all the children on each side of the boundary in Gaza. It is clear that peace cannot be achieved unless there is a mutual recognition of each other's rights. Palestine must unequivocally acknowledge Israel's right to exist politically, territorially and socially. That recognition must be accompanied by a commitment to peace, which means an end to terrorism and violence. For peace to flourish, we need both sides to renounce hatred and violence. It is crucial that we hold firm in demanding an end to terrorist attacks launched from Palestinian territories, as they undermine the prospects of a lasting peace.

It is my view that a two-state solution, in which Israelis and Palestinians live side by side in peace and security, cannot exist with Hamas's continued aggression. The Government have a role to play in addressing this issue—not just by offering support for humanitarian aid, but by standing firm in our support for Israel's security while pushing for genuine peace. If we do that, we can find a way forward. We can find a way if there is a willingness, and if Hamas are eradicated from the Earth.

3.19 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I extend my thanks to the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for ensuring that this important debate took place.

Gaza is not a political football. It is home to 2 million people, and the west bank is home to 3 million. Five million people's lives are impacted. Gazans are not pawns to be used in any game. Gaza is home to millions of innocent people. Have they not suffered enough? This conflict in their homes has devastated communities, decimated entire areas and destroyed countless lives. Yet the first phase of the ceasefire has expired, weakening the hopes of innocent civilians because that process hangs by a thread.

The coming days are critical. Every time progress stalls, the stakes grow higher. Humanitarian aid falters, rebuilding efforts crumble and a return to the levels of bloodshed, violence and tragedy we saw just weeks ago looms closer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) and the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) said, the stakes are so high. The degradation of the Palestinian people and the untold amount of bloodshed must not continue. We must call it out for what it is.

More families are being torn apart. Children are left without vital food and water, and more lives are left in limbo with little relief in sight. Gazans are living with uncertainty on all sides. They are uncertain if Israel will allow aid in, uncertain if they will ever rebuild their homes, and uncertain if they will ever have a land of their own. How many more Palestinian lives must be lost before we finally them afford them the same respect and dignity that is afforded to others?

The next few days and weeks are crucial. We cannot allow this deal to break down. We must continue the fight for a two-state solution. The Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough, is absolutely right when he says we must keep up the pressure. We must shine a light on this tragedy so it is never forgotten. Palestinians need a safe and secure state, alongside a safe and secure Israel.

3.22 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Unlike other Members who have been reflecting on recent visits to the region, although I have visited the region more recently, I visited both Gaza and Israel as long ago as 2012. My reflection when I returned, particularly from Gaza, was how appalling the conditions were. How much worse they are now. I wrote an article for my church magazine reflecting on my visit to Israel and I said that one could feel the tensions within society. It was not a society at ease with itself, and I suspect that is probably still the case.

In preparing for this contribution, I looked back on the Backbench debate that took place in October 2014 about the recognition of Palestine. I noted that 39 Conservatives voted for recognition, including me and the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was a Teller on that occasion, I noted. It would be interesting to hear from the Front Benchers what their views are now on that particular situation.

One of the contributions came from our former colleague Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who of course in the 1990s was Foreign Secretary. His view was that it was not the right time for recognition at that point because to be a recognisable state there needed to be a functioning Government and military. In the present circumstances, achieving a functioning, democratically accountable Government and all the extensions of that such as a military is clearly an impossibility. I am very interested to hear the Front Benchers' comments on that.

As the Father of the House said, and I agree entirely, Israel has a perfect right to exist. I would describe myself as a friend of Israel, but friends can be critical and there is a lot to criticise the state of Israel about. It must surely recognise that its actions in Gaza—while with the perfectly legitimate aim of eliminating Hamas, particularly after the appalling atrocities of 7 October—are creating the Hamas of the future. They are radicalising the children and young people, who see death and destruction all around. How will they not grow up wanting revenge for what they see?

In so many ways, Israel is an admirable country. The people have shown courage. Their science and technology are very advanced, and the resulting benefits are tremendous. However, Israel has a proportional representation system of Government, which inevitably means coalitions, and the extreme elements that exist within those coalitions will always hold them back. I very much hope that after this debate a united approach can be taken, whereby we recognise the rights of Israel but are also extremely critical where appropriate.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I will delay calling the Front Benchers until 3.30 pm, so that I can get more Back Benchers in.

3.25 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for securing this debate; I got to know him well recently on our visit to the region. I also thank everybody

who has spoken in the debate. I am rapidly rewriting my speech, because many things that I would have said have already been covered.

I start by paying my respects to the more than 1,200 people who were killed on 7 October 2023 in those horrific and barbaric attacks by Hamas, whose intent was genocidal, in the sense that they saw anybody who was in that space as a legitimate target. Hamas are completely against the existence of the state of Israel. I have always been a believer in Israel; I believe in a homeland for the Jewish people. However, what I discovered while I was in the region is that Hamas are not the only organisation within that space who are opposed to a two-state solution; extremist elements in the Israeli Government are seemingly opposed to a two-state solution as well. When we met Mohammad Mustafa, the Prime Minister of Palestine, it became clear to me that he was the only political actor I met who is committed to that two-state solution.

Other Members have already spoken well on the settler violence that we witnessed, which was horrific. It is horrific to see people living under decades of occupation. One thing that struck me is the challenge that the Palestinian Authority face to give hope to people, and persuade them not to use armed resistance but to be peaceful after decades living under occupation in a situation where they do not have the same political rights as others, and where Palestinian families are driven away from their villages. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) described well a school that we saw had been smashed to pieces; the remains of children's workbooks were still strewn across the floor.

I was grateful this week to see our Prime Minister literally put an arm around President Zelensky. I feel that the time has also come that we need to put an arm around the Palestinian people—indeed, not just the Palestinian people but all people in that region who are moderates but whose voices are being drowned out.

I will briefly suggest three or four things that we need to look at. One is the ICJ ruling. We know that last summer the ICJ gave an advisory opinion that there is an unlawful occupation, and that the prolonged presence of Israel is unlawful and breaches principles of international law, including the fourth Geneva convention, which prohibits an occupying power from transferring civilian population into the territory that it occupies. That ICJ ruling also put obligations on states to recognise the illegal situation. It is disappointing that the United Kingdom Government abstained in the UN General Assembly on this issue. Can we please revisit that, because as Israel's position shifts our position needs to shift as well?

I used to be of the opinion that recognition of the state of Palestine should come as part of a negotiated settlement, but it is now clear to me that a Palestinian Authority who are committed to a two-state solution needs that recognition sooner rather than later. Could the Minister set out a road map for that?

It is also deeply concerning that the access of the International Committee of the Red Cross to Israeli prisons is being blocked, because we know that human rights abuses and torture are occurring in those prisons. Can we please do something about that?

The economy of Palestine is in a terrible state. When we visited the Bank of Palestine, a specific ask was to include Palestine within the mandate of British international investment, to strengthen the Palestinian economy. Finally, can we do more on sanctions to address settler violence? Can we please put an arm around those people and say, “enough is enough”?

3.30 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I congratulate the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), on bringing this important debate. I will cut down my speech to the bare bones and focus on the rights of the Palestinians as attributed to them by the Government here.

I believe that the UK’s denial of Palestinian rights for more than a century has directly led to the situation we face today. What rights have we denied them? As right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, they have a right for the UK not to refuse to recognise their state, their homeland. They have a right not to be starved and denied essential life supplies, such as water and medicines. They have a right not to be unlawfully killed by Israeli forces and settlers at any point in their daily lives. They have a right not to be unlawfully and violently evicted from their homes, and forcibly displaced.

They have a right not to face abusive detention and torture in Israeli prisons. They have a right not to face movement restrictions, blockades and checkpoints that prevent pregnant mothers reaching hospitals to deliver babies. They have a right not to face discriminatory laws passed daily by the Israeli Knesset. They have a right not to undergo collective punishment and not to be sexually abused trying to live their lives.

To conclude, it is clear that successive UK Governments and many in this House have denied the rights of Palestinians, and continue to do so in blind loyalty in defence of Israel and its many war crimes. Palestinians are as human as any Israeli or Ukrainian, and deserve the same rights from the UK.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): The shadow Minister and the Liberal Democrat spokesman have agreed to have slightly shorter times. I will try to get two more people in for one minute each.

3.33 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Thank you, Sir John. I also thank the Father of the House for securing this debate. In his Oscar acceptance speech, the director of the film “No Other Land”, Basel Adra, called on the world to stop the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. We must bear witness to the atrocities documented in his film, and the genocide documented on our mobile phone screens, and heed his call.

Having committed what many experts are clear is genocide in Gaza, Israel is now, during the holy month of Ramadan, once again collectively punishing the people of Gaza by withholding aid. The UK has licensed arms for export to Israel, and UK military bases have been used to facilitate military cargo to Israel, and for surveillance flights over Gaza. It is very difficult to argue that the UK Government are not complicit in at least some of Israel’s breaches of international law.

If the UK is seen to take an inconsistent approach to war crimes, it undermines the international legal order, which is there to protect us all. We must not treat Israel differently just because it has been our ally. If the ceasefire holds—we must do everything in our diplomatic power to ensure that it does—rebuilding Gaza will be a huge challenge. We must play our part in that by committing significant funding and other resources.

I would like the Minister to answer the following questions. When will the Government recognise the state of Palestine? Will the Government stop all arms sales to Israel and other military support? Will they implement sanctions on Israel? Will they commit to funding the rebuilding of Gaza?

If the answer to any of those questions is no, why not? Why are our responses to Russia’s war crimes in Ukraine and to Israel’s war crimes in Gaza so different? Can the Government not see that hypocrisy on this issue does the whole world a disservice and threatens global security? We must be consistent and stand for human rights everywhere. That means doing everything in our power to hold Israel to account, prevent genocide in Gaza and secure rights and justice for the Palestinian people.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I will enforce a one-minute time limit.

3.36 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) not just for securing the debate but for the manner in which he introduced it. I will speak briefly about what I saw and heard on my visit to Israel and Palestine. It was a journey of stark contrasts—immense suffering, but also remarkable courage. Those experiences should carry us forward in how we set British policy on Palestinian rights.

In Gaza, the devastation is beyond words. In the shadow of Gaza’s skeleton ruins, I met aid workers risking their lives to provide vital relief, and refugees whose homes and futures have been torn apart. The scale of the destruction means that we must push for immediate and sustained humanitarian aid, and we need to stand firm against any measures to undermine that aid getting to where it is needed. In the west bank, I saw the daily reality of life under occupation: the constant roadblocks, the endless checks and the ever-present fear. I met families who have been forcibly removed from their homes and villages that have been demolished six times. Palestinians are treated worse than second-class citizens. The UK cannot turn a blind eye to this injustice. We should use the financial sanctions available to us as a country to target Israeli settlements, to uphold international law and human rights.

When we talk about Palestine, it is easy to focus on the sheer terrible nature of the events, but on my visit I also heard voices of hope—from Israelis who lost loved ones but refuse to embrace revenge, to Palestinians committed to building a peaceful and democratic future. I met a family of a young Israeli hostage, desperate for the safe return of their family member but let down by their own Government’s indifference. These voices remind us that peace is possible, but only through justice and equality.

[*Mr Will Forster*]

The UK can play a role in that. We need to recognise the state of Palestine. We must ensure that aid gets to where it is needed. We must challenge policies that entrench division and violence, whether they come from Hamas, the Israeli Government or any other actor. We have seen Trump and Vance bully their guest Zelensky in the Oval Office recently, yet across the Atlantic, Britain continues to stand up for its ally, Ukraine. We must seize the chance to support countries that find themselves enslaved, isolated and bullied by their neighbour's aggression. The UK should use its worldwide respected authority to support such nations in gaining recognition of their statehood.

The people I met deserve our support. Let us stand with those who want a better world, and pursue an agenda of peace that upholds human rights and self-determination—for a safe and secure Israel alongside a free and independent state of Palestine.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I call Harpreet Uppal. A paragraph, please, Harpreet—no more.

3.38 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the Father of the House for bringing forward this vital debate.

The already strained Palestinian healthcare system in the west bank has been further weakened, and is facing significant budget constraints stemming from Israel's increased withholding of tax revenues meant for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, as stipulated by the Oslo accords. The World Health Organisation reports that 45% of essential medications are out of stock, and health workers have not received their full salary for over a year, meaning that most clinics and hospitals are running at significantly reduced levels. Of course, the effective ban of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is impacting the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Hardly any healthcare facilities are running in Gaza.

I will leave it there, Sir John. I am sure that the Minister has heard those concerns.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): That was wonderful. A few commas, a couple of semi-colons, but a paragraph, I reckon—don't you? I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.39 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for bringing this critically important debate.

Late last year, I also visited the occupied territories and the west bank, and I share his and other hon. Members' strength of feeling. I also pay tribute to our officials in East Jerusalem, who work so hard to tell and navigate the story, to all those there who are seeking peace—there are many of them—and to all those who are living under the daily horror of conflict.

In this debate, I reaffirm the Liberal Democrats' unwavering commitment to human rights, international law and a lasting peace for both Palestinians and Israelis through a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. First and foremost, the Liberal Democrats support the UK Government in their efforts to uphold the current ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Negotiations to move from phase 1 to phase 2 of the ceasefire deal must occur as quickly as possible. In the meantime, I urge the Government to do everything they can to secure the unconditional release of hostages, all the while ensuring that humanitarian aid flows unhindered into Gaza. They must do that.

Last weekend, Israel blocked further humanitarian aid from entering Gaza, which is a contravention of international humanitarian law. It also imperils the delicate but essential cessation of hostilities, and will impose yet more suffering on Gazan civilians, who have already suffered so much. Israel must act in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law and permit aid in.

I also note with concern developments in the west bank. Despite the ceasefire in Gaza, there are strong indications that the Israeli military are refocusing efforts on the west bank. Israel's Defence Minister, Israel Katz, confirmed last Sunday that 40,000 residents were displaced from refugee camps in the north of the west bank, and that Israel will not allow the return of the Palestinian residents. Will the Minister condemn this forced displacement, particularly in view of the comments of Minister Katz?

Moreover, the UK must respect and act upon the ICJ's advisory opinion on the occupation, cease all trade with illegal Israeli settlements, and work to end the arbitrary administrative detention of Palestinians by the IDF. The continued expansion of settlements in occupied territories is an obstacle to peace, and the UK must stand firm in its condemnation of those illegal actions.

On arms exports and human rights, I want to re-emphasise that it is indefensible that the UK continues to export arms to countries in which human rights violations are rampant. The Liberal Democrats have long been calling for an immediate suspension of all arms exports to Israel, in line with the Foreign Office's own human rights priorities.

The UK must also take a stand by immediately recognising the state of Palestine. When I visited, I saw for myself the rapidly shrinking state. Before it disappears, we must recognise it. However, recognition alone is not enough; we must actively work with international partners to support democratic leadership in Palestine, invest in peacebuilding initiatives, and use trade as a tool for economic co-operation and stability. The international fund for middle east peace must be supported, and the UK should lead efforts to bring together Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders who are dedicated to the future of co-existence and mutual security.

As we debate, leaders of the Arab world are meeting in Cairo to develop counterproposals to President Trump's destabilising rhetoric. They intend to provide a peaceful, long-term solution for the people of Gaza. President Trump has previously advocated for the permanent resettlement of Gaza's 2.2 million residents, calling to "clean out" the strip. Such a policy would violate international humanitarian law and severely damage

relations with the Arab nations, whose support and commitment will be essential to any lasting peace agreement. Will the Minister therefore affirm that the British Government oppose President Trump's proposal for Gaza? Will she also outline how the UK is working with partners in the region to help secure lasting peace?

I cannot leave out the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Beyond the immediate violence, the long-term effects of the conflict, if left unaddressed, will devastate generations of Palestinians. It is alarming to think that we might see that devastation start to bite far more quickly than we previously feared, now that the UK and the US have cut back on their overseas aid budgets. The UK must seriously reconsider that shameful decision to reduce overseas aid to 0.3% of GNI—the lowest level this century. In her resignation letter, the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) made it clear that one of the areas of UK development spending potentially affected by the cut to aid is Gaza. By putting that vital work at risk, we are not only diminishing our ability to alleviate vast amounts of human suffering—in Gaza, more than 80% of hospitals have been reduced to rubble—but we are also rolling the dice on a more dangerous world. Failed states create more Hamas.

I want to include Jordan, which has for so long been a refuge for so many Palestinians fleeing their home, and who we have supported for so long. I regret that the UK follows where other countries cut aid or stop aid. I ask the Minister to outline how she intends to ensure that the UK can continue vital development work in view of these major cuts.

I share the outrage and concern of Members of this House at the violence against Israeli and Palestinian civilians. The UK has a moral duty to uphold human rights and the principles of justice on the global stage. The Government must strain every sinew to uphold the ceasefire, get the hostages out, condemn all violence and war, and they must recognise the Palestinian state. It is way overdue.

I will leave hon. Members with the words of a Palestinian Catholic priest who visited my constituency at the weekend to tell the story of the children of Bethlehem. He said to me, "I am not political, but I am here to ask you to work for peace." He reminded me of the teaching of St James, that faith is nothing without action. The peacemakers in the region need our action. I call on the Government to act.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Please divide the remaining time by two, allowing Sir Edward a few moments to sum up the debate at the end. I call the shadow Minister.

3.46 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I start by congratulating the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), on securing this debate and for sharing with us his thoughtful and informed contribution, based on his own very personal experiences and recent visit to the region.

I want to start by talking about the immediate situation. The ceasefire continues to be extremely fragile and there remains a long and difficult road ahead. We want this agreement to endure. That means, as I have said before, the release of each and every single hostage held by Hamas.

We recently passed 500 days since the atrocities of 7 October 2023 and the taking of the innocent hostages. They and their families did nothing to deserve the unimaginable horrors that have been inflicted upon them by Hamas. Since I last spoke in this place, we have witnessed further hostage releases. Tragically, last week, we also saw the return of the bodies of Ohad Yahalomi, Tsachi Idan, Itzik Elgarat and Shlomo Mantzur. The week prior, we witnessed the return of the bodies of Ariel and Kfir Bibas, their mother Shiri Bibas and Oded Lifschitz. Our hearts break for their families and we stand with the state of Israel at this desperately sad time. As the Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis said:

"It is pure evil to take a mother and her young children and an elderly man hostage. It takes another layer of evil to be responsible for their deaths."

Nobody should be in any doubt about the evil of Hamas and their total disregard for human life and human dignity, which I shall return to.

On the present situation in Gaza, I would be grateful if the Minister updated the House on four points. First, what conversation has she had recently with the International Committee of the Red Cross on its efforts, both on hostage releases and on humanitarian assistance more broadly? Is there any further practical or diplomatic assistance that the UK can provide to support its operations?

Secondly, can the Minister offer her latest assessment of the humanitarian situation in northern Gaza? Thirdly, what is the Government's practical response to Israel's decision on aid access? How are the Government working to unblock the situation, and what is happening to British aid that is already in the region or en route? Fourthly, what role is the UK playing to help get an agreement on phase two of the ceasefire over the line? What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with American, Israeli and other regional counterparts in recent days?

Turning to the main subject of this debate, we must acknowledge that fundamental freedoms and rights have been denied to the people of Gaza for many years by Hamas. Hamas have no regard whatsoever for human life, let alone human rights, women's rights, freedom of expression or political freedoms. Hamas have been deeply repressive of civil society and political opposition, and they have arbitrarily arrested journalists. Hamas have also executed Palestinians, and have form on sentencing Palestinians to death. In both Gaza and the west bank, the LGBT community has been subject to attacks, and elections have not been held in the west bank since 2006. There have been reports of thousands of detentions in relation to freedom of expression and political affiliation in the west bank.

We are still at an early stage of the ceasefire agreement, which remains delicate, but we hope in time to be able to progress to the next stages and consider the future governance of Gaza. What are the Government doing on the diplomatic front to help to ensure that there can be no future role for Hamas in Gaza, and what conversations have they had with Israeli counterparts and key regional actors on bringing this about?

In government and before, Conservatives called for many years for the Palestinian Authority in the west bank to reform. If the Palestinian Authority are to have an expanded role, it is even more important that they implement the most significant programme of reform

[Wendy Morton]

in their history, including to their welfare and education policies. Of course, they must also demonstrate real, serious democratic progress. In government, we made those points directly to the Palestinian Authority, so will the Minister tell the House whether the Labour Government have done the same, and specifically whether they have outlined a clear set of expectations to the Palestinian Authority on when they want those reforms to take place?

As I have said, we would also like Israel to take steps in relation to the west bank, including with regard to releasing frozen funds, on settlements and, in particular, in holding to account those responsible for extreme settler violence.

We support a two-state solution that guarantees security and stability for both the Israeli and the Palestinian people. We must help to give the people of the west bank and Gaza the political perspective of a credible route to a Palestinian state and a new future. Do the Government have a vision for what that could look like, and do they intend to present the outlines of a possible blueprint in the time ahead? Although it is difficult, we must strive to lift people's eyes to a brighter future and a regional peace.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): I congratulate the Father of the House on securing this important debate and on bringing together Members from across the House to speak in it. In the short time we have remaining, I will endeavour to respond to all the issues raised.

I pay tribute to the work of Yachad, which educates Members of Parliament on the realities, brings people up to date on important work that is happening, and gives us hope, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) mentioned—as a good Co-operative MP—in remembering the importance of green shoots.

The agreement to end the fighting in Gaza was a major step forward, ending combat operations and increasing aid for Gazans while allowing the release of 38 hostages in Gaza so far. They include British national Emily Damari and Eli Sharabi, who has close links to the UK. The bodies of eight deceased hostages, including Oded Lifshitz, who had links to the UK, have also been released.

We have been clear from the outset that a ceasefire is simply the first step towards a lasting solution to this crisis and a lasting peace. What is needed now is a political process and a political horizon towards a two-state solution. That is why it is so important that members of the Foreign Affairs Committee visited the region to deepen their understanding, so that we can continue to have these debates in Parliament, and push those of us who are on the frontline in discussions with interlocutors to ensure peace, security and the protection of fundamental rights for both Palestinians and Israelis.

The Palestinian Authority will have a key role in the future security and governance of Gaza. For the current fragile deal to work, we need all parties to co-operate. That includes making future security arrangements that protect Israelis and Palestinians and respect their human rights. Most importantly, aid must now flow into Gaza

and must be sustained. We just had an urgent question on this in the House, to which I refer others who were not there. Aid includes the supply of medical equipment, shelter items, water and sanitation equipment, which are essential for humanitarian and early recovery needs. A halt on goods and supplies entering Gaza, such as that announced by Israel, risks breaching obligations under international humanitarian law, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) mentioned, should apply to us all.

The UK is investing in this ceasefire, and we continue to do all we can to alleviate the suffering. We announced a further £17 million in funding at the end of January to make sure healthcare, food and shelter reaches tens of thousands of civilians and to support vital infrastructure across the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Crucial partners such the Red Cross, which the Opposition spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), mentioned, and individuals working in the field of aid and development must be able to pass borders and get desperately needed aid into these difficult areas.

The Government have announced £129 million of funding for the OPTs so far this financial year, including £41 million for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, delivering essential services to civilians in Gaza and the west bank and to Palestinian refugees across the region. This includes support for essential healthcare, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) mentioned, is so important. On education, we earmarked £5.8 million of UK funding this financial year for Global Partnership for Education work in Gaza and the west bank, and for the Education Cannot Wait initiative.

The UK will play a leading role in international efforts to support a Palestinian-led recovery and reconstruction, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome). We welcome the leadership of Arab partners, as demonstrated by the discussions in Cairo today about plans to reconstruct Gaza—my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) talked about the importance of agriculture and the economy. We are supporting efforts towards finding a single viable plan for the next phase of the ceasefire and reconstruction.

Civil society must have a strong role in Gaza's early recovery. It is crucial to lay the groundwork for inclusive governance, accountability and transparency. We will continue to work with Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the US, and Arab and regional partners to build consensus for a governance and security framework in post-conflict Gaza.

So many have mentioned the west bank. Its stability is absolutely essential if the fragile ceasefire in Gaza is to last. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) described the use of protective presence and the NGOs that are working in this important area. We recognise that Israel has legitimate security concerns, but we have continually urged it to show restraint in its military operations and for civilians to be protected. We also continue to call on Israel to hold violent settlers to account. In October, the Foreign Secretary announced sanctions targeting three illegal settler outposts and four organisations that have supported and sponsored violence against communities in the west bank.

We reiterate, as the Father of the House did in his opening remarks, that settlements are illegal under international law and undermine prospects for peace. The UK condemns comments that propose the annexation of land in the west bank. This would undermine prospects for peace, lead to greater instability, and be illegal under international law.

We are not in the business of providing running commentary on the US role in this particular conflict, but we do share the US President's desire for the ceasefire to be sustained. Like him, we want Hamas to release the remaining hostages, as is set out in the ceasefire agreement. The UK commitment to a two-state solution remains strong and unwavering, as the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) and for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) emphasised in their contributions.

Gaza needs to be rebuilt for the Palestinians who live there. Our priority is the implementation of the ceasefire deal in full, creating the foundations for a pathway to peace. An effective Palestinian Authority is vital for lasting peace. The Foreign Secretary has spoken to the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Mohammad Mustafa, and to President Abbas, and has offered our support as their Government implement much-needed reforms to build the pathway towards the future. However the Government of Israel, as well as the Palestinian Authority, retain a responsibility to support the rights of Palestinians. Working closely with our international partners, we will continue to pursue the objectives of the two-state solution. I shall leave it to the Father of the House to wind up.

3.59 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Thank you, everybody, for taking part in what has been a very powerful debate. We are completely united. We condemn Hamas, but we stick up unequivocally for the rights of the Palestinian people. Everybody, from all parties or from no party, has made that point—it has even united the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and me.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for Palestinian rights.

North Staffordshire Ceramics Industry: Energy Costs

4 pm

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered energy cost support for the ceramics industry in North Staffordshire.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John, and I am grateful that this topic has been selected for debate today. I am also delighted to be joined by my fellow Stoke MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), and I thank all other hon. Members in attendance today. This is a city-wide and a nationwide debate, and it is critical that we speak with one voice on the issues, to support the industry as much as we can.

Now is the time to act. It was only last month that Royal Stafford, a ceramics firm in my constituency, went into liquidation after nearly 200 years of making fine pottery. That was a devastating blow for our local economy; more than 80 people lost their jobs, and it highlights the real urgency of today's debate. What happened at Royal Stafford should not have happened, and it should not have happened to all other companies over the years. We must fight for our pots.

I would like to place on record my thanks to Colin, Sam and the wider GMB union for stepping up to support want to pay tribute to the ceramics companies that operate in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North—Moorcroft, Burleigh, Steelite, Moorland and Churchill, to name only a few—and I thank Rob Ffello and Ceramics UK, who have campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the sector.

The ceramics industry is integral to our story as a city—hence our “Potteries” name—and today, in our centenary year, it still employs more than 3,000 people, exporting our fine products all around the world. We cannot afford to lose those jobs, nor the skills of our workforce. Already, in Stoke-on-Trent, disposable household income sits some £5,000 behind the UK average, according to the latest Office for National Statistics data. Over the years we have lost our pits, and we cannot afford to lose any more of our pots. Our ceramics companies must remain a focus of economic growth and industry for our city.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. He is absolutely right to highlight the issue of the ceramics industry. Similarly, in Northern Ireland, we have Larne, Belfast and Londonderry, which also have a very rich history in ceramics. In terms of education—to help the hon. Gentleman if I can—Ulster University in Belfast has helped to develop new advancements in the ceramics field. There is much more that can be done. There is a future for ceramics—that is the point I am trying to make. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more could be done in education to encourage more young people into the field, if there was a vision—and an opportunity—for the future?

David Williams: I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for attending my first Westminster Hall debate. As always, he raises some important points.

[*David Williams*]

I remember the old days of Stoke, when we actually had bottle kilns attached to our local schools, giving people their first opportunities to learn a skill. Sadly, those have all gone, but the point about getting people interested in the sector and learning skills is a valid one.

I am delighted that last year Stoke-on-Trent was awarded world craft city status for our ceramics heritage. Many people will be familiar with our household names in tableware. I have spoken before about our “turnover club”, where people pick up the plates and look at their provenance. I have explained in the past that my mum and my grandad worked in the potbanks of Tunstall and Burslem—namely, at H&R Johnson and Dunn Bennett & Co.

However, many people do not realise that ceramics shape every aspect of our lives. Ceramics companies manufacture the clay bricks, roof tiles and pipes that we need for our homes.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): There is another sector alongside pots and roof tiles: bricks. I wanted to come in on that point as the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills. We have Ibstock—looking to the future, a huge amount of investment is going into the Ibstock factory in Aldridge—and Wienerberger. I think one of the challenges—the hon. Member may agree with me—is that this sector is really impacted by energy costs, so we have to continue to look at how to support the energy-intensive sector in every way we can, because this is the future.

David Williams: I thank the right hon. Member for those comments. I know that she has spoken passionately about this matter in the past, and I will come on to the point about the need to support companies with their energy bills.

I was talking about how ceramics have an impact on our everyday life. Without refractories, we would not have the ability to make steel, glass and other high-temperature products. Without ceramics, we would have no cars, no buses and no mobile phones—what a scary idea. Without advanced ceramics, we would have no aircraft, defence or medical equipment.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. Like me, he will have heard that advanced ceramics carbon filters are going into submarines being built not just for the UK, but for the Australian navy. With the commitment that this Government have rightly made to huge increases in defence spending, perhaps he will allow me to join him in suggesting to the Minister that one way we could help the entire ceramics sector is by redirecting some of that commitment to defence spending to ensure that those ceramic component producers get the help and support they need right now.

David Williams: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that intervention. I could not agree more; I am certain that the Minister will have heard those comments and I wholeheartedly support them.

Of course, we would be eating and drinking from wooden bowls and cups without the beautiful tableware that we enjoy—including, as I have said, many of the plates, cups and saucers we see here across the Westminster estate. The world as we know it simply would not exist

without ceramics. I urge the Government to recognise that the UK ceramics industry is a critical enabler of the UK economy—used, as we have said, from building homes to high technology to steel making.

However, I repeatedly hear concerns from companies regarding their sustainability following dramatic increases in their energy bills. For energy-intensive industries such as ceramics, energy cost pressures are significant. In fact, I have heard from companies in my Stoke-on-Trent North constituency that their energy bills have trebled. One company told me that it has seen energy bills increase by 300% in 10 years. The sector was hit hard by the energy crisis, and inaction left us too dependent on tyrants such as Vladimir Putin. That has had a huge impact on both production and raw material costs, and support is urgently needed to protect these businesses. Sadly, some employers across our city are already making redundancies due to escalating costs, and that disturbing trend will only be exacerbated by inaction.

It takes a vast amount of heat to produce the kind of ceramics products we make. According to Ceramics UK, the UK ceramics industry uses about 650,000 MWh of electricity and about 4.5 million MWh of gas every single year. With gas currently costing about £47 per megawatt-hour and electricity in the region of £297 per megawatt-hour, the costs quickly add up. When we consider that gas used to cost about £11 per megawatt-hour, the impact on those businesses is clear to see.

Of course, a significant portion of those costs comes from non-commodity taxes and levies. Many ceramics companies pay high carbon taxes under the UK emissions trading scheme and ever-tighter restrictions on free allowances are pushing up costs even more. Because the industry is gas intensive, while still using a lot of electricity, very few manufacturers receive the energy-intensive industries exemption.

I am really proud that this Government take the climate crisis so seriously. A move towards green energy is desirable; if we can get to that point, wonderful. However, the reality at the moment is that companies face significant bills. That is a fixed cost that the companies cannot do anything about, and moving towards low carbon is not always straightforward. It is absolutely right, as I said, to push towards a clean energy transition, but energy-intensive industries need a higher level of support in switching to low-carbon methods. The technology to switch from gas to electricity firing is not readily available for many ceramics manufacturers, and connections to the grid are poor.

Some European countries are already taking action and have been for some years to support their ceramics sector. The European Commission recently unveiled its affordable energy action plan, which includes investing in liquefied natural gas projects to help companies to lower their costs. A number of other countries are also helping their energy-intensive industries. It is vital that the UK follows suit.

The history of our city is one of hard-working people. The ceramics industry is in our DNA. If we fail to act now, we risk losing not only the unique skills that, as we talked about before, have been honed in the Potteries for hundreds of years, but the communities formed around them. I have questions for the Minister, but I start by thanking her for agreeing to meet me, my parliamentary

colleagues, Ceramics UK and the GMB union to discuss the technical details around the support the sector needs.

As a starter, however, following my discussions with Ceramics UK, the sector would like the Minister to consider the merits of offering subsidies for smaller manufacturers' energy costs. Indeed, Ceramics UK has told me that the cost pressures can be up to six times greater than they were in 2021. For the manufacturers that can use electricity, eligibility for the Government's energy-intensive industries exemption scheme could be opened up for all UK ceramics manufacturers, including by removing the UK business level test. The Government could also mandate priority grid connections.

For ceramics manufacturers unable to switch from gas, could the Minister consider exempting the sector from new taxes and levies on gas, in recognition of the limited alternatives currently available? Ceramics really is the hardest of all energy-intensive industries to decarbonise. Although Great British Energy will reduce energy bills in the long term, failing to reduce energy costs for the sector now could put our ceramics industry at further risk, and that is simply not acceptable.

With carbon taxes hammering the sector, I also ask the Minister to consider the merits of introducing a temporary exemption from the UK emissions trading scheme for UK ceramic manufacturers until an effective carbon border adjustment mechanism is up and running and ceramics manufacturers can apply for CBAM phase 2.

Something that might also be of great help to our wonderful small and medium-sized enterprises in the sector would be the provision of ultra-low interest loans to help to finance more energy-efficient kilns, dryers and related equipment. Hydrogen presents an opportunity for the sector to decarbonise: Ceramics UK recently unveiled a custom-built pilot kiln that runs on hydrogen. Will the Minister evaluate the hydrogen supply chain and market currently available to the ceramics industry, and how that can be better distributed? I also ask the Minister that, as we discuss the support the sector needs, the Department for Business and Trade work collaboratively with colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, among others, to find a solution on a cross-departmental footing.

Without a desire to move away from the topic of energy costs, it would be remiss of me not to point out one further concern that the sector often raises with me and my colleagues. Counterfeit back-stamping of tableware products from the likes of China is affecting our UK businesses. Although I appreciate the Government's efforts to regulate against those products through anti-dumping regulations and anti-dumping duty, I am concerned that many of those products slip through the net. The fake products get listed on internet sites, so I ask for a cross-departmental approach to review tabling offences and the classifications for importing counterfeit tableware products.

I thank the Minister for coming to answer my questions, and I invite her to visit my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North so that she can see just how brilliant our potbanks are and how important they are to our local economy and people. We must keep those pots open and those kilns fired. The time to act is now.

4.15 pm

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) for securing this important debate. I begin by echoing his thanks to the trade unions, the industry and Ceramics UK for all they do. I have engaged with Ceramics UK quite a bit since taking up this role, and previously in opposition, and I work closely with the unions and the industry.

My hon. Friend clearly laid out the challenges we face, as well as the challenges facing his community's disposable household incomes, and the importance of getting this right. He is right to look to the future of ceramics, not to the past. There are several industries that we want to grow in the UK, but we have historically focused on the past—steel is a case in point—not the future.

My hon. Friend talks about new advanced technologies, and the important uses of ceramics in our mobile phones, our aircraft, our defence and our medical equipment are clear to see, though little understood by those outside this sector. We can all do more to make sure people understand the ceramics industry and what it is for. The industrial strategy is one way to do that.

As my hon. Friend knows, the industrial strategy is coming out in the spring. We promised it for years in opposition, and the previous Government but one tried, but they did not persevere. We have identified eight growth sectors within the strategy—advanced manufacturing is one of them—but foundational industries have to power those growth sectors, which is where ceramics is important.

I nod to my hon. Friend's well-made point about defence, which is one of the growth sectors in the industrial strategy. Over the last few days, we have seen this Government's commitment to increasing our defence spending. The Chancellor spoke at the Make UK conference today about how we can change defence procurement to include more of this country's SMEs. We have also been creative in using UK Export Finance to create jobs with Thales in Belfast. There is more we can do, and I will take away my hon. Friend's point about advanced ceramic carbon filters. I suspect there are other potential applications in this space.

I acknowledge and appreciate the very real challenges that my hon. Friend raises. The cost of energy bills is very difficult for the ceramics industry and other energy-intensive industries. Every one of us has suffered from the huge price hike after Russia invaded Ukraine, although our energy costs are not comparable with those of our neighbours.

My hon. Friend also highlighted how electricity costs so much more than gas and the challenges that will bring as we decarbonise. He mentioned the emissions trading scheme and the ongoing consultation on free allowances. I also heard his well-made points about the low carbon transition and the challenges for sectors such as ceramics, where its up-front cost is potentially prohibitive.

Gareth Snell: The Minister probably knows as much about ceramics as those of us from Stoke-on-Trent, as she is constantly on her brief.

On the transition, one of the challenges facing ceramics companies in Stoke-on-Trent and around the country is that the margins on their products are not sufficient to

[Gareth Snell]

allow big up-front capital investments, which means that going from a gas kiln to an electric kiln is often beyond their reach as they simply do not have the cash flow.

One solution that the Minister could potentially take back to the Department is some sort of VAT exemption for energy-intensive industries and companies that are looking to move towards more low-energy, low-carbon equipment. Perhaps the public sector decarbonisation scheme, which is currently undersubscribed, could be used in some way to help energy-intensive private companies to access new technology that would reduce not only their carbon output but their long-term energy costs through efficiencies.

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for those points, which he has previously raised with me. I can certainly take away the point about the public sector decarbonisation scheme. Bizarrely, as he knows, it is not part of my brief, but that does not matter. This Government work across Departments and across barriers, and I will endeavour to look into it. The point is well made that it can be challenging when a company has small margins and big up-front costs, especially in these industries where there has not been infrastructure investment for a long time. A lot of places need general infrastructure investment, and we are looking actively at this issue through the spending review process.

Happily, I can say that we are looking to answer all the questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North. I cannot promise what the answers will be at this point, and I cannot promise that we will do everything we seek to do, but we are well aware of all his points and are looking at them in depth.

We are looking at subsidies on energy costs. My hon. Friend said that the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero should work together. I sit in both Departments, so I have conversations with myself about these issues. There are competing vantage points that we need to grapple with, but the advantage of my sitting in both Departments is that officials from the two Departments meet to find solutions before speaking to me, which is helpful. They are working well together.

We are also looking at the energy-intensive industries exemption scheme. As my hon. Friend knows, grid connections are an issue across the board. We are working on how to remove undeveloped, speculative programmes from the grid connection queue and prioritise others. One of my roles as the Minister for Industry is to point to the need not to forget our existing industrial base and the need for it to connect to the grid, as well as the need for the important data centres, artificial intelligence and new technologies and new investment that we want to come to the UK. If we cannot get our own industry connected in the way we want, we are getting something wrong, so my hon. Friend is right to make that point.

I met representatives of the energy-intensive industries last week, including Rob from Ceramics UK, and I am following up on all these things with the Treasury and with officials. We agreed on a couple of things at that meeting, and one is to have a session with the industrial strategy team and the energy-intensive industries to make sure we are all working towards the same outcome.

Another is to talk to the Treasury about the challenge we face in how the ETS and the CBAM align and fit together, or not, depending on policy. These things are enormously complicated, as my hon. Friend knows, and CBAM is a Treasury lead. However, I am very aware of the need to get that relationship right; otherwise, the system does not work at all.

My hon. Friend talked about hydrogen, which is very important and is part of my brief in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. We are developing a kind of hydrogen network. We have had what we call HAR1, or hydrogen allocation round 1, which was the initial agreement to fund 11 hydrogen projects—electrolyser projects—around the country. There is hydrogen in the carbon capture and storage clusters that we are developing, and we are currently looking at what the next phase of the hydrogen roll-out will be.

My hon. Friend knows that hydrogen is currently very expensive. We need to work out a path to reduce costs, which is what we are grappling with at the moment, in a climate where it is difficult to bid for money in the spending review. How can we unleash the hydrogen industry and give certainty to businesses that want to invest but need the right signals? How can we do that and use money wisely? And who pays for it? People are very interested in hydrogen, whether in steel, in transport or in the green energy space—it has a lot of uses. We need to make sure we are making the right decisions. I will speak to the hydrogen team about ceramics, and I will ask what we are looking at in that space.

Gareth Snell: Again, I am grateful to the Minister for her generosity in giving way. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) is right that hydrogen could be the thing that helps our industry, but electrolysis requires electricity. Electricity generation is capped to the gas price, and therefore the gas price drives the hydrogen price. Unless there is a way of decoupling that rather difficult circuit, we will find ourselves replenishing fuel without a particular discount.

Our other unique challenge, as my hon. Friend expertly laid out, is that these factories are in communities, because that is how ceramics worked—a potbank was built and then houses were built around it. Connecting to hydrogen would not be suitable if the hydrogen has to be contained in large towers, which are better suited to large out-of-town factories.

Although I welcome the Minister's commitment to hydrogen, I hope she can bear those two points in mind, because ceramics are a unique challenge. However, we are willing to work with her to find a solution.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend articulates his concerns very well. Connecting the gas sounds like a song: "The hip bone's connected to the thigh bone." It is very challenging, and he is right to say so. The challenge with hydrogen is getting it to a point where we can deliver it at the scale we want. Or will it always be used in certain areas for certain things, as we will never get the cost down? That is what we are grappling with. On the potential jobs, potential growth and potential exports, these are huge opportunities for the UK, but we need to work out how we take it forward.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned the huge challenge of counterfeiting. He nodded to the actions taken by the Trade Remedies Authority. I know that Ceramics UK and ceramics

manufacturers have responded to that review and a final recommendation is due in July. Of course, I will make representations where needed. I recognise the challenge that my hon. Friend highlights.

Trade officials regularly meet representatives of Ceramics UK. I do not wish to add to the burden of my colleagues, but it might also be good for my hon. Friend to speak to the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lothian East (Mr Alexander), if he has not already done so, about some of the challenges we face.

Hopefully, I have answered my hon. Friend's questions. I congratulate him again on securing a debate on such an important issue, on behalf of his constituents who work in such a fantastic industry for our country, and hopefully we can work together to fix some of these challenges.

Question put and agreed to.

Bathing Water Regulations

4.30 pm

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

That this House has considered bathing water regulations.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir John. It is a privilege to open this debate, and fantastic to see so many hon. Friends and Members. I am grateful to all of them, as well as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), and the Minister, for their time this afternoon.

We are fortunate in this country to have beautiful natural landscapes. We are blessed with an abundance of beautiful beaches, inland lakes and rivers, pre-eminent among them the River Tone, which runs through Taunton and Wellington. We are lucky to have French Weir and Longrun Meadow as one of the 27 new bathing water sites. I sincerely thank the incredible volunteers, the Friends of French Weir Park, who worked with me to apply for and achieve designated bathing water status there last year.

That means that for the first time we know the river's water quality. It is variable and now proven to be poor, generally speaking. We now have that information because it is publicly available, and we can work towards getting the investment we need to improve the water. I am sure there are similar groups across the country in the constituencies of other hon. Members.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing forward this important debate. I know how much he enjoys a dip in the River Tone. The River Parrett in Langport is a well known and loved body of water for swimming and water sports, which I hope will soon become a designated bathing water site. Sadly, polluters discharged sewage into it 54 times in 2023, amounting to 453 hours of pollution. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is crucial to support such sites to obtain bathing water status, so that they are safe for all who wish to use them?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely right. We need to see more bathing waters not fewer. That is one of the concerns I have in this debate. Bathing waters are not just places where people swim; they are part of the identity and lifeblood of our communities across the country. As in my constituency, they are places where people come together for swimming clubs, rowing clubs, kayaking, paddleboarding, or just to enjoy the natural beauty of the river.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman. He has invited contributions from those of us who are interested in bathing waters. My constituency has Strangford lough and the Irish sea on the other side. Back home, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs designates water quality. I am concerned that, if anyone wants to check water quality on the Ards peninsula, Strangford lough or the Irish sea, they must go online, which does not suit everybody. Does he agree with my suggestion to DAERA that there should be signs at designated bathing waters indicating the water quality? That would be much simpler. People who go for wild-water swimming and other pursuits, would be able to see right away if the water quality is at the level it should be.

Gideon Amos: Seeing the quality of the river water is key, and that is one thing that bathing water status allows us to do. In tackling the need for improvement, many local groups face an uphill battle. Sewage pollution is a national disgrace. Time and again we see reports of raw sewage being discharged into our rivers, lakes and seas, turning what should be places of recreation into sites of contamination.

In my constituency, further downstream on the Tone, examples of recent discharges of untreated effluent are commonplace. At Hook stream, which could otherwise be a charming stretch of the River Tone, there have been over 188 hours of discharge in the first eight weeks of 2025 alone. Residents are rightly appalled by the sewage releases; no one should have to fear that going too close to their local river could make them ill, especially as, all the while, water companies have paid out millions of pounds in dividends and bonuses. We need flow-rate monitoring, extra stormwater storage and resources for the Environment Agency to increase enforcement, but bathing water regulations are a key tool in reducing pollution.

That brings me to the main topic of the debate. There are elements of the consultation that I welcome. Removing the automatic five-year de-designation rule for bathing waters is a positive suggestion. It would simply be unfair for communities to lose the protections that come with designation just because a site has remained polluted for five years. The reality is that people will continue to swim in those waters, as they have done at French Weir for hundreds of years, regardless of whether they are officially designated. Having a high number of bathers is what allows sites to be designated, and that should continue to be the main criterion. Removing monitoring, which is what happens with de-designation, would just put rivers and their users at further risk. It would not stop people using the rivers. Water companies and regulators frequently take longer than five years to clean up sites, and people should not be punished by losing their designation because that has not happened fast enough.

Let us not forget that improving water quality in bathing areas has wider benefits throughout the whole of the river's catchment area. Improving infrastructure in bathing areas that are susceptible to flooding benefits communities along the whole length of the watercourse. Part of the problem is misalignment between the four-year rolling cycle of bathing designations and Ofwat's five-year price review for water companies, which sets out its investment plans for the period. A newly designated bathing water often has to wait years for the price review to receive the investment required. Designation of a bathing water should be aligned with those improvements in investment. Has the Minister taken any steps to resolve that discrepancy?

The health and wellbeing of those who use the water should also be a primary concern of regulation, which is why I am concerned about core reform 2 in the consultation, which proposes the introduction of feasibility tests for bathing sites. That would mean that if it is deemed too difficult or expensive to improve water quality, a site could be denied designation altogether. Who would really benefit from that approach? Certainly not the swimmers, rowers, kayakers or residents. The only people who stand to gain would be the very polluters responsible for the problem in the first place. We must

not give water companies a loophole to argue that it is too costly to clean up a bathing site that people are regularly using for swimming and other recreation. Designation should be based on where people actually use the water, so will the Minister please reconsider that aspect of a perhaps well-intentioned but ultimately damaging proposal?

Core reform 3 of the consultation proposes the removal of fixed bathing season dates and moving them into guidance. I welcome greater flexibility, but the now well accepted 15 May to 30 September bathing season should remain the irreducible minimum that everybody understands and knows about. This should not be a cover for reducing bathing seasons to such a short window that they become meaningless. We should be going further: year-round testing should be standard, in my opinion.

We also need better quality testing, and for better integration with other monitoring systems we should be monitoring sewage volume from spills, not just hours. We should also consider testing for a wider range of bacteria than just *E. coli* and enterococci, especially considering other harmful pathogens such as salmonella and leptospirosis have, since 2010, contributed to a 60% rise in hospital admissions for waterborne diseases. There should be greater funding for the EA to monitor run-off into rivers as well. Only by understanding the scale of the problem will we be able to start to tackle it.

This will not be prohibitively expensive. Research by Surfers Against Sewage, which I thank for all its great work on this issue, suggests the additional cost of year-round monitoring per site would be roughly £775. Across the UK, that amounts to £350,000—less than 4% of the bonuses paid to water company execs last year. That is surely an investment worth making. Will the Minister publish a review into the potential cost of year-round water testing?

The reality is that our inland bathing waters are already in a dire state. While 92% of the 450 bathing waters in England meet minimum standards, that figure drops to only 53% of inland bathing waters. In contrast, Germany has almost 2,300 bathing sites, the vast majority inland. The fact that 98% of them meet minimum standards shows us what is possible. Instead of looking for ways to limit new designations, we should expand them so that more communities benefit from cleaner, safer waters. Had a feasibility requirement existed previously, we would never have seen so many bathing waters granted in the first place; perhaps there would be no more inland water bathing designations in the country.

We also need urgent action to hold polluters accountable. Water companies operate on five-year investment cycles, meaning that improvements to polluted waters often get kicked down the road for years. We cannot afford to wait. We need a tougher regulator than Ofwat, one with proper powers to hold these companies to account. We also need more immediate funding to improve water quality at newly designated sites, rather than forcing them to wait for the next investment cycle, as I said.

Ultimately, this debate is about a simple principle: everyone should have the right to access sites with unpolluted water. The Government must not allow water companies to dictate which sites are worthy of protection and which are not. Let us take this opportunity to strengthen, not weaken, our protection of bathing waters. It is time to expand, not limit, the sites that

benefit from designation. Above all, it is time to ensure that polluters are held accountable so that future generations can enjoy bathing waters like those at French Weir, as well as our rivers, lakes and seas, without fear of pollution.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. If Members want to contribute they should bob. I want to call the Front Benchers at about 5.10 pm, so Back Benchers can work out how long they should speak for so that everyone can get in.

4.41 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this critical debate.

While covid-19 undoubtedly brought on many challenges, one positive outcome was the surge in open-water swimming. More people than ever before enjoyed blue spaces for recreational activities, reaping significant benefits for both their physical and mental wellbeing. However, many were more cautious about diving into freezing cold lakes, rivers and streams when they were aware of the level of bacteria and pollution present in our waters. As Liberal Democrats, we have long and passionately campaigned on this issue. Last year, the Lib Dems discovered that water companies had discharged sewage over 100,000 times in areas designated as current bathing waters, putting public health and local ecosystems at risk.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): My constituency of Tiverton and Minehead neighbours the patch of my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos). Very recently, one of my constituents shared a harrowing story with me, in which his children fell seriously ill after swimming in a local river last summer. These public health risks are further exacerbated by bad flooding in our areas, as we have seen in recent episodes, which sweeps contaminants and overwhelms sewage systems into our waterways, degrading water quality. Does my hon. Friend agree that stricter regulations must be introduced in the interest of public health and to ensure that our bathing waters are safe for everybody to enjoy?

Pippa Heylings: I completely agree. I emphasise what my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington said: that is why we need tougher action on the water companies. We also need to take action on combined sewers and make improvements to the small sewage treatment works on many chalk streams, like in my constituency. However, today's debate is about bathing site designation, which is one of the effective levers that can be used.

We are talking about the proposed reforms by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to bathing site designations. I would like to talk about the second core reform being proposed, which I am concerned would lead to a real reduction in the number of bathing sites being designated, rather than the increase that we should see, particularly for inland waters. The second core reform says that we should

“Include the feasibility of improving a site's water quality to at least 'sufficient' as a criterion for final designation. This would avoid poor value for money, by limiting expenditure where water quality improvement is not feasible or proportionate.”

To best demonstrate why that reform would not only fail but could also damage water quality in our rivers, it is worth sharing the story of Sheep's Green in my constituency. For centuries, people have been enjoying Sheep's Green—a popular spot on the River Cam. It was at Sheep's Green that we worked to bring in a bathing site designation, because of the poor quality of the water.

In October 2023, the Cam Valley Forum, a local voluntary organisation, submitted an application to DEFRA to grant Sheep's Green designated bathing water status. That came after three years of hard work by local volunteers, which is truly commendable, and was based on the success of the River Wharfe. Sheep's Green had been used for decades without official recognition, and the idea of getting it designated bathing status had widespread public support. Over the course of a 10-week consultation, the Cam Valley Forum received more than 500 responses, with an overwhelming 93% in favour of the designation. South Cambridgeshire district council and Cambridge city council also formally backed the proposal. Anglian Water, with whom I worked, also fully supported the designation application.

Once designated, as predicted by local volunteers and citizen scientists, Sheep's Green was classified as having poor water quality. That triggered a statutory obligation for improvements to clean up the source of the pollution—the Haslingfield sewage works in my constituency. For years, local citizen scientists had suspected it was the culprit. Now, finally, Anglian Water was legally required to act.

Bathing water status also unlocked funding from Ofwat under the water industry national environment programme. Tens of millions of pounds vital for the infrastructure improvements needed to reduce the sewage discharges were made available for Haslingfield, with work expected to begin in the next two years. These improvements will not just benefit swimmers at Sheep's Green, but have a wider impact on the ecological health of the River Cam.

However, had core reform 2 been in place when the Cam Valley Forum began its journey in 2020, there would have been no bathing water designation for Sheep's Green. Without that designation, there would have been no investigation by the Environment Agency, no identification of Haslingfield sewage works as the source of the pollution and no legal requirement for Anglian Water to take action. The WINEP funding would not have been available and we would have lost the opportunity for water improvements and nature restoration in South Cambridgeshire.

In short, core reform 2 would have inadvertently blocked the clean-up of hundreds of rivers. Local organisations like the Cam Valley Forum are not just highlighting a problem with their concerns around core reform 2—they are demanding action. They are rightly pushing for bathing water status because it is a vital tool for driving cleaner, healthier rivers. We should be supporting these efforts, not hindering them.

4.48 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this important debate.

[Freddie van Mierlo]

As a former cabinet member for climate change and nature recovery on South Oxfordshire district council, I have been involved in two bathing water status applications. One was successful, one was not. We often learn more from failure than success, so while I am delighted by the bathing water status achieved at Wallingford Beach, I will speak mostly to the desire to establish bathing water status in Henley.

What I learned is that the current system is perverse. It requires swimmers to brave potentially dirty water before a site is cleaned up. This topsy-turvy thinking is all wrong. That is why I very much welcome the Government's review of the status and have contributed to it. My contribution focused on the bonkers criteria that stopped Henley from being successful.

Despite widespread use of the river for canoeing, paddleboarding, pleasure boating and, of course, rowing, only spontaneous, immersed swimmers count as river users, but if someone has my balance, or indeed that of the leader of the Liberal Democrats when paddleboarding, they know that being a paddleboarder does not mean they will not end up in the water. Equally, rowers are constantly exposed to spray and contact with the water during their sport—a fact that leads every year to reports of domestic and international athletes falling ill at the Henley Royal Regatta after being exposed to our effluent. It is embarrassing to know that during the regatta, if I flush the toilet, it may well end up on the sides of one of the boats.

It is bonkers that organised swimming events have also been excluded from the criteria. While I understand that we do not want to see the system gamed with events organised solely for the purpose of meeting the criteria, Henley has enjoyed a vibrant, organised swimming culture for many years, with four annual swims organised by the brilliant Henley Swim. I urge the Government to replace the current bathing water state designation with a recreational water designation with teeth, taking into account the full range of river users.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. We have talked a lot about the ecological and health benefits, but there is also an important economic impact, as shown by all the events in Henley that he outlined. For example, tourism contributes more than £700 million every year to the local economy in West Dorset. We have the Jurassic coast and the River Lim church cliff beach at Lyme Regis, which has just been designated as bathing water. It is important to recognise that clean water benefits our local communities not just in terms of health and nature, but in terms of our tourism industry.

Freddie van Mierlo: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Every year, we welcome to Henley thousands of visitors who contribute to our local economy.

I urge the Government to row back—no pun intended—from the idea that cost and deliverability should be determining factors for investment in a site. When Henley welcomes the world to our wonderful section of the Thames each year, it would be simply unacceptable to say, “Sorry, we must expose you to our sewage, because the Government think it is too hard to treat.” I would

therefore be grateful if the Minister commented on the intended change to the criteria for bathing water status and met me to discuss the situation in Henley.

4.51 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this timely and urgent debate.

A healthy natural environment is essential for both public health and our economy, yet our rivers and bathing waters are being polluted at an alarming rate. In my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon, the River Avon, meandering along its valley, is a treasured natural asset that is used by many residents for kayaking, swimming, boating and rowing, but sewage discharges and pollution threaten its water quality.

Under the previous Government, water companies were allowed to pollute our rivers while consumers paid the price. We need stronger regulations, legally binding water quality targets, and more transparent, year-long testing to tackle this crisis. Local authorities must also be given greater powers to hold polluters accountable.

I thank the many citizen science projects in my constituency, such as Safe Avon, that have highlighted the scale of the issue and the impact of poor water quality on the Avon, its tributaries, and our many precious brooks and streams. Our local residents and groups have come together to create River Hope, which is a new participatory process taking place in Stratford-on-Avon. It fosters a positive narrative for the River Avon ecosystem, and involves individuals, community groups and others implementing activities and events in, on, around and about our local water catchments and their biodiverse ecosystems. Residents not only engage in practical actions to restore and protect the wildlife and flora that the river sustains, but create a positive narrative of gratitude, good stewardship and love for the water as an essential element of thriving biodiversity.

The river has rights. Our rivers and waterways should be safe for swimming and for thriving wildlife, and should be protected for future generations to cherish and enjoy.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I am calling the Front Bench spokespeople early. That is not an invitation to speak—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, do we have Cameron Thomas? I did not think you were bobbing.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I was not bobbing; I was just going to intervene.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Then I am going to call the Front-Bench spokespeople. That is not an invitation to speak at inordinate length. We are delighted to hear from Tim Farron.

4.54 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I will not take that personally, Sir John, although I am sure it is intended. It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance this afternoon and to speak in a long line of Liberal Democrats, as you might expect when water is mentioned.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing the debate and for the eloquence with which he spoke on behalf of his communities. I know how active he is, not just as a bather but as a campaigner for clean water swimming in his constituency, recognising and amplifying the importance of bathing water status for the people who use the rivers in his communities and in all our communities. He also recognises that it is an important way of upping the ante and improving the standards that all those responsible for the quality of our waterways are held to.

I welcome the point that my hon. Friend made about de-designation and how that will not help people or keep them safe; we will simply be in a situation where people will carry on swimming in those places and will no longer have the protections they had beforehand. He rightly talked about an issue I am deeply concerned about, which is the potential for flexibility over fixed season dates. The minimum must be the May to September window, but many people who are enthusiastic about open water swimming do so at other times of the year. I have swum in Windermere in February, but I know people who have swum in Grasmere and Rydal in January and December and marvel at their hardiness. They tell me it is good for their mental health, and I believe them. That falls without that window, and it seems a nonsense to not have year-round testing.

I want to pick up on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington made about what it is we are testing. There is much good in the Government's new Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. Nevertheless, the insistence on only testing for the duration of spills in our waterways, lakes, rivers, streams and coastal areas means that we do not get the full picture. There could easily be a brief deluge or a lengthy trickle. The reality is that not testing for volume and content does not give a full picture of what is happening in our lakes, rivers and coastal areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) talked about the public health and ecological aspects of maintaining bathing water designations and how important it is to extend those designations in her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) talked about bathing water status in his communities and his active campaign to extend access in his constituency. He also talked about the topsy-turvy nature of the bathing water status, which can create all sorts of perverse outcomes.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello), who is no longer in his place, made a really important point about the economic value. There is a clear case in my communities in the lakes and the dales, because people do not visit the Lake district not to see the lakes. The value to our communities is something like £4 billion every year in tourism revenue. Any threat to the cleanliness of our bathing water sites or the rest of our waterways could be catastrophic for our economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) made incredibly important points about the biodiversity of our waterways and how it is important to protect them and stand by the wonderful citizen scientists who underpin the work of trying to maintain them and their cleanliness. It is also about recognising that, as with all aspects of nature, our job is to preserve our waterways for those who come after us. Caring for our neighbour means caring for the environment for those we will never meet. That is vastly important.

In my communities in the lakes and the dales, there are seven designated bathing water areas, on Windermere and Coniston. One of the sites on Coniston was recently designated as poor, which is deeply concerning. However, it has been pleasing to see the local parish council work very successfully with the national park, Councillor Suzanne Pender, the business forum and others, and United Utilities has agreed a significant package of investment to help deal with that problem.

The current bathing water regulations have not been sufficient to protect our waterways from egregious offences. For example, in the north-west alone in 2023, United Utilities spilled 10,467 times for 76,259 hours into bathing waters alone. That does not include all the other times that it has spilled in other parts of our region. Indeed, United Utilities is the worst offender of all the water companies, despite the fact that there are other serious offenders across the country.

The Liberal Democrats take the view that water is precious. It is important to our economy, our ecology, our heritage, leisure and human health, as well as biodiversity. It is of such significance that we have made it one of the key issues that we continue to campaign on, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame. The leader of my party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), is so dedicated to our waterways that he spent much of the election in them.

Much of what the Government have done in the first part of this Parliament, including the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, has been commendable. We wait now for the Cunliffe review to see whether there will be the advances that have been promised or hinted at. There are three things that we need to make sure we do better. First, monitoring must be much more comprehensive. We welcome the fact that the Government are engaging citizen scientists in the process, including the Clean River Kent campaign, Save Windermere in my own constituency, and the Rivers Trusts up and down the country. But we are not helping them if we do not ask for them to be given a place on water company boards. Nor are we helping them, although they are very useful to a degree, if the monitoring sites available for those people to look at do not have historical data. We depend on our brave water campaigners around the country committing their time to never, ever go to bed or go to work or look after their children. They cannot look backwards. If they blink, they may well miss egregious offences in our bathing waters and in other parts of our waterways. Monitoring is important.

Secondly, regulation is all important. I always try to be careful not to castigate the individuals working for Ofwat or the Environment Agency, or any of the water companies for that matter, but I recognise the system is broken and we have a diluted regulatory framework in this country. That is why the Liberal Democrats think that Ofwat, the Environment Agency and other water regulators should be merged into a much stronger regulator that the water companies would actually fear, rather than running rings around them all the time.

Finally, there is ownership. We could have an organisation called the clean water authority. It would replace and advance on Ofwat and create real powers. It would have real teeth that the current regulatory system does not have. Ownership matters. It is an outrage that between 11% and 40% of the water bills of every person in this

[Tim Farron]

country are going to pay off the debt of the water companies. That is a disgrace. And it is time that we moved those water companies into a not-for-profit status. We do not want to call for nationalisation, but we do call for public-benefit companies to be incorporated to make sure that those who look after our waterways do so in the interests of our water quality, and of meeting the needs of the consumer, not racking up huge profits.

Finally, because bathing water status does give communities more power over the cleanliness and the standards of the waterways that they care about so much, particularly in my part of the world in the lakes, it is clear that very often DEFRA does not grant clean bathing water status when it really should. So I want to say on behalf of my own communities—communities up the River Kent, north of Kendal through Burneside and Staveley—that the river desperately needs to be given bathing water status in several places. That would allow the communities who campaigned so vigorously for the cleanliness of that river to be able to hold United Utilities and other polluters fully to account.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): My remarks about brevity were neither targeted at nor limited to Mr Farron. I call the shadow Minister, Robbie Moore.

5.3 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) on securing this really important debate, and I thank all Members who have contributed and made incredibly valid points, which I will pick up on in my summing up of this debate. I am glad to hear that the hon. Gentleman's constituents are pleased that the River Tone in French Weir has been awarded its bathing water designation. I was the Minister who signed that off when I was in the Department, so I am pleased that that has been welcomed. I also want to thank his predecessor Rebecca Pow for the work that she did in campaigning vociferously to get that bathing water designation in place.

In 2010, 76% of bathing sites were considered good or excellent and by 2024 that figure had reached 90%, which I am sure all of us would welcome. That is despite the criteria changing and becoming much stricter in 2015. And I was proud, as I have indicated, when I was the Water Minister for a brief period in DEFRA to sign off an additional 27 bathing water designations last year, bringing more areas under the spotlight with additional monitoring and ensuring more water companies were then able to be held to account for the pollution that they were causing. It brought the total number of bathing water designations up to 451 sites for the 2024 bathing season. I was proud to see that the River Nidd in Harrogate was one of the rivers awarded bathing water designation and that there was an additional such designation on the River Wharfe. In my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley, the Wharfe was the first to have a bathing water designation on a river. I must congratulate a very active campaign group in my constituency, the Ilkley Clean River group. It was founded by Karen Shackleton, who is an incredible campaigner. She and many others have tirelessly campaigned for improving

water quality, not only in the River Wharfe but across the country. I am sure many Members have received emails from this campaign group.

When we announced those 27 bathing water sites to be added to the list, I was also proud to announce the review of such designations. From my experience with having the River Wharfe designated, I felt the bathing water designation regulations at the time were not fit for purpose. I am pleased the Government carried on with that review, which has now taken place. I have seen many contributions to it, not least from the Office for Environmental Protection which in their feedback of November 2024 was supportive of many of the changes that needed to take place.

I shall go through some of those. On dates, for example, I do not feel that it is just to have bathing water designation sites ringfenced only between May and September. As has been mentioned by all Members in their contributions, many of us who are lucky to use a bathing water site are not just doing so between those specific dates but actually throughout the year. Why should we be constrained by having the bathing water designation sites between May and September? It seems right and just that those sites have all-year monitoring, to be able to hold to account those who pollute our rivers but also to make sure the level of resource, whether financial or community, is able to improve the water quality in those areas.

That brings me on to the name “bathing water regulations”. Is it fit for purpose? From my experience in my constituency, once a bathing water designation is approved the assumption is that it is safe to bathe in that area. When bathing water sites are being allocated to rivers, or indeed on our coastal environments, it can be unsafe to swim in those environments given the undercurrents that exist, particularly in river networks. The water quality does not need to be good or excellent. In fact, many of those sites are unfortunately designated as poor. I urge the Government to think about whether it should be changed to something like “clean water status”, so as not to give the impression that it is necessarily safe to bathe.

I would also like to pick up the point on automatic de-designation. This is something I have experienced in my own constituency. We were lucky enough to have the River Wharfe bathing water designated but unfortunately, as probably expected, it has consistently been designated as poor as a river—year on and year on. Fortunately, Yorkshire Water has responded very positively in realising that an additional level of investment needs to go in there. We have seen £15 million spent on improving water capacity and retention, to help with the sewage treatment works in Ilkley. We have now seen an additional allocation of about £45 million being spent in Ilkley to deal with the wider sewage treatment works.

However if one knows the designation is consistently going to be poor, and then after year five drops off and there is no bathing water designation, I fear there is a real risk it reduces the onus on the polluter to do something about this. The polluter may not just be a water company. It may be agri-runoff through phosphorous or nitrate. I know that the civil servants sitting behind the Minister will have listened to many of the conversations that we have been having, and, on that point, I congratulate the civil service on the work that it has done on the regulations and in bringing forward this review.

However, I do feel that, when we are relying on evidence coming forward to secure enough resource or finance to improve things, we sometimes need to rely on longer datasets than just one or two years to see those improvement measures. That relates not only to water companies but the agri-environmental benefit from many of the stewardship schemes that farmers enter into as well. I therefore urge the Government to remove the automatic de-designation.

Then I come on to users, because, at the moment, the regulations specifically relate to those who wish to bathe, but, as has also been indicated by those who have contributed today, we are all using our river networks, our coastal environments, or indeed our lakes for many purposes other than swimming. I do not want to comment on the Lib Dem leader, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), but I am not the only one who goes paddleboarding and ends up underwater. The point is that, under the current regulations, if someone wants to kayak, canoe or paddleboard, that is not sufficient to get a bathing water designation. I therefore urge the Government to look at the users of these sites so that we can ensure that more rivers, coasts and lakes achieve more bathing water status.

On the issue of multiple measuring points, from my own experience from the River Wharfe in Ilkley, a bathing water designation relates to a specific point where that monitoring takes place. In my constituency, that specific point is actually upstream of the outfall from the water treatment works—which Yorkshire Water is rightly putting a huge amount of investment into. That monitoring is pointless if it is upstream. That may be at the point where most bathers bathe, but it is less likely to put pressure on ensuring that polluters are held to account.

I therefore urge the Government to look at having multiple measuring points associated with a bathing water designation. Indeed, as we see more rivers getting allocated bathing water sites—and I was proud to sign off more rivers when I was lucky enough to be the water Minister—I do wish the Government would explore having multiple measuring points, particularly in river environments, because, as the river flows through, bathers are more likely to bathe over a wider stretch, rather than at a single point, as with coastal environments.

I am grateful to Surfers Against Sewage for specifically raising the issue of prior testing with me in advance of today's debate—indeed, as they have before—because proposals under consideration, including those of sites to be designated going forward, could be tested before the designation is granted. Should those prior tests come back as poor, my worry—indeed, the point has also been raised by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings)—is that that could allow a Minister not to grant, or to be less inclined to grant, that bathing water designation. I would not want prior testing to result in a bathing water designation not being given approval, because actually, as I have demonstrated in my own constituency and others, having a bathing water site, in itself, puts that pressure on the polluter, whoever, or whichever organisation, that is.

Forecasting has also been picked up by other Members in this debate. Forecasting is important, because it provides much more onus on future programming to do with finance that may be going into cleaning up the

rivers, and enables more comfort for the community in understanding what is happening to improve the water quality at those bathing water sites.

However, as we all know, even when a site is designated as excellent water quality, it could experience a huge amount of rainfall, or potentially a serious pollution incident, but, because the monitoring is taken over a wider period of time—and the designation is therefore taken over a wider period of time—a single issue to do with pollution or a heavy downpour will not necessarily impact the designation itself. Therefore, I think it would be helpful if more awareness was raised. That is about not only additional rainfall events, or additional water entering into the system, but forecasting to better prepare those who do want to bathe, or use that water, to make the right decision at the appropriate time.

I would like to sum up by thanking the Ilkley Clean River Group in my constituency, because it certainly helped me to get a much better understanding, not only when I was first elected to the House in 2019 but in the role that I ended up in, which was as a Water Minister in DEFRA. I also thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate, because water quality is a major challenge.

The infrastructure responsible for much of this issue is literally Victorian. It cannot be fixed overnight, but it can be fixed with a dedicated and serious plan. The previous Administration delivered the start of that plan with the “Plan for Water”, and in opposition we will very much welcome working with the Government and, indeed, other parties from across this House to improve water quality. I hope that the Minister will reiterate my thanks to her team, who I know have worked incredibly hard behind the scenes on this issue. I would like to say to the Minister that we would be more than happy to provide support in the right places to make sure that we are all focused on improving water quality.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is always a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John.

I feel that we are having a little bit of a love-in this afternoon, which is always a nice way to start. Of course I will be more than happy to pass on the thanks from the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), to the team who have worked on this issue. I thank the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for securing this really important debate. There is so much agreement in the room that I almost wonder whether we are still in the House of Commons. I will certainly try to cover most of the points that have been made.

Just to set the issue in context, we completely accept and believe that the water system at the moment is broken. That is why, when we first came into office, we changed the articles of association to put customers and their opinions into the water boards. It is why we are doubling the compensation for people who face water outages. It is why we have ringfenced money so that it cannot be diverted from infrastructure improvements and into bonuses. It is why we have the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which just came into force and got Royal Assent last week—because we know that the

[Emma Hardy]

system as a whole is broken. It is also why, just last Thursday, I was in Manchester with Sir Jon Cunliffe, launching the call for evidence on water. I strongly urge every Member here to respond to that call for evidence. There is a huge, 200-page consultation document that goes with it but, just because we are kind, there is a 20-page executive summary as well, so please have a look at that, respond to the consultation and make some of these points there.

Bathing waters in and of themselves are not under the water commission. The reason for that is that I wanted to do something on bathing waters really quickly; I did not want it to get delayed by the water commission when we already knew some of the things that we wanted to look at. I will quickly go over some of the things that we are looking at changing. At the moment, the regulations are one size fits all. I would like to reassure people talking about the dates around bathing waters. Obviously, we will officially respond to the consultation; there will be an official Government response, but so far I have yet to see put forward any evidence that seems to indicate that there is a wish to shorten the bathing water window. In fact, most people are advocating to keep it the same or extend it, recognising that some people go swimming all year round.

This is the perfect point at which to mention my mum, who has decided to do open water swimming and swims all year round, and now has her own wetsuit. I think it is amazing that she has discovered open water swimming in her retirement—slightly crazy, but definitely amazing. As I said, we will obviously have a formal response to the consultation, but so far I have not seen anybody advocating shortening the bathing season. I wanted to make a point of mentioning that.

On the de-designation points, I wholeheartedly accept the points made by the spokesman for the official Opposition and by the Liberal Democrats that it would be an incentive for companies not to invest in improving the water if they knew that after a certain number of years it would be de-designated—although of course I must add the proviso that we have not officially responded to the consultation. However, from looking at what we have had so far, that is certainly what I am feeling.

I also want to address this point. I am sure that it was not intended, but I wondered whether it was coming through that bathing water status is the golden ticket to improve the water in an area. I do not accept that, because if we are saying that bathing water status is the golden ticket to improve the water, that means that we are also almost accepting, on the flip side of that, that if people do not have bathing water status, we are okay with their water being completely polluted.

We are not okay with that. We want to clean up all our rivers, lakes and seas, and we have a plan to do so. We have £104 billion of investment going into the next five years. We are looking at what is happening in bathing waters, and looking at iconic sites around the country. The argument that somewhere needs to have bathing water status or its waters will remain polluted, is one that I challenge head on. That argument almost accepts that we are okay with things remaining polluted. No—we should focus on something much bigger than that, which is how we clean up all of our rivers, lakes and seas, especially looking at bathing waters.

There is a major public health aspect here. It is an important point, and it is why I am delighted that Sir Chris Whitty is one of the expert advisers on the Cunliffe review looking at this. An argument is being made that asks why we are setting a standard, as if to say, “If they are really poor, we don’t want to allocate them as bathing sites.” We should pause and think about that for a moment because, as was illustrated by the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), if we are saying something is a bathing site and we give it bathing water status, it implies that it is safe to bathe there. If we designate a site that we know will not be safe for many years to come, and would take a huge amount of investment to become safe, is it right to call that a bathing water site and imply that people are safe to bathe there?

So, I think the sensible and correct decision is to improve all our water everywhere through reforms, which is why we are doing the water review and why we passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. Let us look at the areas that are likely to improve more quickly, and say to people, “You can bathe here, because it will improve more quickly and we can see rapid progress, but these other sites that you want to bathe in—if we think seriously—are not going to improve for a long time.” As a Government, we think that it would be irresponsible to call those sites bathing water sites when we know full well that there could be serious damage to public health.

Pippa Heylings: I wanted to clarify that there are two bodies of argument here. Given that there has been a complete lack of regulations and ways to enforce the “polluter pays” principle with water companies until now, status has been seen as one of the only mechanisms to do it. However, I would like the Minister to recognise that these are already bathing sites because the criteria is that they have to show that they are already being used as bathing sites—that they are recognised as culturally and ecologically important. Given that, even though they are poor we should be investing in them to ensure that they continue. We know that if they are declared poor, people are warned of that and therefore do not swim. So we are not subjecting people to unsafe water; we are recognising that these are key bathing areas and have historical, cultural and ecological importance—now and in the future.

Emma Hardy: I do not disagree in the slightest. To be completely clear, sites that are already designated as bathing sites of course need enhanced investment and support to improve them, even if they are poor at the moment. I was addressing the point about when we are looking to designate new sites, and answering the question why we are looking at core reform 2.

Again, I stress that we have not officially responded to the consultation. If we are looking at a site that we wish to designate in the future, which is of a really low quality, is it irresponsible to designate that site knowing that it will not reach for five to 10 years the standard it needs to reach? Like everything, that is a question for debate. But for sites that are designated at the moment, I agree that we should be putting extra investment into them even if they are poor.

I do not want to rehearse the many debates and discussions we have already had. There were 36 amendments, I think, to the Water (Special Measures) Act on Report.

Tim Farron: Forty-four.

Emma Hardy: Forty-four amendments! We had many debates and discussions during the passage of that Act. To rehearse an argument we have had many times before, the reason why we are not focusing on the volume of water coming out is simply because volume can be very diluted, and therefore not a great threat. There can be a small amount of incredibly toxic waste causing a huge amount of damage. I would like to see the investment going into water quality monitors. That is part of the next price review—how can we put water quality monitors in? They would measure whether it is a huge amount and it is dilute, or a small amount and it is toxic. We just want to know what damage is being done to the river. My focus is, and remains, on water quality.

There were some genuinely helpful suggestions from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about where to place those monitors for measuring water quality. That was a really helpful contribution. While I am paying credit to him, the way we describe it—how we say it is safe to bathe—was also a helpful suggestion.

Joe Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Emma Hardy: I will; I am praising the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale—let us get back to normal.

Joe Morris: The Government have moved quickly on this issue. Does the Minister recognise that it is important that we maintain an engaged and concerned public? I have met with the Wylam clean river group and with other concerned groups throughout my constituency along the length of the Tyne. One thing that continues to resonate with me is that these groups understand that this is a consistent piece of work, and that we need to be constantly iterating on making sure that our rivers do not just get clean, but remain clean into the future. The Government and the public need to consistently work in partnership.

Emma Hardy: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I know that he cares deeply about this issue and has spoken to me many times about the importance of cleaning up rivers, lakes and seas. I would like to think it is something that we are united on.

Many stakeholders, many people and many Members have called for bathing water regulations to be updated to reflect the new ways in which we are using our waters or falling into our waters, whatever it might be, and to continue to support public health outcomes. It would be irresponsible for us not to consider public health when we are thinking about designation.

We are a Government who listen. We are a Government who believe in co-production. We are a Government who actively engage. I encourage all Members to contribute to the water review. It is out there now; the consultation is only open for the next seven weeks, so please do not lose the opportunity to have your say.

I put on the record my thanks to all the environmental campaigners, Surfers Against Sewage and all those organisations involved in supporting our clean rivers, lakes and seas.

Freddie van Mierlo: The Minister made some points on the length of time it would take to get some popular sites up to standard. Would she consider a pre-designation status, so that those sites are not left on the shelf with no support whatsoever—so that we are recognising, as my hon. Friends have said, the importance of certain sites for sporting, cultural and historical reasons?

Emma Hardy: That is a really interesting consideration. I hope the hon. Member fed that into the consultation. I will not commit either way, but it is an interesting point and one I will reflect on—as I said, this is a Government who listen. On that note, I think it is time for me to finish talking. I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Well done for getting your mum in *Hansard*. I call Gideon Amos to say a few words to sum up.

5.28 pm

Gideon Amos: I am really grateful to everyone who has taken part in the debate. I thank them very much. I am delighted that when I was filling in the form for bathing water status in French Weir, it was such a successful initiative that it attracted not only the support of the Opposition spokesperson but also my predecessor as Member of Parliament at the time.

We were delighted to get that designation, but it would not have happened if core reform 2 was in place. Even though that bathing site has been there for hundreds of years, dating back to at least the 18th century—we have records and pictures from the 19th century of changing rooms beside the river—the designation would not have happened and people would continue using the river and they would not have the benefit of bathing water status.

I urge the Minister to think carefully about introducing this very different criterion and moving away from places where people actually swim towards places where the industry think that they can afford to make the water quality better. That is the wrong criterion. The right criterion is where people are already using the river. I was in the river every Saturday in February—I did not quite make January—and people will be there throughout the year, whether or not the signs are up and it has bathing water status. I urge the Minister to think a little more on that.

I reiterate my thanks to everyone for taking part. I hope the Minister will ensure a debate on the regulations when they go through this House, because they are really important for our water quality.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered bathing water regulations.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 4 March 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Making Work Pay: Consultation Responses

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): The Government's plan to make work pay is a core part of our mission to grow the economy, raise living standards across the country and create opportunities for all. It will tackle the low pay, poor working conditions and poor job security that has been holding our economy back. The landmark Employment Rights Bill (ERB) will benefit more than 10 million workers in every corner of the country.

We are committed to working with all stakeholders on how to best put these measures into practice. In October the Deputy Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and I launched an initial package of four consultations, with the potential to inform amendments to the ERB. We greatly appreciated the many detailed responses we received. The insights we have gained from businesses, trade unions, representative organisations, civil society, and others have been invaluable in developing proportionate and effective policy.

Today we are publishing the Government's response to each consultation on gov.uk, including our next steps, as well as the Government's response to a consultation undertaken by the previous Government on tackling non-compliance in the umbrella company market. I will also be tabling a number of amendments to the Employment Rights Bill today for consideration at Report stage, reflecting the outcomes of these consultations.

The Government are committed to continuing with this approach through full and comprehensive consultation on the implementation of Make Work Pay to ensure that the changes we are making work for both workers and businesses of all sizes.

Consultation 1: The application of zero hours contracts measures to agency workers

The Government believe that every worker should be able to access a contract which reflects the hours they regularly work. We believe this should extend to agency workers, not only to offer them greater certainty of hours and security of income, but to ensure that agency work does not become a loophole in the plans to end exploitative zero hours contracts. We also recognise the important role that the temporary work sector plays in both the public and private sector, and the need for employers to retain flexibility in their workforces. This consultation sought views on how to apply zero hours contract measures to agency workers, receiving 629 responses from a broad range of stakeholders.

Based on the consultation responses and further stakeholder engagement, we will table amendments to the Employment Rights Bill which would allow the Government to implement the zero hours contracts rights for agency workers. We believe it is important to narrow the broad power currently in the Bill so that end hirers, agencies and agency workers are clear where responsibilities will sit in relation to the new rights. The

obligation to provide a guaranteed hours offer will rest with the end hirer, but legislation will maintain flexibility to place the obligation on agencies or other intermediaries instead, in certain scenarios, which will be set out in secondary legislation. Both the end hirer and agency will be responsible for providing an agency worker with reasonable notice of shifts, shift cancellations and changes to shifts. Agencies will be responsible for making payments to workers which result from short notice cancellations, movements or curtailments of a shift. Agencies and hirers will remain free to negotiate terms which may allow these costs to be recouped from the hirer where the hirer was in fact responsible for the change. In the case of pre-existing contracts, legislation will allow agencies to recoup these costs to the extent the hirer was responsible.

Significant details of the legislation will be set in regulations. We will take the necessary time to consult on the regulations, to ensure clear, detailed and workable provisions. We will continue to engage with employer organisations, the recruitment sector and trade unions to identify the best way to achieve the policy objective of extending rights for agency workers without causing unintended consequences to employment agencies and end hirers.

Consultation 2: Creating a modern framework for industrial relations

This consultation sought views on proposals to update the legislative framework in which trade unions operate to align it with modern work practices, removing unnecessary restrictions on trade union activity and ensuring industrial relations are underpinned by collaboration, proportionality, accountability, and a system that balances the interests of workers, businesses and the wider public. This consultation received 165 responses from a range of stakeholders.

We will table amendments to improve the process and transparency around trade union recognition and access, including streamlining the trade union recognition process and strengthening protections against unfair practices. This includes addressing unfair practices to prevent mass recruitment designed to influence the bargaining unit and prevent recognition being granted; a new fixed timeline for employers and trade unions to agree access arrangements for recognition purposes; removing the requirement to prove that an unfair practice influenced voting behaviour; extending the code of practice on access and unfair practices from the point the CAC accept a recognition application; and extending the unfair practice complaint timeframe from 24 hours to five days. We will also amend the Bill so that independent unions can apply for recognition where an employer has voluntarily recognised a non-independent union following receipt of a formal request for voluntary recognition by the independent union.

We will also table amendments to extend the trade union access provisions to cover digital access, in line with modern-day workplaces, while also introducing a fast-track route for achieving an "off-the-shelf" access agreement where certain conditions are met, alongside a mechanism to ensure there are robust penalties in place for non-compliance.

As part of our efforts to remove unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles, and deliver a balance between allowing for effective industrial action, while also ensuring that employers

are able to reasonably prepare, we will amend the ERB to abolish the 10-year requirement for unions to ballot members on political fund maintenance, simplify the information requirements for industrial action ballots and notice to employers, extend the expiry of mandate for industrial action from six to 12 months, and ensure that trade unions provide a 10-day notice period for industrial action.

The Government also want to ensure that trade unions have a meaningful mandate to support relationships and negotiation with employers and deliver effective dispute resolution. That is why we are committed to making balloting more accessible by delivering e-balloting, which we anticipate will increase participation in statutory ballots and demonstrate clear mandates. We will launch a working group with trade unions and businesses imminently. While we continue to engage on how to ensure that trade unions are able to secure a meaningful mandate for industrial action, and as the other reforms to trade union legislation come into force, the Government will table an amendment to the ERB specifying that the repeal of the 50% industrial action ballot turnout threshold will be subject to commencement on a date to be specified in regulations. The intention behind this approach is to align as closely as possible the removal of thresholds with the introduction of e-balloting. This will ensure that industrial action mandates will have demonstrably broad support.

Consultation 3: Strengthening remedies against abuse of rules on collective redundancy and fire and rehire

This consultation sought views on increasing the maximum period of the protective award for failing to adhere to collective consultation requirements, and on applying interim relief to fire and rehire and collective redundancy scenarios. We received 195 responses, from a range of stakeholders.

We will table an amendment to increase the maximum period of the protective award to 180 days (up from the current maximum of 90 days). Increasing the maximum value of the award means an employment tribunal will be able to grant larger awards to employees for an employer's failure to meet consultation requirements.

The Government want to enhance the deterrent against employers deliberately ignoring their collective consultation obligations and ensure it is not financially beneficial to do so. The Government are not proposing to bring forward the proposals to make interim relief available for either collective redundancy or fire and rehire scenarios. The most overarching and prominent theme from the responses on this section of the consultation is that it would be difficult to implement interim relief in practice, and the complexities for the employee in bringing a claim would outweigh any benefits in doing so. We will keep the area under review though and if it is found that further measures are needed, we will look to introduce them.

Consultation 4: strengthening statutory sick pay

Through the Employment Rights Bill, we are removing the waiting period so that SSP is paid from the first day of sickness absence and extending eligibility to those earning below the lower earnings limit.

We are introducing a new rate for statutory sick pay which will be paid to the lowest earners, including all those earning below the lower earnings limit. An employee

will be entitled to the flat rate or a percentage of their earnings, whichever is lower. We consulted on what this percentage rate of earnings should be.

Following this consultation, and together with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, I am today tabling an amendment to set the percentage rate of statutory sick pay that will be paid up to the flat rate of SSP at 80% of an employee's normal weekly earnings. This percentage rate provides a fair earnings replacement and strikes the right balance between providing financial security to employees who are unable to work due to sickness, while also limiting additional costs to businesses.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will also publish the full Government response to the consultation on statutory sick pay, which sets out the findings and rationale in more detail, and will submit the Government's response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee report on statutory sick pay.

Consultation 5: Tackling non-compliance in the umbrella company market consultation

In 2023 the previous Government consulted on proposals to regulate umbrella companies and options to tackle tax non-compliance in the umbrella company market, but no action was taken to address this. This means that many workers are unaware of who is responsible for providing their employment rights, or whether they are entitled to any employment rights at all. Many have reported a lack of pay-related transparency and mishandling of pay (typically, non-transparent deduction from wages). Yet the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate is currently unable to take action against non-compliant umbrella companies, as they do not fall within scope of the legislation covering employment agencies and employment businesses.

We will therefore table an amendment to the Employment Rights Bill to expand the scope of the Employment Agencies Act 1973, allowing umbrella companies to be regulated for the purposes of employment rights. We will set out the detail in regulations following further consultation, aiming to ensure that workers have comparable rights and protections when working through an umbrella company as when taken on directly by an employment business.

Next steps for consultation

This package represents the first phase of formal public consultations on how best to put our plans into practice. We have committed to full consultation on the implementation of this legislation, and expect this to begin this year, ensuring reforms work for employers and workers alike.

[HCWS490]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Early Support Hubs

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): The Minister for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health, my noble Friend Baroness Merron, has made the following written statement:

Nothing says more about the state of a nation than the wellbeing of its children. That is why the Government made a clear commitment in our manifesto to improve

the mental health of young people through specialist support and earlier intervention. We continue to make progress on delivering these manifesto commitments, such as access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, as part of our drive to reform the NHS through our 10-year health plan and create opportunities for young people through mission-led Government.

Today, I wish to inform the House that the Government are providing continued top-up funding in 2025-26 for 24 early support hubs in England and running an evaluation of the support that they deliver, backed by £7 million.

Building on a shared outcomes fund project being delivered in 2024-25, this means that over 12,000 children and young people will continue to have access to innovative early mental health and wellbeing support at an early stage.

In our manifesto, we committed to providing open access mental health support for children and young people through Young Futures hubs. Working with the Home Office, the Department for Education and colleagues across Government, our hope is that the evidence and insights collected through the early support hubs evaluation will support the delivery of Young Futures hubs, alongside best practice and learning from other initiatives. This learning will inform our ambitions for community mental health and wellbeing support for children and young people, and ensure that they have access to the kinds of support they need.

As well as providing mental health support in every community, we are also continuing work to recruit 8,500 new mental health workers to cut waiting times and ensure that people can access treatment and support earlier.

I know that we still have a long way to go to ensure that all young people are provided with access to the mental health support they need. However, today's investment marks a step in the right direction to support children and young people's mental health.

Early Support Hubs Receiving Funding	
Hub Name	Constituency
ABL Health	Mansfield (Steve Yemm)
Base 25	Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss)
Brook Young People	Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham)
West Central London Mind	Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake)
Centre 33	Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner)
ChilyPep	Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis)
The Children's Society	Torbay (Steve Darling)
The Children's Society	Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson)
CHUMS Charity	Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson)
Family Action	Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier)
Isle of Wight Youth Trust	Isle of Wight West (Richard Quigley)
Lancashire Mind	Chorley (Sir Lindsay Hoyle)
Mancroft Advice Project (MAP)	Norwich South (Clive Lewis)
Noah's Ark Centre	Halifax (Kate Dearden)
No Limits South	Southampton, Test (Satvir Kaur)
Onside	Worcester (Tom Collins)
People Potential Possibilities	Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales)

Early Support Hubs Receiving Funding	
Hub Name	Constituency
Sheffield Futures	Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed)
Spring North	Blackburn (Adnan Hussain)
Warrington Youth Zone Ltd	Warrington Youth (Sarah Hall)
YMCA St Helens	St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Marie Rimmer)
Young Devon	North Devon (Ian Roome)
Youth Enquiry Service	Wycombe (Emma Reynolds)
Young Persons Advisory Service	Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson)

[HCWS493]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Audit Backlog in England: Non-compliance Lists

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Effective local audit provides transparency, accountability, trust and confidence in local bodies to spend taxpayer money wisely. Close to 500 local bodies in England are required to publish their audited accounts annually.

However, the Government inherited a broken local audit system in England, evidenced by an audit backlog that peaked at 918 outstanding unaudited accounts in September 2023. More recently, the whole of Government accounts for financial year 2022-23 was disclaimed in autumn 2024, primarily due to a lack of audit assurance on local government accounts.

In July 2024, I outlined proposals to clear this unacceptable backlog and give taxpayers' the confidence they deserve. These measures were implemented in autumn 2024 via amendments to the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 and through the Comptroller and Auditor General's new code of audit practice. Without these measures, audits would continue to be delayed, and the local audit system would move further away from timely, effective audit, with significant additional cost to the taxpayer. The measures are supported by all key local audit system partners.

The Government appreciate the efforts that bodies and auditors are undertaking to support the drive to fix the foundations. The outcome of the 13 December 2024 backstop shows a shared commitment to restoring sound financial practice to the sector.

Backstop publication requirements

The 2015 regulations, as amended, require bodies to publish audited accounts (including the audit opinion) on their website by the statutory backstop dates below:

Financial year	Backstop date
Up to and including 2022-23	13 December 2024
2023-24	28 February 2025
2024-25	27 February 2026
2025-26	31 January 2027
2026-27	30 November 2027
2027-28	30 November 2028

The 2015 regulations also specify circumstances in which bodies may be exempt from meeting a backstop date (these are in line with exemptions for auditors set out in the code of audit practice). Where such an exemption exists, bodies must publish an explanation on their website on (or as soon as practicable after) the relevant backstop date, and publish audited accounts as soon as practicable.

If a body is not exempt and fails to comply, it must publish an explanation on its website on (or as soon as practicable after) the relevant backstop date, send a copy of this to the Secretary of State and publish audited accounts as soon as practicable.

13 December 2024 backstop (for financial years up to and including 2022-23)

Following the 13 December 2024 backstop, the system has taken a significant step forward. The vast majority of bodies (approximately 95%) have now published audited accounts for all years up to and including 2022-23. 233 bodies (approximately 50%) have published all audited accounts for years up to and including 2022-23 with unmodified opinions.

In line with expectations, around 200 bodies (approximately 45%) have published at least one disclaimed opinion due to the backstop. Across all years, close to 400 backstop disclaimers have been published.

Six bodies were exempt from this backstop date.

In the interests of transparency, my statement of July 2024 committed to publishing lists of bodies and their appointed auditors that do not meet backstop dates. I can confirm that the Government have today published two lists on gov.uk as follows:

a list of 21 bodies yet to publish all audited accounts for financial years up to and including 2022-23 as of 19 February 2025, and;

a list of 47 bodies that had not published one or more audited accounts for financial years up to and including 2022-23 by 13 December 2024, but had published all audited accounts as of 19 February 2025.

The publication of audited accounts is a joint endeavour between bodies and audit firms, and is shaped by a complex array of factors. Accordingly, today's publication does not provide detailed commentary on individual circumstances as to why a body did not publish all its audited accounts by the backstop. It does, however, include factual context on whether the body published its unaudited draft accounts by 31 October 2024 to allow the 30-working-day statutory public inspection period to conclude ahead of the backstop date.

Bodies and audit firms named in the lists were contacted prior to publication, including to help reinforce the legislative requirements and, where relevant, to emphasise the importance of publishing audited accounts as soon as practicable. The Government will continue to engage with bodies with outstanding accounts as appropriate.

28 February 2025 backstop (for financial year 2023-24)

The deadline for publication of audited accounts for 2023-24 was 28 February 2025. The Government will update on the outcomes of this backstop in due course.

Systemic reform

Clearing the backlog is a vital priority. However, to fix the broken local audit system, systemic reform is clearly also needed. In December 2024, the Government

published a strategy for overhauling the local audit system in England: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/local-audit-reform-a-strategy-for-overhauling-the-local-audit-system-in-england/local-audit-reform-a-strategy-for-overhauling-the-local-audit-system-in-england#local-audit-office-remit-1>

The Government committed to a series of measures as well as consulting on others, and we are carefully considering responses to those consulted on as part of the strategy (the consultation closed on 29 January 2025). The Government response, which will set out next steps, will be published shortly.

Overhauling the broken local audit system demonstrates our determination to drive sustained improvement and ensure that local government is fit, legal and decent. It is the least taxpayers can expect, and this Government fully intend to use all levers available to fix the local audit system and give the sector the firm foundations that it requires.

[HCWS492]

Plan for Neighbourhoods

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): This Government's defining mission is growth, and we are determined that nowhere will be left behind in that pursuit.

Over the last decades the impact of austerity and decline has not been equally felt. Some neighbourhoods have been starved of investment and reform, worsening deprivation and making the path to growth more difficult than in other communities.

The new £1.5 billion plan for neighbourhoods will deliver up to £20 million of funding and support over the next decade into 75 communities across the UK, laying the foundations to kickstart local growth and drive-up living standards.

No more sticking plasters; no more short-term fixes—rather, a 10-year programme allocating £2 million a year to unlock the potential of the places people call home. This goes hand in hand with everything this Government are delivering to rebuild our country: whether that is the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the cold war, tackling NHS waiting lists or ending the “Whitehall knows best” approach by empowering local leaders to strengthen communities and determine their future.

The programme will help revitalise local areas and fight deprivation at root cause by zeroing in on three strategic objectives: building thriving places, strengthening communities and taking back control.

In each of the 75 communities, the Government will support the establishment of a new “neighbourhood board”, bringing together residents, local businesses, and grass-roots campaigners to draw up and implement a regeneration plan for their area. Communities have come up with their own grass-roots solutions: opening foodbanks and warm banks, shopping local to back jobs and enterprises in their high streets, and raising support through trade unions, charities and civil society bodies. Our plan for neighbourhoods will empower local people to take ownership for driving the renewal of their community.

Our country has all the raw ingredients to ignite growth—untapped talent and potential across every town, city, village and estate. But we also have people without enough to get by, and places and public services which have been hollowed out. People feel divided and disempowered, perceptions which are made worse by deprivation that for too long has been tackled with sticking-plaster politics.

Together, this Government will work in partnership with people on the ground and local authorities to deliver in every corner of the country. The plan for neighbourhoods is just the start: through the introduction of community right to buy and further initiatives to support high streets and communities, we will give people and places the resources and the powers they need to succeed. I will deposit a copy of the prospectus in the Library of the House.

Annex

The following list includes eligible local authorities for the Plan for Neighbourhoods, ordered alphabetically.

Accrington
Arbroath
Ashton-under-Lyne
Barnsley
Barry (Vale of Glamorgan)
Bedworth
Bexhill-on-Sea
Bilston (Wolverhampton)
Blyth (Northumberland)
Boston
Burnley
Canvey Island
Carlton
Castleford
Chadderton
Chesterfield
Clacton-on-Sea
Clifton (Nottingham)
Clydebank
Coatbridge
Coleraine
Cwmbran
Darlaston
Darlington
Darwen
Derry-Londonderry
Dewsbury
Doncaster
Dudley (Dudley)
Dumfries
Eastbourne
Elgin
Eston
Farnworth
Great Yarmouth
Greenock
Grimsby
Harlow
Hartlepool
Hastings
Heywood
Irvine
Jarrow
Keighley

Annex

The following list includes eligible local authorities for the Plan for Neighbourhoods, ordered alphabetically.

Kilmarnock
King's Lynn
Kirkby
Kirkby-in-Ashfield
Leigh (Wigan)
Mansfield
Merthyr Tydfil
Nelson (Pendle)
Newark-on-Trent
Newton-le-Willows
Kirkwall (Orkney Islands)
Peterhead
Ramsgate
Rawtenstall
Rhyl
Rotherham
Runcorn
Ryde
Scarborough
Scunthorpe
Skegness
Smethwick
Spalding
Spennymoor
Thetford
Torquay
Washington
Wisbech
Worksop
Wrexham

Programme timeline

February to Spring 2025

Neighbourhood boards and local authorities receive a tailored data pack detailing metrics across the three strategic objectives.

Neighbourhoods boards and local authorities receive polling on local sentiment around investment priorities for their area.

Neighbourhood boards to confirm finalised membership and any proposals to alter the default area boundary for spending in their community to Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government by Friday 15 April 2025.

MHCLG to review membership and boundary proposals and confirm to places whether acceptable.

Spring 2025

Further guidance on fund delivery, policy toolkits for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the submission, assessment and approvals of regeneration plans to be published.

MHCLG issues 2025 to 2026 capacity funding payment to all places.

Spring 2025 to winter 2025

Neighbourhood boards submit their regeneration plan to MHCLG for assessment and approval.

April 2026

First programme delivery funding payment to be made to lead local authorities, commencement of delivery phase.

MHCLG issues 2026 to 2027 capacity funding payment to all places.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Household Support Fund

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall):

This Government are committed to a sustainable, long-term approach to drive up opportunity and drive down poverty across the UK.

At the autumn Budget, we announced a one-year £742 million extension of the household support fund in England, from 1 April 2025 until 31 March 2026. The devolved Governments will receive consequential funding through the Barnett formula in the usual way, to be spent at their discretion.

We know that local authorities have the experience and relationships to determine how best to support those in their local areas. This extension of the household support fund will enable local authorities to provide everything from immediate crisis support such as food vouchers or warm winter clothing to more preventive approaches to tackling poverty, such as referring people to debt and other advice services, working with community and voluntary organisations to signpost people to wider support, and helping with costs of energy bills and white goods.

We also encourage local authorities to consider how their provision of crisis support could have a longer-term, sustainable impact, such as providing insulation or energy-efficient household items which reduce bills and repairing or replacing white goods and appliances.

The scheme guidance and funding allocations for the forthcoming extension will be shared with local authorities imminently.

[HCWS495]

JUSTICE

Ministry of Justice Contingency Fund Advance: 2024-25

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman):

The Ministry of Justice requires an advance to discharge its commitments which are set out in its supplementary estimate 2024-25, published on 11 February 2025 as “HC 655 (Central Government Supply Estimates 2024-25, Supplementary Estimates)”.

This is a temporary cash advance due to the timing of Royal Assent for the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill (“the Supply Bill”), and does not reflect an overspend.

Once the Supply Bill achieves Royal Assent the advance will be repaid in full.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £300,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Justice. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £300,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS491]

Written Correction

Tuesday 4 March 2025

Ministerial Correction

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Gaza: BBC Coverage

The following extract is from the debate on Gaza: BBC coverage on 27 February 2025.

Chi Onwurah: Since the Hamas atrocities of 7 October, tens of thousands of Gazans have been killed by Israeli forces, and hundreds of thousands more have been subject to unimaginable suffering. It is essential that their stories be told and it is unacceptable that the BBC should have chosen to tell them through those connected to Hamas. We understand that the BBC is not allowed into Gaza, so will the Secretary of State confirm where this programme was subcontracted and to whom? On

the issue of translation, does the BBC not have a translation guide? Is that publicly available? If not, should it be? Finally, when Israeli Ministers and others call for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza or for the elimination of the Palestinian people, surely that must be reported in a way that highlights that that is illegal and the cause of immense distress to many in this country?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully about the careful use of language and the way in which we all have a responsibility to uphold the highest standards on that. On her specific question, having had discussions with the BBC, I can confirm that this was not a BBC programme; it was commissioned by an external organisation.

[*Official Report*, 27 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 940.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy):

Lisa Nandy:... On her specific question, having had discussions with the BBC, I can confirm that this was not a BBC programme; it was commissioned **by the BBC but made by an independent production company.**

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**not later than
Tuesday 11 March 2025**

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