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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 6 March 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Emergency Alert System

1. **Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the emergency alert system. [903023]

9. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the emergency alert system. [903031]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Opong-Asare): The emergency alert system is a vital tool for warning and informing in a case of a serious incident where there is a threat to life. This Government have used the tool five times, including the largest ever deployment for Storm Éowyn. We are incorporating the lessons identified, including on improved targeting, into alert mechanisms.

Paulette Hamilton: A secret phone can be a lifeline for survivors of domestic abuse. Can the Minister tell the House what steps the Government are taking to ensure that when emergency alerts are sent, survivors of domestic abuse are not put in any additional danger?

Ms Opong-Asare: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The whole purpose of the emergency alert is to make people safer, so we are mindful of the potential risks to people with secret phones, such as victims of domestic abuse. We are continuing to work with domestic abuse charities and organisations that support victims to mitigate the risk, including by producing guidance on disabling emergency alerts.

Ms Minns: The threat of flooding is ever present in Carlisle, and although I and other local residents regularly receive flood alerts, they do not necessarily distinguish between a threat to life and a regular flood alert. Could the Minister please explain at what point flood alerts are updated to reflect the seriousness of an emergency alert?

Ms Opong-Asare: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. The Environment Agency is responsible for issuing flood warnings. For locations covered by severe flood warnings, the Environment Agency may ask for an emergency alert to be activated where there is an immediate threat to life, in order to support the response in the local area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response. It is good that we have this system right across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and that all our constituents can respond to it. It has a very clear role. First, how quickly can there be a response to things such as domestic abuse, flood warnings or whatever? Secondly, my understanding is that councils have a role to play. If so, perhaps the Minister could remind us of their role.

Ms Opong-Asare: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. We work very closely with local authorities and local resilience forums when considering issuing an emergency alert, to ensure that the response is as adequate as possible.

Cyber-security: Local Government Resilience

2. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the resilience of local government digital infrastructure against cyber-attacks. [903024]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): The Government are working hard to improve the cyber resilience of the public sector, because cyber-attacks can be against central Government institutions, local authorities and, of course, individuals and businesses. With regard to local authorities, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has launched a cyber assessment framework for local government. It sets a clear cyber-security standard for the sector, and the Department also provides monthly cyber clinics to support local authorities in improving collaboration, sharing intelligence and tackling vulnerabilities in this area.

Ian Lavery: Local councils manage mountains of sensitive data, deliver essential services and lead on emergency responses to critical incidents, among much more, yet 15 years of Tory underfunding has left outdated digital infrastructure, leaving them particularly vulnerable to cyber-attack. Does the Minister agree that improving cyber resilience in local authorities is of paramount importance if we are to protect our citizens' data and continue to deliver essential services without interruption from hostile actors?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: not all the systems used across central or local government are as up to date as they should be. This is a constant battle and a constant challenge. It is really important that we put every effort into ensuring that we are as well protected as possible against hostile acts from both state and non-state actors.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The US Defence Secretary, Pete Hegseth, has this week announced the stepping back of US counter-cyber measures against Russia. This incredibly concerning decision by the Americans threatens not only their cyber-security, but our own. The Russian Government have been accused of orchestrating a widespread campaign of interference and disinformation that seeks to undermine the global order. In 2020, the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee stated that the Government had underestimated the response required to the Russian threat. Can the Minister tell us what further measures the Government are taking to protect British democracy, and will he commit to publishing the full, unredacted Russia report?

Pat McFadden: We are fully alive to the threat posed by Russian cyber-attacks. I mentioned in my previous answer the threat from state and non-state actors, and there is sometimes a threat from state-backed actors against our public infrastructure. We will work as hard as possible to protect our institutions against such attacks, and our intelligence co-operation with the United States remains a very important part of our defences.

Cyber-security

3. **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening cyber-security. [903025]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): The Government are taking action to strengthen our cyber-security and protect our digital economy. The Home Office has launched a public consultation on proposals to tackle ransomware—one of the most malicious types of attack—to protect UK businesses, improve reporting and strike a blow against those who use this model of organised crime. However, this is a major challenge, as I have said, and it is an ongoing battle against those who seek to us do harm, to extort money and to undermine the delivery of crucial public services.

Johanna Baxter: I share some of the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). Last week I spoke to businesses and officials working on Ukraine's critical national infrastructure, who are on the frontline of Russian cyber-attacks. They told me that, since the invasion, there have been cyber-attacks on virtually every aspect of Ukrainian life, and highlighted the scope of the damage they have done to civilian and military operations. Can my right hon. Friend say a little more about how we are learning the lessons from this conflict and what we are doing to protect our own national infrastructure from Russian cyber-attacks?

Pat McFadden: The Government are helping Ukraine's cyber-defenders to detect, disrupt and deter Russian cyber-attacks. The programme is back by £16 million of UK funding, using world-leading expertise from both the private and the public sectors to protect Ukraine's critical national infrastructure. We understand that the protection of cyber-assets is part of modern warfare, and we are providing this help for Ukraine, just as we have supplied it with a large number of weapons over the past three years.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): ByteDance, the company that owns TikTok, is required as a Chinese company to have an in-house Chinese Communist party committee. We all know that attacks from China on our national infrastructure as well as on our cyber-networks are becoming increasingly common, and it is clear that elements of the Chinese Government are behind them. Yet, astonishingly, the Government are still failing to fully declare ministerial meetings with TikTok representatives. Will the Minister ensure that meetings with TikTok executives are declared by Government Ministers alongside other senior media executive registrations, given TikTok's huge presence in the media space, the massive public influence it has and the known cyber-risks posed by this Chinese platform?

Pat McFadden: There is a well-established process for transparency about meetings between Government Ministers and outside organisations, and TikTok will be treated in the same way as anyone else.

Public Procurement: Support for SMEs

4. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises in public procurement. [903026]

7. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises in public procurement. [903029]

11. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises in public procurement. [903034]

12. **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises in public procurement. [903035]

13. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small businesses in public procurement. [903038]

17. **Jess Asato** (Lowestoft) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises in public procurement. [903043]

20. **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises in public procurement. [903047]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 7, 11, 12, 13, 17 and 20 together—while the rest of the ministerial team go and have a cup of tea.

The wide-ranging interest in this topic shows just how much the £400 billion spent on procurement in the public sector matters for growth and for communities across the UK. I was recently in Grimsby, where small businesses are delivering local growth, innovating and providing more than half of local employment. MPs know that SMEs are vital for providing local employment in their communities. Under the previous Government,

however, we became overly reliant on large consultants and a small number of big companies. We have too often ended up locked into expensive, poor performing contracts, with companies able to drive up prices in closed markets. That has to change. The new national procurement policy statement asks the public sector to maximise procurement spend with small and medium-sized enterprises, and the Government are leading the way by setting ambitious public targets for Departments on spending on SMEs.

Dave Robertson: I am glad that I am at the front of this particular queue, Mr Speaker.

Right across the country we have amazing, cutting-edge businesses, such as Great Wave AI, a start-up in my constituency that is already helping the Government to take advantage of AI. It wants to grow faster and do more work with Government Departments. What work is the Minister doing to ensure that small British start-ups can play their part in the AI revolution in government, not just mega companies such as Meta, Microsoft and Google?

Georgia Gould: We have been absolutely clear that there are huge opportunities for AI to support the public sector to better personalise services and save money, but we have to keep up with the speed of innovation in how we buy. I have heard from SMEs specialising in AI and digital transformation that the way we are doing procurement is too slow and too inflexible to keep up with that pace. That is why I am working with the Minister for AI and Digital Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), to set up a new digital commercial centre for excellence to make sure that that changes, and that we have the best innovation from my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country in Government.

Sarah Owen: Last year, Luton airport invested £110 million in local businesses. It knows the value of businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, in places like Luton. Every weekend, I do a small business Saturday shout-out. What can we do to ensure that small businesses in Luton get a fair crack of the whip when it comes to public sector procurement?

Georgia Gould: It is brilliant to hear about my hon. Friend's leadership in supporting small businesses and the work they are doing in her constituency. We are absolutely determined that SMEs should have that fair crack. The new national procurement policy statement asks us to maximise spend with small businesses. It also sets stretching and transparent targets for each Department, which will be brought to the House. We will be held to account for delivering on them.

Euan Stainbank: The targets in the national procurement policy statement for Government Departments to buy from British SMEs are to be strongly welcomed. The benefit will be long term, with broad and essential sources of investment, and we will improve our economy's domestic resilience. Bus manufacturing is an area that needs domestic resilience, with over 100 jobs recently lost in the Falkirk area because the previous Government failed to support British buses. At the bus expert panel next week, does the Minister expect a general increase in domestic procurement following the updated national procurement policy statement?

Georgia Gould: As soon as I saw my hon. Friend's name on the Order Paper, I knew that he would mention buses, because he has never missed an opportunity to raise this critical issue with me. The Government are absolutely committed to supporting the UK's domestic bus manufacturing industry and ensuring that the procurement system recognises the high standards and quality of UK manufacturers. The new national procurement policy statement aligns with our industrial strategy and pushes us to maximise spend with SMEs. As a result, contracting authorities across the country must now consider how their procurement strategies can support the industrial strategy, including the bus manufacturing strategy.

Jack Abbott: Recent figures show that hundreds of small businesses have been opening up across Ipswich, and I am proud that we are now ranked in the top 10 of areas in the country where the number of SMEs is growing. However, I am ambitious for my town and want to go further. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that, as part of our skills agenda, young people in towns such as Ipswich have the chance to find skilled, long-term, well-paid employment with SMEs, and, in doing so, boost public procurement and our local economy?

Georgia Gould: There is so much young talent in Ipswich and in communities across the country, but too many young people are struggling to get on to the employment ladder, and we know the scarring impact that that can have on their lives. We need to ensure that the £400 billion spent on public procurement means something in communities such as Ipswich. We are streamlining how we measure social and economic value so that there is a very clear ask that is linked to our missions, including the opportunity mission, to deliver jobs and skills to young people out of work. We are asking those who win Government contracts to advertise in local jobcentres so that people in Ipswich and communities across the UK can benefit from Government contracts.

Debbie Abrahams: In January it was reported that nearly 7,000 construction firms were on the brink of insolvency—that is on top of the 4,000 that folded last year. A major cause of this is payment delays by large contractors. Given that project bank accounts, which protect against payment delays, are used by only some Departments, will the Minister act where the previous Government failed to do so and introduce these accounts across all Departments?

Georgia Gould: I really welcome this question. It is so important to small businesses that they are paid on time—I have heard time and again that late payments threaten their very existence. The construction playbook states that project bank accounts

“should be used unless there are compelling reasons not to.”

We are determined to crack down on late payments. We have announced regular spot checks on prompt payments throughout our supply chains, and in the Budget the Chancellor said that the Government will be required to exclude suppliers from bidding for major contracts if they cannot demonstrate that they pay within an average of 45 days. I welcome my hon. Friend's work on this matter, and I very much enjoyed meeting her to discuss

it. I know that she has built a wide coalition, and I hope we can continue to work together on these important issues.

Jess Asato: Pathways Care Farm is an amazing charity in Lowestoft that supports people with disabilities, those with mental health issues and ex-offenders to get back on their feet by working with animals and growing food. The charity has excellent outcomes, particularly with helping people to get work-ready and improve their health, but it finds it hard to access opportunities for public contracts, such as social prescribing, because it is so small. Does the Minister agree that organisations in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors and charities such as Pathways have an important role to play in providing solutions for the public sector?

Georgia Gould: I wholeheartedly agree. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) took me to a similar farm in her constituency that had been set up by an ex-prison officer. I have to say that it was one of the most enjoyable visits I have had—it was great for my mental health to feed some alpacas and goats. I have heard powerful stories about how social prescribing has changed lives, from ending chronic loneliness to helping individuals such as a man I met recently, who had found his first stable home in his 50s.

The new NPPS specifically asks contracting authorities to maximise spend with voluntary sector organisations, and we will be introducing targets for Government on spend with voluntary sector organisations and social enterprises. The Government have listened to concerns from local authorities and are working to implement changes to allow them to reserve competitions for low-value contracts for local organisations.

Jo Platt: Last but not least, Mr Speaker. The mass grouping of these questions on this subject proves the failure of the previous Government to get a grip on this particular issue. Can the Minister reassure me, and SMEs such as WJ Structures and Rothwells Paper in my constituency, that this Government will take steps to simplify the process, thereby keeping the pound local instead of contracts going to multinationals?

Georgia Gould: I very much welcome these questions—I could happily speak about procurement all day, because it is absolutely critical for delivering the Government's missions. The Procurement Act 2023 removes some of these challenges, but we need to do more. That is why we are setting ambitious and stretching targets for direct spend on SMEs and have asked officials to review our framework contracts, in particular, to ensure that they are more accessible to SMEs. The challenges raised by businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency are the same as those I have heard described by SMEs across the country—our procurement is too complex and too slow, and it needs to change. We need to get that £400 billion into real jobs and SMEs in our communities.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I congratulate the Government Whips' Office—[*Laughter.*] What discussions have been had with the Crown Commercial Service regarding Romeo Mike 6277 network—RM6277?

Georgia Gould: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I look forward to spending another day with him in the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill Committee later. I have regular discussions with the Crown Commercial Service on a range of issues.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Given that public sector procurement accounts for a third of all public sector spending, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that it is less siloed, more joined up, and as efficient as the private sector?

Georgia Gould: That is such an important question. We need to deliver value for money in how we do procurement. One change that we made in the new national procurement policy statement is ensuring that contracting authorities procure collaboratively, crack down on some of the excessive costs of private frameworks and ensure that they are transparent. We are using AI to streamline procurement, and have set up a new commercial innovation challenge at the heart of government to ensure buying supports innovation and growth.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

5. **Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on establishing an infected blood compensation scheme. [903027]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Last month, I laid regulations, which, subject to parliamentary approval, will give the Infected Blood Compensation Authority the powers that it needs to pay compensation to all eligible people by all routes. My aim is for the regulations to be in force by 31 March to enable IBCA to begin payments to all eligible groups this year.

Andrew Cooper: Last year, I was contacted by a constituent who tragically lost her husband to infected blood and I am continuing to support her. There is an understandable lack of trust between victims and the authorities after such a long wait for justice, and my constituent is concerned about the urgency in compensating affected families. When he spoke in the House last month, the Minister committed to producing an easy-read version of the regulations. Can he say when that is likely to be published and will he commit to full transparency on the progress of settling claims?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will publish a simplified version of the document explaining the infected blood compensation scheme by the end of the month. Transparency is vital. IBCA, although an independent body, is committed to being open with the community and publishes monthly figures showing progress on compensation claims.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the Minister's progress in this area. I visited IBCA on 30 January and was impressed by the professionalism of the team. Since then the Minister has made himself accessible so that I can give him feedback. One issue that has come up is the need for recipients of payments to sign non-disclosure agreements or terms. I am anxious that misunderstandings do not arise as a consequence of that. Can the Minister

use his good offices to implore IBCA to explain why that happens? If IBCA cannot do that, perhaps he can explain to the House why such agreements might be necessary.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his work as Paymaster General. Indeed, I was pleased to facilitate his recent visit to IBCA and am grateful to him for the constructive approach that he continues to take. On the specific issue that he raises around the contracts that IBCA has entered into, I can say that I entirely agree with him about the need for transparency, and that is something that I am re-emphasising to IBCA.

Devolved Administrations

6. **Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen co-operation with the devolved Administrations. [903028]

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): Since entering government, we have reset working relations with the devolved Governments and I am now working to support those efforts. All three tiers of the intergovernmental structures are in operation. Several of the portfolio-level inter-ministerial groups have met, while the middle tier inter-ministerial Standing Committee and finance inter-ministerial Standing Committee both met last Thursday. The top-tier meeting between the Prime Minister and the Heads of the devolved Governments also met alongside the Council of the Nations and Regions in October. Of course those formal structures are not the sum total of our engagement, as we continue to collaborate closely on issues affecting citizens in all parts of the country.

Andrew Ranger: Although much of public service delivery is devolved, all four nations face a shared challenge of reforming these services in a tight fiscal environment. What can the nations learn from one another about reforming these services, and does the Minister agree that it is important that they do learn from one another?

Mr Alexander: My hon. Friend raises a key and important challenge. In every part of these islands, public services need both resources and reform given the Government's inheritance back in July. The UK Health Secretary has set out ambitious plans to roll out new AI technologies, upgrade the NHS app and reform the healthcare system to bring down waiting lists. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster met devolved Government Ministers to discuss public service reform, data sharing and harnessing work on public service reform across these islands.

Relations with the EU

8. **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the European Union. [903030]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): A closer, more co-operative relationship with the EU is in the UK's national interests as it will grow the economy, boost living standards,

protect our borders and keep the UK safe. I am taking forward discussions with my EU counterpart Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič. The UK-EU leaders summit on 19 May will be an important opportunity to drive forward this agenda.

Peter Prinsley: Palmerston said that this country has no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, only interests which are eternal and perpetual. Does the Minister agree that it is in our eternal interests for there to be security in Europe and a sovereign Ukraine? Will he congratulate the Prime Minister on his statesmanship and leadership at this dangerous moment?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Prime Minister on the careful and considered leadership he is showing at a time when we face a once-in-a-generation moment for the collective security of our country and our continent. We remain absolutely committed to securing a lasting peace in Ukraine. On 2 March, the Prime Minister hosted international leaders in London to discuss support for Ukraine. As he said,

“we will never choose between either side of the Atlantic...the past week has shown that that idea is totally unserious.”—[*Official Report*, 3 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 25.]

We are stepping up on defence and security, and we know that Europe is stepping up, too.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Last week, I was in Ukraine, where, following Trump's betrayal, the need for European solidarity to defend our democracy has never been more evident. The unintended consequences of Brexit for our economy and our security are certainly very real. It is increasingly obvious that the UK cannot afford the luxury of splendid isolation. In the spirit of nothing being off the table, will the Minister's Department start a discussion in government about the UK moving to customs union and single market membership? The closer and the quicker we align with our European partners, the safer we will all be.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I always thought the SNP's policy was one of splendid isolation, but that is certainly not the UK Government's policy. Indeed, we are working very closely with our European partners. That is precisely the leadership that the Prime Minister has been showing in the past week.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): We appear, regrettably, to be witnessing the start of a global trade war. Over the past week, the United States has placed tariffs on some of its major trading partners, and they have retaliated in kind. The President has said that he intends to place tariffs of 25% on EU goods soon. Should that happen, it is highly likely that the EU will respond.

Even if the United Kingdom were to avoid tariffs, the consequences for Northern Ireland could be particularly complex. What conversations has the Paymaster General had with his European counterparts to ensure that Northern Ireland is not caught in the crossfire of a trade war?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, we have a strong and proud tradition over centuries of free trade here in the United Kingdom, and we will continue to make the case for that. With regard to our specific trading relationship with the United States, the hon. Gentleman will have seen that, after conversations between the Prime Minister and the President in the Oval Office last Thursday, we wish to deepen our trading relationship with the United States. Specifically on Northern Ireland, I completely understand his point, and we will continue to monitor the impact of any such policy on Northern Ireland.

Alex Burghart: I am grateful to the Paymaster General for his response, but it sounds as though he has not yet had any conversations with his EU counterparts on the issue. I appreciate that he has a meeting on 19 May, but I am sure he will understand that tariffs may come much sooner than that. That being the case, will he undertake, first, to talk to his European counterparts and secondly, to come and give a statement to this House as soon as he has done so, so that we can understand that the Government are preparing for such an eventuality? Can he also make it clear to our friends in Europe that should trade and manufacturing be disrupted in Northern Ireland, we will not hesitate to use our powers under article 16 of the Windsor framework to protect businesses there?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To reassure the hon. Gentleman, the Windsor framework taskforce is based in the Cabinet Office and I regularly discuss issues on Northern Ireland with my European counterparts. I can assure him that I will speak to Maroš Šefčovič on a number of occasions prior to 19 May. I hope the hon. Gentleman will take that reassurance. He should also be reassured that we will, of course, always act in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Two weeks ago, I was glad to read reports in *The Times* that the Government intend to introduce a youth mobility scheme between the UK and the EU. That would be good for our economy, while providing young British people with the opportunity to work and study abroad. That is what the British public want, with new polling showing that more than two thirds of the UK population are in favour of such a scheme, but last week the Home Secretary ruled it out. Will the Minister do the right thing, remove the unnecessary barriers facing young people in the UK and commit to negotiations on an EU-UK youth mobility scheme?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The position of the Government is unchanged; we have no plans for a youth mobility scheme. We will, of course, always listen to sensible proposals from the EU, but they have to be within our red lines of no return to freedom of movement, no return to the single market and no return to the customs union.

Plan for Change

10. **Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the Government's plan for change. [903032]

14. **Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the Government's plan for change. [903039]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): I am pleased to report to the House that we are making progress in delivering our plan for change. After years of rising NHS waiting lists under the Conservatives, those waiting lists are now falling and last month we announced that we had met our first step pledge to deliver 2 million additional NHS appointments seven months early. In addition to that, the first 750 breakfast clubs will open in April to help children get the best start to their learning day, and our new criminal justice legislation is being introduced to protect the public from crime and antisocial behaviour, including the introduction of respect orders targeted at known troublemakers in our local communities.

Mark Swards: I thank the Minister for that answer. I was proud to vote for the £22.6 billion increase in NHS spending, which means that we are getting 2 million more appointments seven months early and that waiting lists are coming down. Of course, there is still a long way to go and the British public deserve to know that every penny of that extra investment is being spent as efficiently as possible. Will the Minister update the House on what the Government's plans are to reform the NHS to ensure that every single penny is spent wisely?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the additional resources for the NHS were only made possible by the Budget proposed by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor back in October. My hon. Friend is also right to say that as more money goes into the NHS, there is a duty to ensure that that is matched by reform. The 10-year health plan will set out how we will deliver an NHS by creating a reformed and modern health service to ensure that the extra investment results in faster and more convenient treatment for patients, because that is what we all want to see.

Perran Moon: Over the last 14 years, my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency has seen child poverty rise. A third of secondary school children are now persistently absent from school, educational attainment is below the national average and life expectancy has actually fallen. Those were 14 years of abject failure, for which my constituents will never forgive the Conservative party. Does the Minister agree that the true test of success of our plan for change and a decade of renewal should be measured in the positive changes to the lives of our poorest communities?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend puts it well. The missions that we have set out are focused on delivering long-term and ambitious outcomes that will make a meaningful difference to people's lives. Specifically on the issue he raised on child poverty and the best start in life, the plan for change has a specific target to close the development gap between children who are starting school, and to ensure that more children are ready to start school and to learn and to give them the opportunities that education can bring. Our aim is that people from all backgrounds can benefit from those policies, and that is why the plan for change will make a real difference to people's lives in all parts of the country.

Ministerial Appointments

15. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Whether the Cabinet Secretary has issued guidance on ministerial appointments. [903040]

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): The Cabinet Secretary may be asked by the Prime Minister to advise on any matter supporting the smooth running of government, including ministerial appointments. There is no written or published guidance on such matters.

Gregory Stafford: Since July, three Ministers have had to resign for everything from fraud through to unwise entanglements in foreign affairs. What steps will the Minister take to strengthen the ministerial code so that the public can have confidence in the Ministers that this Prime Minister appoints?

Ellie Reeves: We have strengthened the ministerial code, but we do not need to take any advice from the Conservatives. What we have seen from this Prime Minister is decisive action to uphold ministerial standards. Compare that with the record of the previous Government where the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), was found guilty of bullying but was allowed to keep her post; where the Government whipped their MPs to block the suspension of former Minister Owen Paterson, who broke lobbying rules; and where the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson lied about being told of allegations of sexual misconduct by his Deputy Chief Whip.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Despite the complacent response from the Minister, fewer than 250 days in, we have already had a Transport Secretary resign over her criminal record, an anti-corruption Minister resign over corruption, questions raised over the checks on the new Investment Minister, and at least three Cabinet Ministers accused of peddling dodgy CVs. The Prime Minister either cannot or will not say whether the necessary questions were not asked on appointment, whether relevant information was not disclosed on appointment, or whether he knew perfectly well about it but only took action when they were caught? Will the independent adviser conduct an urgent review of ministerial vetting?

Ellie Reeves: The Prime Minister is determined to uphold high standards of conduct in public office, unlike the previous Government. That is why decisive action has been taken. This is a Government in the service of working people, and we will not hesitate to take action against any Minister who fails to meet those high standards.

National Resilience

16. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening national resilience. [903041]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): We are taking action to strengthen the UK's resilience. Next month, the UK Resilience Academy will formally launch with the capacity to train over 4,000 people a

year. Later this year, we will undertake a full national pandemic response exercise—the first of its kind in nearly a decade. Of course, resilience has to protect the most vulnerable, so we are mapping vulnerability around the country to ensure that in our resilience strategy we can protect people from all backgrounds and of all incomes.

Kevin Bonavia: The covid inquiry found that years of under-investment under the Conservatives meant that our health services were already struggling to cope even before covid struck, with waiting lists rising years before the pandemic. Does my right hon. Friend agree that investing in our NHS and tackling the terrible delays that patients, including many of my constituents in Stevenage, experience in receiving treatment are vital to improving our country's resilience?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point not just to specific resilience measures but the most fundamental thing for national resilience: the underlying strength of the country and its services. Nowhere is that more true than in the national health service. We are investing in the national health service and are already seeing the early results of that, with the first fall in NHS waiting lists for years. It is a good start; it is not enough, and we want to build on that progress to treat patients more quickly and, indeed, build our resilience in the process.

Government Advertising: Social Media

18. **Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Government advertising through social media. [903044]

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): The Government regularly evaluate the effectiveness of all communication channels, including social media, to ensure that they are delivering and providing value for money for taxpayers, and that Government messaging appears in appropriate environments.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: Since Elon Musk purchased X three years ago, Departments have continued to spend money on subscriptions and ads on the site, and one Department has recorded a spend of more than £400,000 since 2022. Given the lack of adequate content moderation, and an increase in the peddling of conspiracy theories, misogyny and racism on the site, often actively encouraged by its owner, does the Minister think it right to review Government spending on X?

Ellie Reeves: I know that my hon. Friend takes a keen interest in these matters. In 2023, the previous Government suspended paid advertising on X while reviewing alignment with our SAFE framework. That suspension remains in place. We continue to post content, without paid promotion, to communicate important Government information.

Democratic Processes: Foreign Interference

19. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps he is taking to ensure the security of democratic processes from foreign interference. [903046]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden):

It is an absolute priority to protect the UK's democratic processes from foreign interference. The defending democracy taskforce has been set up to protect the democratic integrity of the UK from such interference. The Prime Minister recently reconfirmed its mandate, and the Security Minister chaired a meeting of the taskforce last week.

Wera Hobhouse: As well as addressing foreign interference, will the Minister update us on how we can protect our own election infrastructure to safeguard against misinformation, voter suppression and cyber-attacks?

Pat McFadden: We had some earlier exchanges about cyber-attacks. It is important that our democratic processes uphold their integrity and that people who take part in our elections exercise their choice freely and without external interference in the process. The Government are dedicated to ensuring that that happens.

Topical Questions

T1. [903050] **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Since the last Cabinet Office questions, new procurement rules have come into force, which will help to deliver growth, drive value for money and, crucially, give small businesses greater access to the nearly £400 billion of Government procurement. They also include stronger new powers to exclude and debar suppliers on national security and performance grounds. We are also seeking out and reducing wasteful spending, including by using artificial intelligence to go through departmental spending line by line, because it is important that taxpayer funds are used for good public service outcomes. We are seeing the initial fruits of that in the first reduction in NHS waiting lists for years.

Sarah Dyke: Women in rural areas often face additional barriers to their engagement in politics, at both local government and national Government levels. The reasons can vary: they may be social, cultural, structural, institutional, or often a perceived lack of knowledge. As we celebrate International Women's Day, what steps is the Minister taking to address those barriers and encourage women in rural areas to access and engage with politics?

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): I thank the hon. Member for that important question. She is absolutely right to highlight the barriers to politics that women in rural areas can face. We want more women in rural areas and around the country to be elected to local government and to Parliament. We should be proud that this House now has its highest ever number of elected women, including many outstanding women representing rural areas, but we know that there is much more we can do.

T3. [903052] **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): Since the Labour Government came to power, the list of patients waiting more than 65 weeks for treatment at my local hospital trust in Derby has gone down by a

whopping 82%. With national waiting lists having fallen for four months in a row and the early delivery of the commitment to provide an additional 2 million NHS appointments, does the Minister agree that our plan for change is already under way? How is the Department working to embed that culture of delivery right across the Government?

Ellie Reeves: I am delighted to hear about the falling waiting lists in my hon. Friend's constituency. Waiting lists are indeed falling. Last month we announced that we had met our first step pledge to deliver 2 million additional NHS appointments seven months early. We are determined to keep up the pace of delivering our plan for change, for which the public voted.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Why are the Government scared of allowing the National Security Adviser to give evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy?

Pat McFadden: The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will be aware that accountability to Parliament is through Ministers. The Prime Minister is regularly accountable to Parliament, and I am very happy to appear before the Committee at any convenient time.

Alex Burghart: I am sure the Committee will be delighted to hear that. However, there is a precedent in this area: David Frost, now Lord Frost, was an adviser when he gave evidence to the Committee in May 2020. The Committee is unanimous: the new adviser must appear. The Government's own Osmotherly rules say that Ministers should agree to a request for evidence from any

"named official, including special advisers".

This Government promised greater transparency. Why are they breaking another promise?

Pat McFadden: Special advisers are appointed by the Minister whom they advise, and the line of accountability is through Ministers to Parliament. That is why the Prime Minister takes questions every week at this Dispatch Box. The National Security Adviser is an adviser to the Prime Minister, and as I said, I am also very happy—as are other Ministers, I imagine—to appear before the Committee at a convenient time.

T4. [903053] **Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): As parliamentary chair of the Coalition on Secure Technology, I have raised several times in this House concerns over the prevalence of Chinese manufactured internet of things cellular modules. Will the procurement review unit carry out a risk assessment of the true risks posed by Chinese supplies of cellular modules in the UK's critical national infrastructure, and will he meet me to discuss this important issue?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): The Government take the security of critical national infrastructure extremely seriously. The UK's national technical authorities, including the National Protective Security Authority, the National Cyber Security

Centre and the UK National Authority for Counter-Eavesdropping, already provide expert guidance and best practice to owners and operators of UK critical national infrastructure, including on risk assessments and supply chains. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

T2. [903051] **Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The Minister for Intergovernmental Relations is an extremely experienced Minister, so will he cause to be reviewed the quite extraordinary decision to cut the integrated security fund by £120 million? Is that fund not a classic example of how development complements defence demonstrably and effectively? Will he listen to the great concerns that Members on his own side of the House feel at the terrible decision to axe crucial development spending?

Pat McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman has great experience in this area, and I respect his judgment very much. He will also have seen the world rapidly change before our eyes in recent weeks. The leadership task when the world is changing so fast is to understand the change, respond to it and explain it. I believe that in the decisions the Prime Minister has taken in this area in recent weeks he has fulfilled those obligations in full and in a way that this House is proud of.

T5. [903054] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): Following the recent announcement that the Smedley Hydro Government site in my constituency will close in the years to come, will the Minister work with me to ensure that the hundreds of jobs currently based there are relocated at a new site also in the constituency?

Georgia Gould: I know how hard my hon. Friend works for his constituency, and I very much understand his concerns. My understanding is that there are no changes expected at the Smedley Hydro site in the first instance. The Government Property Agency is actively working with the Home Office and NHS Digital to understand the future workforce requirements, but I would welcome a conversation to discuss that further.

T6. [903055] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): We have already heard about the cyber-attacks on public bodies across this country. Will the Cabinet Office ensure that full guidelines are given to every Government Department about the procurement of software and the need for security software to be kept up to date? The people who attack us are rapidly improving their capability, and we must be on top of it.

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member is absolutely right: the people who are attacking us are trying constantly to probe our defences, and as I have said a few times in the past hour, this is therefore a constant challenge. It is a combination of hardware, software and good practice, and that applies to central Government, local government, public bodies and—crucially—businesses. It is a national effort to protect the business that we do and the processes that we take for granted every day.

T8. [903057] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Food wholesale and distribution company Bidfood, which has been awarded public sector

contracts and has a site in my constituency, recently unilaterally tore up union recognition agreements that have been in place for more than 30 years. What steps are Ministers taking to ensure that trade union recognition and access is valued and considered as part of the process of awarding public sector contracts?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this critical issue. The Employment Rights Bill will introduce new measures that will give staff and their chosen trade union a meaningful shot at gaining statutory recognition. I hope those provisions will ensure that GMB Union members across the country can have their voices heard in their workplaces.

T7. [903056] **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): In a speech in December, the Minister said that he wanted to put bureaucracy on more of a “start-up” footing with a Silicon Valley vibe, and that in order to achieve that he was going to send teams—indeed, not just teams, but crack teams—to Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield and Essex in order to test, learn, and fix by Friday. I have a simple question: in those three months, how many of those crack teams have gone in, what have they tested, what have they learned, and what have they fixed by Friday?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reading my speeches so closely, but what he has misunderstood is that the teams are on the ground, and the process is to learn every week. I am glad to report that I have already visited a couple of those areas, and good work is under way. The whole point is that this will develop, it will adapt, and perhaps it will be different from the record of the Conservative party, which saw a growth of 131,000 public officials over the last—

Mr Speaker: Order. I know we have mentioned Thursday and Friday, but I think we are on Sunday already.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The York Central development site is pivotal in driving forward York and North Yorkshire's economy, and at the heart of that site will be a Government hub. Will the Minister meet me to ensure that that hub is not separate from the rest of the site, but integrated in the economic vision that we have for York?

Georgia Gould: It is critical that Government property and Government assets support economic growth in constituencies, including that of my hon. Friend, and I would be delighted to meet her to discuss that further.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): To great fanfare the Government cancelled the previous Government's contract for ministerial travel by helicopter, describing £40 million as “grossly wasteful”. We now learn that the Government have signed their own contract for ministerial helicopter travel, but it is a secret contract—so secret that we do not know how much it will cost. Will the Minister confirm whether it will cost more or less than £40 million?

Pat McFadden: I think on this one I had better write to the hon. Gentleman.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Local people across my constituency have said how much they value and welcome the vast investment that we have seen in our public services, from our NHS to our schools and beyond. Will the Minister please set out what steps are also being taken to reform our public services, working with other Cabinet colleagues?

Pat McFadden: As I have said a few times this morning, reform is important, particularly when the taxpayer is being asked to put in extra investment. That is true in schools as well as in the NHS, because we want to ensure that teachers can do what they want to do, which is teach children in the classroom. That is also why the best start in life is one of the targets in the Government's plan for change, which was published in December.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): During their eight months in government, what assessment have the ministerial team made of the productivity of the civil service? What measures are they putting in place to improve it, and will the Minister report back to the House?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the work that he did on public sector productivity. It was probably essential given that in the eight years between 2016 and 2024 the previous Government employed

an extra 131,000 civil servants, so it is quite right that we look at the productivity for the extra employment sanctioned by the last Government.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does the Minister have an appetite for a policy of like-for-like retaliation when a cyber-attack by a hostile state is confirmed?

Pat McFadden: I have both appetite and full faith in our excellent intelligence and security services, who protect us every day.

Mr Speaker: That completes questions—after Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The best is always last.

What assessment has the Minister made of the volume of apprenticeships offered within the cyber-security industry, specifically in relation to digital software and hacking prevention online?

Pat McFadden: We want to see more apprenticeships. The numbers have come down, compared with where they should be. The area that the hon. Gentleman highlights would be a very good and fruitful one for people to learn more about and get the skills they need.

Speaker's Statement

10.31 am

Mr Speaker: Before we come to business questions I am sorry to have to pass on the sad news that a long-standing colleague, Peter Hipkins, passed away at the weekend after a short illness. Peter devoted 52 years of service to the House of Commons, latterly working in service delivery in the Palace, ensuring the papers were always delivered correctly and on time. He previously worked as an attendant in Norman Shaw North and 3 Dean's Yard. During his working life, he was known and well thought of at all levels of Parliament, from the colleagues he worked with to the thousands of Members he ensured could go about their duties and all the public and visitors to Parliament. He will be missed.

Business of the House

10.32 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I shall. The business for the week commencing 10 March includes:

MONDAY 10 MARCH—Second Reading of the Crime and Policing Bill.

TUESDAY 11 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Employment Rights Bill, day one.

WEDNESDAY 12 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Employment Rights Bill, day two.

THURSDAY 13 MARCH—General debate on the future of farming, followed by a general debate on mental health support in educational settings. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 14 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 17 March will include:

MONDAY 17 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, day one.

TUESDAY 18 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, day two.

WEDNESDAY 19 MARCH—Consideration of Lords amendments to the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill, followed by Opposition day, first allotted day, second part: debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 20 MARCH—General debate on knife crime among children and young people, followed by a general debate on coastal communities. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 21 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

Jesse Norman: Mr Speaker, may I first associate myself very strongly with your kind remarks about Peter Hipkins and his service to this House?

We join all colleagues in celebration of International Women's Day this Saturday. I am sure the whole House will also share my deep concern at the latest news in relation to Ukraine and will wish to send all of our best wishes to the Prime Minister and other European leaders in doing everything they can to support that country.

It is now three months or so since I became shadow Leader of the House, and I am sad to say that these joyous Thursday morning sessions seem to have fallen into a little bit of a rut. *[Interruption.]* "No, no!", I hear you cry, "Business questions are still as fresh, lively and engaging as they ever were, if not more so," but sadly I fear that is not true. It is our function on the Opposition Benches to press public concerns and raise questions about the Government—indeed, as His Majesty's loyal Opposition, it is not only our function, but our constitutional duty to do so. It is the Government's job to respond to those questions and concerns and, in

[Jesse Norman]

so doing, to make the case publicly for the policy choices and decisions they have made and to say whether they have an underlying strategy.

Unfortunately, as you will have noticed, Mr Speaker, the Government are not doing that in our sessions. In fact, the Leader of the House rarely, if ever, responds to the important public questions and concerns that I raise. Instead, I am sorry to say that we get the same endlessly reheated mishmash of standard party political lines, personal jibes and irrelevant comment.

Hon. Members will recall that I first raised this issue at business questions on 5 December, when I highlighted a series of occasions on which the Leader had been unwilling to answer or even address some obvious examples of Government economic incompetence. As I pointed out:

“Many different responses were open to her. She could have said, ‘I agree with you.’” —[*Official Report*, 5 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 458.]

She could have said, “The shadow Leader is wrong for the following reasons,” or even, “I don’t know.” If she did not want to respond at that time, she could have said, as so many other Ministers do, “I will look into it,” “I will reply to you,” or, “I will ask a colleague to investigate and respond”. We just heard the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster say those things.

In fact, on none of those occasions did the Leader of the House bother to give any kind of proper answer at all. Instead, her approach was to change the subject and attack the previous Government, rather than to defend the record of her own Government—which is, after all, the whole point of these exchanges. More troubling still is that she herself has so often called for transparency from Ministers, and that a failure to be accountable is itself a breach of the rules of this House, of the Nolan principles and of the ministerial code of conduct.

I wish I could report that anything has changed since December. If anything, however, I am afraid that matters have got worse. A recent low point was at business questions on 13 February, when I raised five important issues relating to the Government’s approach to the rule of law, including the potential clash between domestic and international law, the level of risk that the Government sought to take and their attitude towards judicial review. I am sorry to say that the Leader of the House did not bother to respond to any of those questions: instead, we had yet another series of irrelevant political attacks.

We need a better way to track and monitor those evasions, so, in the spirit of openness and transparency, I propose a new approach, which we can call “Leader’s bingo”. Colleagues get a point every time the Leader of the House blames the previous Government, attacks Members of the Opposition, changes the subject or uses the words “gently remind”, “take no lectures” or similar in her response. I would not for one second suggest that colleagues shout “Bingo!” in the Chamber, but there may be other ways in which they can indicate when they have filled their card.

That is a light-hearted suggestion, but it has a serious purpose. I know how strongly you, Mr Speaker, feel about the importance of parliamentary accountability, transparency and the proper scrutiny of Government decisions. I ask the Leader of the House again if she will reaffirm her commitment to those values and engage properly with the questions I ask in the future.

Lucy Powell: I join you, Mr Speaker, in passing on our condolences to the family of Peter Hipkins, who gave long service in this House.

I also wish peace and blessings to those observing Ramadan and those marking Lent. Today is also World Book Day, a day to celebrate our favourite books and authors—and, I have to say, every working parent’s worst nightmare, because of having to find a last-minute costume. I see that the shadow Leader of the House has come as his favourite author: himself. For those who have not read the thrilling historical novel, “The Winding Stair”, it is still available in all good bookshops. He can give me some royalties later.

Saturday marks International Women’s Day. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing us to come together in this Chamber and take a historic photograph to mark the most female MPs ever being elected to this House. It is a reminder that the gender pay gap in this country is still 13.1%, and women work for free on average seven weeks a year—although perhaps the shadow Leader of the House is working for free most of the time.

I thank the shadow Leader of the House for his comments on Ukraine. It has been really important to this country’s international role and in supporting the Prime Minister that the House of Commons has once again shown such unity, and such backing for Ukraine and for the Prime Minister’s leadership in recent weeks. As the shadow Leader of the House knows, we are focused on making sure that Ukraine is in the strongest possible position to achieve long-term, lasting peace through strength. As we have done in recent weeks, we will make sure that the House is kept constantly updated on these matters.

That was kind of where it ended today, Mr Speaker. The shadow Leader of the House has again used his slot to ask me not a single question. He says that I have not given him any answers in any of the weeks that we have been standing at the Dispatch Box, but if he really wants me to tell him again today where he has gone wrong, I am happy to give him some advice. I am happy to tell him that yes, his Government did get many things wrong, and we are getting many things right. If the shadow Leader of the House wants to play business questions bingo, perhaps we can start by saying “Bingo!” every time he actually asks me a question, because we did not hear much of that today.

There are lots of people in the Chamber for business questions today, so I will not detain the House for much longer, but I notice that the shadow Leader of the House did not ask me about some of the really good things that the Government have been doing here at home, as well as abroad. As there are a lot of people here today, I remind the House that we have confirmed the first 750 schools that will receive free breakfast clubs, because we do not want any child to start school hungry. We are ending the 8 am scramble in our GP surgeries, with more appointments and better access. We have launched our fantastic commonhold White Paper, which is another step towards finally ending the feudal leasehold system, and we are dealing with the courts backlog that the shadow Leader of the House’s Government left us with—another shameful reminder of their shocking record on criminal justice. We have also announced our plan for neighbourhoods, with another £1.5 billion to help restore pride in our communities. That is on top of the additional amendments to our Employment Rights Bill.

Unlike the shadow Leader of the House's vacuous contribution today, this Government are getting on with delivering for the country, whether at home or abroad.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Flooding has caused heartache for families and communities in my constituency. In order to be protected from extreme flooding, they desperately need Sheffield city council's excellent proposals for the upper Don flood alleviation scheme, including work on the Clough Dike culvert and Whitley Brook improvements. Despite widespread local support and the importance of that scheme, the Conservatives never actually allocated funding to it. Will the Leader of the House allow time to debate flood alleviation schemes, to ensure that the appropriate funding is allocated in the forthcoming spending review?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the flood assets we inherited were in the poorest condition on record after many years of under-investment. That is why we are putting more money into flood assets and have launched the floods resilience taskforce. I will ensure that my hon. Friend is kept updated on how those things will affect her constituency.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): As the Leader of the House has already noted, today is World Book Day, and I would like to say a big thank you to Barnes Farm primary school in my constituency for inviting me in yesterday to open its brand new library. One in seven state primary schools in the UK do not have a dedicated library or reading space, and almost 1 million children in the UK do not have a book of their own. As such, it was wonderful to meet year 5 students and representatives of Barnes Farm student council, who were very enthusiastic about their new library. It is fantastic to know that those students will have access to such a facility for a long time to come.

At Prime Minister's questions on 8 January, I raised the plight of community pharmacies. They are struggling to stay afloat due to the unfair terms of their NHS contracts, which often mean that they have to buy drugs that they dispense for more than the NHS reimburses them. The Prime Minister asked me to follow up with more details, which I did that afternoon. Despite chasing, I am yet to receive a reply from the Department of Health and Social Care, to which my inquiry was passed.

Community pharmacies cannot wait. The National Pharmacy Association projects that nearly 1,000 pharmacies will close by the end of 2027. There is no guaranteed funding for Pharmacy First beyond the end of this month. This is a critical issue that the Government need to address urgently. I know that the Leader of the House takes seriously the timeliness of replies from Ministers and Departments, so will she let the House know what further steps she is taking to ensure that issues such as protecting our vital community pharmacies are given the swift and full attention they deserve?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising these matters with me. First, I concur with what she says on World Book Day and school libraries. I am sure that, as Members of Parliament, we have opened a library in a school. I recently opened a library at a

school in one of the poorest parts of my constituency, and the young children, many of whom were not even wearing proper footwear, were queuing outside to get their hands on their first book—it was such a fantastic achievement. I am sorry to hear that she has not had the responses and replies she has asked for from Ministers, and I do take these matters incredibly seriously. I will ensure that she does get a reply.

The hon. Member has raised the issue of community pharmacies with me on a number of occasions, and rightly so. They are a vital part of our national health service, and they have been left on their knees, with many closing in recent years. We are turning that around, because getting services back into communities via pharmacies and other means is critical to delivering our health mission. I will ensure she gets a reply.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): This is on flooding again, I am afraid. My constituency has suffered greatly from flooding in recent years. Our steep valleys and wide moorland catchments make us particularly vulnerable. I massively welcome the Government's commitment to a record £2.65 billion of funding for flood defences. We have a number of key schemes in Rossendale and Darwen that urgently need that funding, and I am in communication with the Department about that. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on flood resilience and support for communities affected so badly by flooding?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is a great advocate for his constituency on this and other matters. Flooding affects his area, as it does many others. As I have said, this Government are finally turning the oil tanker around when it comes to our flood resilience. I will ensure that the relevant Minister hears his call today. We have had regular statements and debates on flooding, but I will ensure that we continue to have them.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Mr Speaker, I thank you and your Deputies for facilitating the estimates day debates yesterday and allowing the maximum number of people to contribute. When we come to the full estimates—in May, we believe—if we can be advised of the dates so that we can do the processing of the applications, that would be appreciated.

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, if we are given Thursday 27 March, there will be a debate on St Patrick's day and Northern Irish affairs, followed by a debate on the 10th anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. We now have a queue of debates for the Chamber that will last until the summer recess. We will be grateful for every Thursday and any time that can be given, particularly if the House is going to rise early on Government business.

In addition, the business in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 11 March will include a debate on the governance of English rugby union. On Thursday 13 March, there will be a debate on educational opportunities for young carers. On Tuesday 18 March—with your agreement, Mr Speaker—there will be a debate on free school meals. On Thursday 20 March, there will be a debate on British Sign Language Week and Government support

[*Bob Blackman*]

for the tourism industry. On Tuesday 25 March, there will be a debate on the retrospective accountability of the construction industry. On Thursday 27 March, there will be a debate on the prevention of drugs deaths, followed by a debate on the first anniversary of the Hughes report on valproate and pelvic mesh.

Yesterday, the External Affairs Minister from India, Shri Jaishankar, was attacked when he was leaving a public venue where he had been addressing an audience of Indian people in this country. He was attacked by Khalistani thugs. That is against the Geneva convention, and it appears that the police and the security forces failed to ensure that he was made safe. That is an affront to democracy, and an affront to our friends and allies in India. We need to make sure that does not happen again. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Home Secretary or an appropriate Minister makes a statement to the House about what protection we will have to ensure that visitors to this country are safe?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for organising the estimates days this week, and all the other debates. I am sure he will appreciate that I have been generous, much more than my predecessors on some occasions, in giving him notice both of estimates debates and of slots for Backbench Business. I have heard his plea today for as many of those as possible, and I will look kindly on it, as I have done previously.

I am very sorry to hear about what sounded like a serious attack on a visitor to this country from the Indian Parliament. That is unacceptable and not the way in which we want our visitors to be treated, and I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman receives a full response from the Home Secretary.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): May I first wish the Leader of the House a happy International Women's Day for Saturday?

My constituent Chris is among many people affected by the loan charge, which applies to “disguised remuneration” schemes. While everyone should pay their fair share of tax, many, like Chris, used these schemes in good faith when they were legal and now face retrospective penalties. The Government's long-awaited review is a welcome step, but Chris and many others who have been affected feel that its scope is too limited. They believe that it fails to examine how we got here, its implementation, or those who promoted and mis-sold these schemes. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a full debate on the loan charge and its consequences?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this serious matter. I recognise the concern about the loan charge scheme, as do the Government, and we are committed to ensuring that there is a fair resolution for those affected. We do not believe it is right for them to face years of uncertainty, which is why, as my hon. Friend said, we have established an independent review. It is tightly focused so that we can get the report out before the summer, with a Government response, and I will ensure that the House is kept fully up to date on that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Many Members are here for the International Women's Day debate, so I expect to run business questions until about midday.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Budget turned the world, or at least the future of family farms, upside down. Ever since then, we have seen mounting evidence of the impact that the changes to inheritance tax, business property relief and agricultural property relief will have on family farms. That evidence has come from the industry, from industry experts and from tax experts. There is also mounting concern among Government Back Benchers about the impact that the changes will have on farmers in their constituencies up and down the country, and that concern is reflected on our own Benches. Given the impact on family farms and the future of food security in the country, will the Leader of the House please consider granting a debate in the Chamber on the family farm tax and what we can do to mitigate its impacts?

Lucy Powell: This Government back British farmers, which is why we have increased the farming budget to £5 billion over two years, much more than was provided by the last Government. We have set out a deal for farmers, and we are investing in flood defences and extending the seasonal workers scheme, as well as dealing with many other issues. We have already had a debate in Government time on farming, and I noted that the Opposition did not choose to make this matter the subject of one of their recent Opposition day debates, but they have another Opposition day coming up, and they could use it for this purpose.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I wish to raise a case that has been highlighted by other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister).

In 2017, Jagtar Singh Johal, a British national from Dumbarton, was arrested in India just weeks after his wedding. He has been tortured, threatened to be burnt alive, and in arbitrary detention for seven years and four months. This week Jagtar was acquitted in the first case to come to court, as there was no credible evidence, and his lawyer has asked for all charges to be dropped because there is no new evidence. Many in the Sikh community, including my constituents, welcome this development, as well as the Government's commitment to securing Jagtar's release and return. Given the Prime Minister's and the Foreign Secretary's meetings in the last 48 hours with the Indian Foreign Minister, will the Leader of the House provide time for an update on what steps are being taken to bring this British national—one of our own—home?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the case of Jagtar Singh Johal, which I know is of great importance to many Members of this House. We recognise that it is a very difficult case. He will know that the Prime Minister has raised it with Prime Minister Modi, and Ministers continue to raise it on an ongoing basis, making it clear that we want to see faster progress and a full resolution to this case. As part of that, we must see a full and independent investigation into allegations of torture. I will ensure that my hon. Friend and the House are kept updated on this important case.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It has been drawn to my attention this week that there is a continuing problem in this country with a reserved matter: the supply of drugs. A 22-year-old constituent of mine, who is an elite athlete and unfortunately has inoperable brain tumours, came to me to say that drug inhibitors that would help him are currently on open access trial in this country. Unfortunately, the health board in my constituency is not taking part, so drugs that could save his life and allow him to continue with his ambitions are available, but he cannot access them. Would the Leader of the House either consider having a debate on how we make access to drugs on trial universal across the UK, or set up a meeting for me with the relevant Minister to discuss this issue?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent, and I am very familiar with these issues. Unfortunately, my gorgeous cousin recently died of a brain tumour, and it is a terrible illness. It is something that I have personally spoken to the Health Secretary about. There are drugs that could be made more available, and there are trials. The Health Secretary is committed to doing that, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) has been campaigning on these issues for a number of years. I will absolutely ensure that the hon. Lady gets a meeting with the relevant Minister.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I have received an email from my constituent that says:

"On April 1 last year I had a fall on Highgate Golf Course which resulted in a complex break of my right leg. Friends phoned for an ambulance but were told that an ambulance would not come for this type of emergency...On a cold spring day, I was left lying in an isolated spot on the wet ground, unable to move and in great pain, with very limited options about getting to hospital."

Could we have a debate about the response of ambulances in such serious situations, so that my constituents do not have to go through something like that again?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of that case. Ambulance wait times, and the availability of ambulances, are still absolutely unacceptable. They are a symptom of an NHS that is still in crisis. Ambulances find themselves waiting outside A&Es with patients on board, unable to get them inside, which means that they are unable to go on to the next case. We are taking action, and I will ensure that the House is kept updated and that my hon. Friend's case is looked into.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): This week, I received a copy of the national priority infrastructure Bill from the "Looking for Growth" campaign. The campaign's proposals rightly highlight the complexity in our energy and planning systems. We urgently need more nuclear power and data centres to drive forward the artificial intelligence and robotics revolution here in Britain, but with the highest industrial energy prices in Europe, we risk falling behind. Can we have a debate about how planning can best be reformed to provide reliable, affordable and abundant energy?

Lucy Powell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that these are very important matters. We are speeding up our planning and infrastructure decision making so that we can get more nuclear, more data centres, and

more onshore and offshore wind, and deliver the energy security that the country so desperately needs. I am sure that he will delight in reading the forthcoming planning and infrastructure Bill, probably in a matter of days.

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): Zoe Dunklin, from Thrapston in my constituency, is a former Paralympian who represented our country on the global stage. Recently, the publicly funded Motability scheme refused her request for a six-way driver's seat, which would have meant that she could use a car independently. Instead, the scheme only offered a vehicle that would force her to rely on carers to get her in and out, thereby preventing her from working and volunteering, and taking away her independence. She has even offered to pay the difference in price in order to get what she needs to live independently. Will the Leader of the House join me in fighting for the independence that Zoe and others deserve?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. My hon. Friend highlights how important it is to give people independence and mobility so they can go about their lives and work as well. He will be aware that the Motability Foundation is an independent charity, but the Government continue to work with it to ensure that its policies are open and inclusive, as they should be.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): As the Green party representative on the cross-party commission on social care, I was deeply disappointed at the cancellation, with only a day's notice, of last week's planned initial talks. Since social care is in crisis, surely it should be a matter of urgency to get these talks rescheduled, but I have as yet had no response to my request for a new date. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to urgently prioritise setting a new date for the talks as soon as possible?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely will do so, because these talks are essential. We are determined to take forward cross-party talks on the future of social care, which is so important.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): If the comments from across the Atlantic this week have reminded us of anything, it is that we should always keep at the forefront of our minds the bravery of our service personnel, not least in recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan when serving alongside the US and other allies. I therefore ask my right hon. Friend to find time on the Floor of the House for us to debate the bravery and sacrifices of our service personnel.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. My hon. Friend can hear from the cheers across the House that this would make a very popular and important debate. It would be a reminder that our armed services have gone to many countries around the world in support of our allies over many years and sacrificed their lives, and we should always remember their bravery and their contribution.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I assume that the Leader of the House shares my constituents' alarm that a court found that a convicted

[Sir John Hayes]

drug dealer who was here illegally could not be deported because he was too “Westernised”; that prolific offenders, including domestic abusers, are, as I understand it, going to be offered anger management courses, rather than being incarcerated; and, most of all, that the new sentencing guidelines suggest that judges should look at felons’ ethnicity and religion before sentencing. Will she allow a debate on criminal justice to enable us to expose the huge gulf between the liberal bourgeoisie’s prejudices and those of our constituents, who want people caught, captured, convicted and punished, regardless of whether they are black, brown, white or any other colour?

Lucy Powell: I think the right hon. Member is talking about deporting criminals when they should be deported. He will be aware, or should be aware, that nearly 3,000 foreign criminals have been deported since the election, which is an increase of more than 20% compared with situation under the last Government. However, he is right to point out that there are still gaps in that system, which is why we have brought in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. The Bill will strengthen powers to tackle illegal migration and the small boats, and enable the Government to pick up the pace even further on returning those who have no right to be here.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): In a series of hard-hitting articles in *The Herald* and the *Evening Times* recently, the current condition of my home city of Glasgow was reviewed, and issues as diverse as potholes in Partick and poverty in Drumchapel, as well as the state of the public realm, were raised. After 14 years of the Tories in Westminster, 18 of the SNP at Holyrood and eight of an SNP-Green administration in Glasgow, the city is in need of a new vision. Does the Leader of the House agree that joining a five-city pact, as suggested by Andy Burnham, is a sensible suggestion, and how does she think the Government could support that ambition and the ambition of all of us who have the best interests of Glaswegians and Glasgow at heart?

Lucy Powell: I am sure my hon. Friend can appreciate that I, as a Mancunian, agree with all of Andy Burnham’s suggestions—nearly all of the time, anyway—and this sounds like a very good one. However, she makes the bigger point that the Scottish Government, along with the previous Conservative Government here in Westminster, have failed the Scottish people. That is why people voted overwhelmingly for a fresh start with Labour at the general election, and I am sure that will continue.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): Women are being forced to face significant risk in order to be inclusive. Men must not be allowed access to women-only spaces, regardless of whether they believe themselves to be a woman—they are not. We must prioritise safety over inclusivity, dignity over wokery, reality over ideology. Will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time on protecting women-only spaces and women-only services?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. The Equality Act 2010, which was brought in by a Labour Government, is absolutely clear on the provision of women-only spaces and that they are to be

protected, especially where they are needed. We are proud to have brought in the Act and we stand by it. I am sure he would have wanted to say in his question that the Labour party has done more to support women—to close the gender gap, to reduce inequalities, and to tackle violence against women and girls—than perhaps his party or the Conservative party.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): The B23 postcode in my constituency has experienced a troubling surge in knife-related offences. The west midlands violence reduction unit has been instrumental in addressing the issue, engaging with over 8,000 young people and contributing to a 18% reduction in youth violence involving knives between April and September 2024. However, the violence reduction unit depends on short-term annual funding, which restricts its capacity for long-term strategic planning. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in this Chamber to discuss the incredible work of violence reduction units and explore the long-term funding arrangements for these organisations?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. My hon. Friend raises a really important issue. The Government are determined to tackle knife crime. She is right that this is a long-term strategy. It is about prevention and supporting organisations like the one she mentions, and establishing organisations such as Young Futures and the coalition to tackle knife crime, which the Prime Minister brought together, as well as taking the steps we are already taking to ban the sale of knives and to pass other measures that are in the forthcoming Crime and Policing Bill. She will note that there is a debate on this matter in two weeks’ time in the Chamber.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Last week, I attended the Thrive youth café held at All Saints church in Huntingdon. The café runs on Mondays and Fridays after school. Richard and Ruth, who run the space, said that it provides a safe space and a listening ear, as well as pool, table tennis and a PlayStation. Crucially, it provides opportunities for young people to access support from local youth workers. Funding for the Thrive youth café is precarious, with grants allowing the project to exist only in six-monthly cycles, and it desperately needs longer-term funding guarantees. Will the Leader of the House make time in the schedule to celebrate the value that such provision brings to teenagers and young people? And can I invite her to the youth café to try one of its now infamous Oreo milkshakes?

Lucy Powell: My children are very fond of Oreo milkshakes and all the calories that are usually in them. I will take the hon. Gentleman up on that offer when I am next in Huntingdon in his constituency. He raises what sounds like a fantastic volunteer-run service in his local community. Many such services face funding uncertainty, which is one reason why the Government want multi-year funding settlements for local government, as that is where many of those types of organisations get their funding from. We need to do more to ensure that these important services can thrive and survive.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Blyth town in my constituency is definitely on the up and up, but the first impression for new visitors using the main gateway into the town is of a huge derelict garage in

desperate need of demolition. Northumberland county council has been approached to address the situation, but here is the issue: the council says quite simply that, while it agrees it is in a complete and utter mess, it does not bring the overall amenity of the area down. What a slap in the face for the people in the local community! Does the Leader of the House agree that certain areas have been abandoned over 14 years of Tory rule? Can we have a discussion in Government time on the accountability of local authorities to determine what they can and should be doing with properties like this in different constituencies right across the country?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of the blight on my hon. Friend's community and constituency caused by this derelict garage. He is absolutely right that this is an opportunity for investment and transformation and for showcasing the area, and I am sorry that his council has not seen that opportunity for what it is. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is committed to addressing these issues, which is why we are bringing forward the plan for neighbourhoods, which we announced this week, as well as forthcoming legislation on the community right to buy, compulsory purchase orders and other matters, which will give local authorities the powers and resources they need.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): When the law favours identity over principle, it ceases to be justice at all—Magna Carta taught us that. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Justice Secretary comes to the Chamber to explain why, under this Government, sentencing is going to become about who someone is, and not what they have done?

Lucy Powell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the sentencing guidelines were developed and consulted on under his Government last year, and they were not ruled out. The current Justice Secretary—the remarkable and formidable Justice Secretary—has made her position absolutely clear, and she has today written to the Sentencing Council on that. The hon. Gentleman might do better to reflect on the actions of his own Government, rather than attacking this one.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Weston Museum, in the heart of Weston-super-Mare, is a joyful community hub famous for Clara's cottage, fantastic cake and, now, Banksy's famous pinwheel. The museum is also hosting a beautiful exhibition curated by some of the wonderful women of Weston-super-Mare for International Women's Day. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the women who put this exhibition together so thoughtfully, encouraging everyone to visit the exhibition and thanking the dedicated volunteers who contribute so much to the life of Weston Museum and our town?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in supporting his constituents—what a great job he does as the MP for Weston-super-Mare in standing up for all the women in his constituency, as well as everybody else.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I draw the House's attention to the fact that I am vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the western gateway. The Government have so far refused to allocate further

funding for the western gateway partnership, which has brought together businesses, academia and local leaders to produce some impressive work, including the soon-to-be-published report on tidal energy opportunities along the River Severn. When will the Government bring forward a statement on the future of the western gateway, and will the Leader of the House ensure that it is before the spring statement?

Lucy Powell: I will ensure that the hon. Lady is given an update on the western gateway partnership. Tidal is one of a number of energy resources that we are taking action on, and I will ensure that she and the House are updated.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Last week, Suffolk county council announced that it is ending its contract with Suffolk Libraries and taking the service in-house. This is an appalling plan. Suffolk Libraries saved Suffolk from experiencing library closures under Tory austerity, opening up libraries and expanding services when others across the country were closing down. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should be celebrating Suffolk Libraries' success and not talking it down and running it down?

Lucy Powell: I strongly support any organisation that boosts and supports local libraries, because they are vital to our communities and to the young people in those communities; on World Book Day in particular, we should mark the contribution of our local libraries. I know that Government officials have met officers from Suffolk county council on this matter, but I will ensure that my hon. Friend is updated. She has made her point strongly here today.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): On Tuesday, I took part in the Westminster Hall debate on market towns, which was heavily oversubscribed. Although Members across the House did their best to canter around their constituencies and highlight places such as, in my case, Brigg and Barton-upon-Humber, time was very limited. Our market towns face a host of challenges, among them the future of the retail sector and the availability of public services, and it was clear that an opportunity to discuss those challenges in more detail would be appreciated. Could the Government provide time for a full half-day debate on our market towns?

Lucy Powell: Market towns are one of our great British assets, so I am not surprised that the debate was so well subscribed—as, indeed, have been many debates in Westminster Hall. We do consider how well subscribed debates have been when deciding which to bring to the Floor of the House. I know that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, who is present, already has a full list of debates, but I am sure that he would be open to this proposal, which would allow the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues to celebrate our market towns.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): This Tuesday, organisations and companies based in the north-east visited Parliament to celebrate their role in growing our local and national economy, including The Sage, the Port of Tyne and the North East chamber of commerce.

[Liz Twist]

I was especially pleased to see Firebrick Brewery, based near my Blaydon office, celebrating the launch of its new stottie beer—Members who do not know what a stottie is need to look it up. May we have a debate in Government time on the part that north-east businesses can play in delivering Labour's plan for change?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely will look up what stottie beer is. I thank my hon. Friend for that question, because this Government are committed not just to growth, but to ensuring that growth in living standards is felt in every part of the country, especially in places such as Blaydon and Consett in the north-east. I am pleased to hear that so many businesses from her region came to Parliament this week.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Seven years ago this week, on the orders of Putin in the Kremlin, my constituents faced the Novichok incident, which had an enormous impact on their lives for several months. In the end, Dawn Sturgess died. Please may we have a debate on the position of Russia in the world at a time of changing geopolitics? It is absolutely clear to the people of Salisbury, as it is to the people of this country, that an enduring peace can be achieved only if we resist appeasement and ensure that we have a secure arrangement with Europe, and with the US hopefully engaged. We need to discuss that urgently, along with the role of Russia in the world.

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Member for that important reminder that, in this country, we have seen what a tyrant and a terror the Russian regime is on our soil. This is not some separate or foreign incident affecting only Ukraine; Russia has directly affected this country, with direct consequences for us. That is why the whole House remains steadfast in our support for Ukraine. We, as a Government, are working night and day to build those global alliances to ensure that there is long-lasting security and peace, and not just in Ukraine but across Europe and elsewhere in the world. We have seen at first hand what Russia does when not kept in check.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): My constituent Chloe is trying to sell her leasehold flat, but in order to do so she needs a landlord's certificate, which protects leaseholders from the cost of remedial work. Riverside, the company managing her property, is refusing to provide it, meaning that she is trapped in an unsaleable flat that has become unaffordable. Can the Leader of the House update us on the legislative action the Government are taking to support people such as Chloe, and everyone in our country suffering from the leasehold scandal?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. As a near neighbour of his, I am familiar with Riverside and many of the issues he raises. I hope that Riverside has heard the case he mentioned. He is absolutely right that some leaseholders find themselves trapped in homes that are unsaleable or unaffordable, with high and rising insurance costs. They often find that they are voiceless in the future of their building, with costs going up and up. That is why, first and foremost, we are implementing the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. Just this week we published our commonhold

White Paper, which is the beginning of the end of leasehold for good, and later this year we will introduce a draft Bill on leasehold reform.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): This week the BBC uncovered the shocking case of how a man convicted of a horrific murder in Bradford went on to spend almost two years working with vulnerable children and schools after he was wrongly cleared by the Disclosure and Barring Service in 2021. In response to that major safeguarding failure, the DBS now claims that although serious offences committed after 2006 may lead to someone being automatically barred from working with children, offences committed before 2006 may not. That is clearly wrong, and I suspect that this case in Bradford is not a lone one. May we have a debate in Government time on the wider system of DBS checks, particularly for individuals seeking to work with vulnerable children, so that we can get to the bottom of this?

Lucy Powell: This is a shocking case. The hon. Member is absolutely right that we need to be able to have confidence in the DBS checking system, which underpins the safeguarding of children in this country. If we cannot have confidence in it, that throws up a whole number of questions, as this shocking case has done. I therefore thank him for raising it. I will ensure that he gets a Government response about that case and what steps are being taken to ensure that this never happens again.

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): Mr Speaker, rugby league fans like you and others in the Chamber will know and love my most famous constituent, Billy Boston. Before I came into the Chamber, I was informed that Billy is not well. Local councillors in my constituency have started a petition to ensure that he receives a knighthood while that is still possible. It is a scandal—and one that we must recognise—that for over a century no rugby football league hero has received a knighthood. Does the Leader of the House agree that Billy Boston should be Sir Billy Boston while that is still possible?

Lucy Powell: I know that you have strong views on these matters, Mr Speaker, as president of the Rugby Football League—views that I share. My hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot comment on particular nomination applications, but I share his concern, as I know you do, Mr Speaker—you often take the opportunity to share it with us—that rugby league, which is a great northern sport, should get better recognition in our honours system.

Mr Speaker: We must wish Billy well. He is the greatest convert from rugby union who came to rugby league. Nobody has ever scored tries like Billy Boston.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): May we have a debate on access to banking services in small towns and rural communities? For years, big banks have treated loyal customers very badly—they have shut branches and reduced services, especially in more rural and remote areas, such as my constituency in the Scottish Borders—and last weekend I had to contact cash machine providers because Selkirk and Eyemouth ran out of cash. Will the Leader of the House back my call so that the residents of small towns and rural communities can get access to the cash and banking services they need?

Lucy Powell: Access to cash and banking services is probably the single biggest issue that is raised with me in business questions, so I know that it is of great interest to the House and to the hon. Member's constituents, and it is vital that we take it seriously. That is why we are bringing in banking hubs—we are committed to opening 350 of them, and we are along the way to do that—but this is not something that the Government alone can deal with; we all need to take more action to ensure that our rural communities can access banking services.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Last week I held a meeting with local residents impacted by leasehold, which is an acute problem in my constituency, compounded at times by pretty unscrupulous behaviour by developers. They are trapped in short leases with unaffordable buy-outs, eye-watering extension costs and mortgage lenders unwilling to lend. May we have a debate in Government time to update the House on the action the Government are taking to end the feudal leasehold system?

Lucy Powell: This matter is also raised with me a lot, both in business questions and by my constituents. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to end the feudal leasehold system, which is trapping innocent homeowners in properties that they are unable to get mortgages on or to sell, which is shocking—we have called it “fleecehold” many times before. We are taking a number of steps, including implementing the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. We are moving forward on commonhold with the White Paper, and later this year we will introduce draft legislation for a fundamental root-and-branch reform of leasehold. However, I will ensure that the Minister for Housing and Planning comes to the House regularly to update us.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I recently visited the beautiful village of Burton Leonard in my constituency for the 100th anniversary of its women's institute branch. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the fact that it has made it to 100 and hope that it has many more years to come? Will she also consider whether there is time for a Government debate on the importance of local community organisations and how we can ensure that they have funding support?

Lucy Powell: As we celebrate International Women's Day, it is a good day to recognise the valuable work of women's institutes across the country, including in Burton Leonard. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that those sorts of voluntary organisations provide a huge service to our communities and deserve a long-term future.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): This week, a youth strategy review was announced, which could not be more welcome in my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages. According to Unison's local government report, between 2010 and 2023, Staffordshire county council closed 32 youth centres, which is the third-highest rate in the country. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the work to help youth centres across the country?

While we are talking about young people, Emily Rizk from Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group was recently honoured with the project excellence award at the

Association of Colleges' student of the year awards. Will the Leader of the House join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) in celebrating Emily's amazing work?

Lucy Powell: I will absolutely join my hon. Friends in celebrating Emily Rizk's fantastic work and her achievement. I will also join my hon. Friend in agreeing that youth services and centres, which have been completely hollowed out in recent years, play a vital role in supporting young people, keeping them out of other activities that we might not want them to do. That is why we are committed to the Young Futures programme and many other initiatives.

Mr Speaker: May I remind Members to speed up, so that we can get everyone in?

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I declare my interest as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary media group and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on freedom of speech.

Last month I found myself in somewhat rare agreement with the Chancellor when she challenged Britain's regulators to create a regulatory environment that unlocks innovation and investment. Our media is one the sectors in which we have seen really good growth over the past few years, with huge diversification right across the sector, but there is a concern about the attitude of regulators, which might undermine that growth potential.

I think specifically of cases highlighted recently in an opinion piece by my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin), in which Ofcom fined GB News 10 times more for doing a question time event with the Conservative party leader than it fined another channel for broadcasting antisemitic tropes. I worry that that attitude towards policing the media, which seems to focus more on politics than prejudice, may act as a barrier to others coming into the sector. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate on the media sector, the role of regulation and freedom in our sector?

Mr Speaker: That is a bad example of a short question. [Laughter.]

Lucy Powell: I think the right hon. Gentleman began by saying that he found himself in the unusual position of agreeing with the Chancellor. Fear not; I do not think he and I will find ourselves in the unusual position of agreeing on much any time soon, but I respect his views on many things. Our regulators play an important role. We absolutely support free speech, but we also ensure that there is fairness and balance in our media and that we protect people from disinformation and misinformation and from some of the problems we have seen.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Tomorrow night, Natasha Jonas and Lauren Price will make history, headlining the first ever all-women's championship boxing card at the famous Royal Albert Hall, with Boxer and Sky Sports. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing both fighters and the entire undercard the best of luck? Will she also confirm this Government's commitment, ahead of International Women's Day, to increasing participation in sport for women and girls in Blackpool and across the UK?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, I join my hon. Friend in celebrating this historic occasion as Natasha and Lauren take to the ring in that first all-women's boxing championship. This Government are committed to supporting and developing women's sport, and not just in Blackpool but across the country.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Sentencing Council has issued guidelines saying that a pre-sentence report will normally be considered before sentencing a criminal from an ethnic, cultural or faith minority, or if the criminal is a woman or a transsexual, but not, apparently, if someone is a straight, white, Christian man. That evidence of two-tier justice is corrosive to public trust and confidence in the criminal justice system.

Given that Ministry of Justice officials attend the Sentencing Council, either the Lord Chancellor knew of the policy or she was asleep at the wheel. For the record, the Lord Chancellor's predecessor, Alex Chalk, has described this as ridiculous. The Leader of the House failed to give a response to my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), so will she find time for a debate on the Sentencing Council?

Lucy Powell: As I made clear to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) earlier, the Government have made it absolutely clear that we disagree with the guidance issued by the Sentencing Council. The hon. Member will know that the process and consultation for developing that guidance happened on his Government's watch—it absolutely did. The Lord Chancellor has made her position and that of the Government absolutely clear today, and that is why she has written to the Sentencing Council.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The creative services sector in my constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle and in Cornwall more generally is one of the most important to our local economy. The work produced is exhibited and sold all over the world, but many of those active in our creative industries are concerned about the intellectual property risk from artificial intelligence. Following the end of the consultation last week, will the Leader of the House assure those working in the creative industries that the Government will take full advantage of what AI can provide, but will also protect our precious creative industries?

Lucy Powell: This Government absolutely support our valued creative industries. It is a long-standing, prevalent principle of our copyright rules in this country that creatives get payment and have control over the creative content of their work. I will absolutely ensure that the House is kept updated.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): I recently wrote to all Departments about the total cost of employee settlement agreements. Although there were some astronomical figures, most Departments have provided me with a response, but the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice have refused to answer that basic question, even rejecting freedom of information requests from my office. Will the Leader of the House advise me on how I can obtain that information, particularly since the two Departments have frustrated my efforts to scrutinise them thus far?

Lucy Powell: I will look into why the hon. Member has not had a proper reply and ensure that he gets one.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, York Rescue Boat spent 6,500 hours patrolling the rivers in York and trained 1,500 people on river safety. However, the rivers saw 25 people in, and this week we saw the latest tragedy. Will she have a discussion with colleagues in Cabinet about having a joint departmental working group to create a strategy around river safety, so that we can prevent these tragic events?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the tragic event in my hon. Friend's constituency, and water safety is of real importance. We have to educate people on regular occasions and ensure that the rescue services are there. I will certainly ensure that her suggestion is looked at carefully and that she gets a response.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I am sure you will appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, the importance of the cider industry to my constituency, which is home to many fantastic traditional cider makers: Burrow Hill cider, Bere cider, Hecks cider, Harry's cider and Tricky cider, to name just a few. However, as we enter the spring blossom season, many independent cider makers are worried about the impact of the forthcoming extended producer responsibility regulations. Can we have a debate in Government time on the impact of EPR regulations on independent traditional cider makers?

Lucy Powell: As a regular attender of Glastonbury festival, I have partaken in a bit of Glastonbury cider over the years, and I can confirm that it is excellent cider—although perhaps I could not remember that towards the end of having it. I am not actually aware of the new regulations that she mentions, but I will absolutely ensure that she gets a full response about them.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Today I have joined over 100 Labour parliamentarians in calling for environmental, social and governance rules to be reformed to support investment in defence. At this historic moment, can we have a debate on how the financial sector could step up by helping shore up defence on our continent?

Lucy Powell: That is an important matter to do with the frameworks and how that type of investment should be allocated. I will ensure that the House continues to discuss it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Business questions are a must-watch every week, but I understand that the people of Parachinar in Pakistan are watching this week in particular because of this question. For the past 150 days in Parachinar, Shi'a Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Hindus have been under siege. Despite the signing of a peace agreement in January, the humanitarian situation remains dire, with continued reports of mob attacks and widespread internal displacement. Some 800,000 individuals, including the elderly, pregnant women, infants and the sick, are facing severe food and medicinal shortages because of the blockade of the road. They need food, petrol and medicines to keep them going. Some 128 children have tragically died because of the lack of essential resources. Will the Government engage in discussions with their Pakistan counterparts to address

the ongoing siege and ensure the restoration of humanitarian access via the road to Parachinar, to protect that vulnerable community?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman yet again for raising an important matter. He will know that the Government are committed to promoting the rights and safety of religious minorities in Pakistan and elsewhere. The British high commission continues to raise the situation in Parachinar with the Pakistan authorities at the very highest levels.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Recent reports published by *The Manchester Mill* about racism, financial misconduct and bullying at the University of Greater Manchester in Bolton have significantly damaged the reputation of that institution over the past few weeks. Those reports have also led to a significant number of whistleblowers contacting me with further allegations highlighting concerning practices at the university. Given that the university is a key institution in Bolton and receives significant public funding, it must be transparent and accountable—as must the Office for Students. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on this gravely concerning matter?

Lucy Powell: I know that this issue is of huge importance to my hon. Friend's constituents in Bolton. He will be aware that the Office for Students is looking into those serious allegations and engaging with the provider, and that the police are involved as well. He will know that the Office for Students has a number of sanctions available to it when allegations of such failures are found to be true. I will ensure that he is kept updated.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Questions must be short as we have only 25 minutes to go. I call Adam Jogee to show us how it is done.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I shall try, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Last Friday, the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme received the news that the cowboy operators of Walleys quarry landfill had gone into liquidation. That is an attempt to cut and run from cleaning up the disgraceful mess that they have caused for far too long. Will the Leader of the House find time for us to unpick the crisis facing the waste sector in England, to identify how we can ensure that those who cause harm are held to account and made to pay for their failures, and to discuss how we can deliver justice and answers for the good people of Newcastle-under-Lyme?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for his leadership on the issue of Walleys quarry, which he has raised with me a number of times in business questions. I know that he has had meetings with Ministers, the Environment Agency and others, and I am sure that his leadership on sorting out that terrible situation will be of great comfort to his constituents.

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): Footage released yesterday appears to show 200 horrific hours of repeated animal abuse at an abattoir in my constituency. I have been working with residents and a multitude of agencies to try to ensure safety and compliance since well before my election to this place. Many now feel outraged that

the regulatory systems have failed even to notice, let alone address, the repeated breaches. Will the Leader of the House work with me to establish why it took an activist to highlight those issues while my constituents in Old Arley and those animals continue to suffer, and to find ways of ensuring that there is tighter scrutiny and swifter action, and that businesses are closed when standards are not met?

Lucy Powell: We take a zero-tolerance approach to breaches of animal welfare, such as those that my hon. Friend describes. The Food Standards Agency has already taken action, but if that has not been sufficient, I will ensure that it does more.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Today is, as the Leader of the House mentioned, World Book Day. It is also the day when I announce the winner of my World Book Day competition for the children of Rochdale. Will she join me in congratulating 10-year-old Harry Hodgkiss of Milnrow parish Church of England primary school on his brilliant review of David Walliams's "The World's Worst Monsters", and in thanking local businesses Alf Recruit, I-Branded and Office Supplies Now for providing the prize of £375-worth of books for Harry's school and personalised stationery for all the winners?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Harry Hodgkiss on winning his World Book Day competition and the businesses and others who supported it and provided funds. Today and on many occasions in this House, we can say that it is a bit of "A Squash and a Squeeze".

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): On Tuesday, my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal, arbitrarily detained in India for over seven years now, was acquitted of all charges by the judge at the district and sessions court in Moga in Punjab, yet he remains imprisoned, facing the possibility of eight further court cases lacking in any credible evidence and of languishing in confinement for decades. This is the breakthrough we have all been waiting for. The time for my Government to act is now. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent Government statement confirming that every effort will be made to secure his immediate release and bring him home to Dunbarton?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise the case of Jagtar Singh Johal, which has been raised a number of times in the House. He will know that the Prime Minister has raised this with Prime Minister Modi, and I assure him that we will continue to support Mr Johal through his detention until he is released, which needs to happen urgently. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that and will ensure the House is kept updated.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): Two hundred years ago this September, the modern passenger railways were born when locomotion No. 1 was put on the tracks at Heighington station in my constituency. Can the Leader of the House tell us how the Government will support the global anniversary of the Darlington-Stockton railway, and will Ministers meet me to discuss how we can bring back to its former glory the dilapidated original station, which is so key to our heritage?

Lucy Powell: We support the Darlington-Stockton railway, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising that as we mark 200 years of its existence. We will support him in every way we can.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): One reason that parts of my rural north Cumbria constituency are not served by fixed broadband is that the per-metre charge to access Openreach's ducts and poles makes it prohibitively expensive to roll out broadband by other providers. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the costs of rolling out rural broadband, in particular the charges for physical infrastructure access?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that access to digital broadband is vital—it is now the fourth utility for many people—but in rural communities it remains patchy. Despite the previous Government making money available, digital broadband has been too slow to roll out and to get to her constituents, and this Government are taking steps to speed that up.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): Last Friday in this Chamber, Members of the UK Youth Parliament discussed and agreed the priorities for this year, which were votes at 16 and period dignity. The MYPs conducted themselves with honour and respect. I would like to pay tribute to and thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as well as Mr Speaker, the Speaker's Office, the Table Office and the Doorkeepers for everything they did. Will the Leader of the House congratulate the MYPs on their amazing day?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating the amazing Youth Parliament. It is a reminder of how brilliant the young people of this country are and how young people can be responsible for casting their votes at the age of 16. I thank Mr Speaker and his office for facilitating it.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Bracknell indoor indie market celebrated its first birthday last week. It is run by two fantastic businesswomen, Jem and Rachel, and gives opportunities to many more women-owned businesses in Bracknell. Ahead of the International Women's Day debate, will the Leader of the House join me in wishing BIIM a very happy birthday?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I congratulate Jem and Rachel on the work they do. We should be supporting women in business more than ever, because they play a valuable role in our economy.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): We all know of one famous US citizen who has close family ties to Scotland, but there are 25 million Scots Americans who want to trace their lineage—it is a big market. That is why organisations in my constituency such as Hebrides People in Harris and historical societies in Ness and North Uist invest in family histories and oral histories, which are a treasure trove to connect people to their roots. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging investment in heritage tourism, so that we can connect the children of Scots emigrants, even those who strain our friendship, to find their way home?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, and I know how important tourism is to my hon. Friend's constituency. He has been a great advert for it here today, which I am sure will attract many more people.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): In recent weeks I have been contacted by many constituents who are frightened by the decision of Buckinghamshire council to close its housing register temporarily. Does my right hon. Friend agree that people facing homelessness deserve our full support, and that we must address the underlying causes of homelessness, such as the lack of affordable and social housing? Will she make time for a debate on that issue?

Lucy Powell: We have an acute housing crisis in this country, and the long waiting lists, or even closed lists such as the one my hon. Friend describes, are a symptom of that crisis. That is why the Government are committed to 1.5 million extra homes, of which a huge proportion will be social and affordable homes.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): May I draw the House's attention to my position as chair of the all-party groups on long covid and on myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME)? In recognition of International Women's Day, I wish to draw attention to the significant gender disparity in the impact of chronic illnesses. Given the gravity of the issue, will the Leader of the House commit to holding a debate on women's health inequalities, with particular focus on those living with ME, long covid, and other chronic illnesses?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. We are committed to supporting those with chronic illnesses and those with ME, and we will publish a delivery plan in the coming months. She highlights the important matter of gender disparity. We recently had a debate on women's health, and I am sure gender disparity in chronic illness would be a popular subject.

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): Across the House this week we have heard about the vital contribution that our armed forces make, and the dedication they show to this country. However, sometimes the experiences of women in the armed forces can be challenging. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate on how the Government can support women who are currently serving in or have previously served in our armed forces?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises an important matter, and recent cases have highlighted some of the difficulties she raises. We want women not only to join the armed forces, but to feel that they can completely and fully contribute and have a long career in the armed forces. Any barrier to that is wrong and needs to be rooted out, and I will certainly ensure that my hon. Friend is updated.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have 19 people standing and just 13 minutes, so I ask Members please to keep it short.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the all-party group on political and media literacy. We live in increasingly uncertain times, and we are seeing a real change as the threats we are facing move from the traditional to the digital, with things such as misinformation and disinformation on the rise. Given that, will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate on the importance of media literacy in preventing such misinformation, giving people the tools they need to fight against it themselves?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises the important matter of online misinformation and disinformation. Provisions in the Online Safety Act 2023 are starting to come through, but she is right to say that educating our young people is vital to ensuring that they have the literacy they need to navigate the social media world of the future in which they will all live.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of visiting Mail Solutions, an employee-owned company in my constituency led by Karl Lee. That company exports envelopes and printing around the world, including for elections across Africa, but it told me that it faces red tape and barriers in doing so. Can we back British business, reduce red tape, and allow businesses such as Mail Solutions to grow?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely; the Government are committed to growing the economy and ensuring that businesses such as Mail Solutions can grow and flourish and that red tape and barriers to growth are broken down as best we can.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I am proud to represent historic Shrewsbury, with our grade II listed building, but it is currently not being used to its full potential as the gateway to our magnificent town. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Transport to make a statement about ensuring that the transition to Great British Railways allows for unlocking our beautiful railway assets for public and commercial use, which would transform our station quarter?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I am familiar with Shrewsbury station, which is beautiful but could perhaps be better used as the interchange of important rail connectivity that it is for my hon. Friend's constituents. That is why the Government and the Secretary of State are looking at how we can ensure that land use and station development are at the core of our plan for boosting the railways, as well as infrastructure and housing.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): Last week, I kicked off the annual Hillbilly 10k in my home town of Dalmellington in my constituency. Hundreds braved the weather to race and to support Cancer Research UK. By organising events such as that for more than 20 years, my constituent, Lorna Dempsey, has helped to raise £500,000 and more. Like many other fundraisers, she was inspired by the loss of a friend, who died of breast cancer at the age of 32. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking fundraisers such as Lorna, and make time for a debate in Government time on how we fund research into saving lives from that cruel disease?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate my hon. Friend on kicking off the Hillbilly 10k—I hope there was not the traditional Scottish weather when she was doing that—and I congratulate Lorna on her immense fundraising efforts. My hon. Friend is right that we need to continue to do more to fight cancer, promote research and provide support so that we can stop people unnecessarily dying of cancer so young.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): The Leader of the House has already mentioned the Equality Act 2010. Back in 2013, Parliament legislated to require a Minister of the Crown to

“amend this section so as to provide for caste to be an aspect of race”.

However, five years later the Government announced that they would not implement that legislation, arguing that caste discrimination can be discrimination based on ethnic origins. Does the Leader of the House agree that caste discrimination is as bad as discrimination based on colour, nationality, or ethnic or national origins, and will she agree to a debate in the House on the implementation of section 9(5) of the Equality Act, so that caste discrimination is specified as a form of race discrimination?

Lucy Powell: I appreciate that caste discrimination can be incredibly damaging and pernicious. We take our obligations under the Equality Act very seriously indeed, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets an update on that.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): A week ago today, Basingstoke sadly lost Graham Robins, a long-serving governor at St Mark's primary school in my constituency. Graham dedicated over 25 years to supporting the school, Immanuel church and St Mark's church, playing a pivotal role in the lives of countless pupils and families. Even in his final days, he spoke of his deep love for the school and its community, and he leaves behind a remarkable legacy of kindness, wisdom and service. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Graham, and to the vital role of school governors and the invaluable voluntary service they provide?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about the passing of Graham Robins, and I understand that that will have a devastating impact on the school, his family and the whole community. I join my hon. Friend in paying my full respects to the work that Graham did, and to the contribution that he and many others make to our society.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I am delighted that residents in Park End and Ormesby will soon see the state-of-the-art new Southlands Centre sports facility coming to east Middlesbrough. Its delivery has been a team effort from our Labour council, the Middlesbrough Football Club Foundation and Sky Bet English Football League, and has been signed off by the Labour Government. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is a winning performance from a strong Labour team?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely; it is a winning performance from a strong Labour team and it is a winning effort in puns. They are normally my speciality, but I cannot beat my hon. Friend on that one.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Residents in Ovingham, in my constituency, are desperate for adequate glass recycling facilities that they can walk to, as they are currently having to drive to Prudhoe or Wylam, yet Conservative-led Northumberland county council is simply not listening to them. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling for the Tories leading Northumberland county council to get a grip and allow my constituents to recycle their glass properly?

Lucy Powell: I am pleased that my hon. Friend's constituents are so keen on recycling. I join him in calling for the Conservative-run council to do more to ensure that his constituents who want to recycle can recycle.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Seven-year-old Skye has been bringing joy to the lives of residents at the award-winning Brookfields nursing home in my constituency, whether playing bingo, watching a film or chatting over dinner. Does the Leader of the House agree with me that everyone needs to be a bit more like Skye, and could we have a debate on the physical and mental benefits, to both the young and the elderly, of being together?

Lucy Powell: I love to hear of those intergenerational schemes in which young people such as Skye go into care homes and really lift the lives of those at the end of their life. I absolutely join my hon. Friend in saying that we should all be a bit more like Skye.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): As we have heard, today is World Book Day. Like many in this House, I have fond childhood memories of dressing up as a character from my favourite book, but research from the National Literacy Trust shows that the number of children reading in their spare time has fallen to its lowest in almost two decades. That comes at the same time as soaring smartphone usage among children, which is causing concern to parents in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on how we can reinvigorate a love of reading in young people and tackle smartphone harms?

Lucy Powell: I am glad that my hon. Friend enjoyed dressing up. As I said at the beginning, scrabbling together an outfit is a bit of a stressful thing for working parents. He is absolutely right: we have to get our young people enjoying the love of reading and actual, physical books and libraries, and Bookstart and the National Literacy Trust, which my hon. Friend raised, are crucial parts of that. I was really pleased that my youngest understood what a contents page and an index page were when reading a book. I know that sounds remarkable, but these days, when they can google everything, they do not know how to use an index.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): The date of 29 March is a seismic day in Redditch town centre, as, after a long hiatus, the outdoor market returns to Redditch town centre, thanks to the excellent leadership of our Labour council by Joe Baker and Sharon Harvey. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Redditch borough council on its commitment to regenerating our high street and our local businesses, and perhaps encourage residents to join us on 29 March to ensure that the market is a success?

Lucy Powell: I am sure that many people across Redditch will join my hon. Friend and the local council on 29 March. I congratulate him as a great new MP for Redditch and its local council on bringing back Redditch market.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Right across my schools, young people are concerned about the conspiracy theories and extremism that they encounter online. A really important report recently by the Pears Foundation and Public First highlighted the need to do more to empower schools to tackle those issues in the classroom. Can we have a statement from the Education Secretary on how we can ensure that the upcoming review of the curriculum delivers on exactly that issue?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. A number of Members have already raised digital literacy with me today and how we can do more to tackle misinformation and disinformation online, especially for our young people. That would make for a very popular topic for a debate, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets an update.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the longest serving leader and second-ever chair of Harlow council, Tom Farr, who passed away on Tuesday? Tom devoted so much of his life to serving the community of Harlow as both a councillor and a secondary school teacher, and also as the chair of Harlow primary health trust.¹

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Tom Farr and his life of dedicated service to Harlow and to Harlow council. I also take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for joining the Modernisation Committee.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Ogwen Valley mountain rescue in my constituency is being stretched to the limit by an increase in call-outs. It has gone out 23 times already this year, including for two tragic incidents that resulted in fatalities. Will the Leader join me in saying a huge thank you to all the volunteers who dedicate their time, especially as the group celebrates its 60th birthday this weekend?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating and thanking all those from the Ogwen Valley mountain rescue team for the fantastic work they do. It is a shame that they need to do it, because we really need people to take more seriously a common-sense approach to enjoying our beauty and not to put themselves at risk.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Residents of the Upper Braes villages in Falkirk have been campaigning for five years following the failure of not-fit-for-purpose heating systems that has led to poorly heated homes and extraordinarily high household bills. A gentleman I spoke to in Slamannan is spending £300 to £400 a month on energy for his two-bedroom house simply, as he put it, to "keep the frost off" his nose. Does the Leader of the House agree that those involved in that failure should be held to account and that those who have suffered deserve a fair solution?

1. [Official Report, 10 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 676.] (Correction)

Lucy Powell: Absolutely; that is why this Government are taking our clean energy mission so seriously. It will not only give us energy security, but lead to lower bills for people such as my hon. Friend's constituents. In the meantime, we are ensuring that we extend the warm home discount to another 2 million people next year, so that his constituents and many others can keep themselves warm at home.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Last week, I had the privilege of opening the new block at Sir John Deane's sixth-form college in Northwich. It was revealed at the event that the Sixth Form Colleges Association has confirmed that, once again, Johnny Deane's is one of the country's leading sixth-form colleges, having both the highest attainment and the highest value added of all large mainstream sixth-form colleges. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sir John Deane's on that incredible achievement, and will she allow time for a debate on the vital role that sixth-form colleges play?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in giving my heartfelt congratulations to Sir John Deane's sixth-form college for its outstanding contribution and all the great standards it delivers.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): It was great to visit Hertfordshire and Essex high school to kick off this week's National Careers Week. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on how this Labour Government are breaking down barriers to opportunity for young people in semi-rural communities such as mine?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for organising and being so involved in the careers fair in his constituency. He is absolutely right—we have huge opportunities in this country, and we need to better link young people and the skills they have with the job opportunities of the future.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Recently, I met Dr Shamsee and Dr Ward at Oaklands health centre in my constituency, and we discussed social prescribing. Social prescribing addresses social, emotional and practical needs, promoting holistic health, and local GPs play a crucial role in it. Can we have a debate on the importance of social prescribing?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the important work done by Oaklands health centre. This Government support social prescribing to address wider health determinants and improve people's wellbeing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That might be a record. I thank the Leader of the House for being so fast in her responses—we got everybody in.

North Sea Energy

12.1 pm

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): With permission, I would like to make a statement about this Government's plans to unleash the North sea's clean energy future.

For almost half a century, the workers, businesses and communities of the North sea have powered our country and the world. We believe that they can and will continue to do so for the next half a century and beyond, which is why yesterday, we launched a consultation on the steps we are taking to seize the opportunities of the clean energy transition in the North sea. This is about working with businesses, workers and communities to strengthen north-east Scotland's status as the energy capital of the UK, and it is about showing global leadership as we deliver a well-managed, orderly and prosperous transition.

We know that the North sea is a maturing basin. Oil and gas production has seen a natural decline of 72% between 1999 and 2023, and as a result, the industry has lost around a third of its direct workforce over the past decade. The truth is that sprinting to clean energy is the only way to deliver energy security and good, long-term jobs for the workforce and for communities. At the same time, we know that we need to listen to the science on what is required to keep global warming to 1.5°C. A science-aligned approach to future oil and gas production is the only way to deliver climate security for future generations, so we owe it to the North sea's workers and communities—who have done so much for our country—to come up with a proper plan for the future. That is what this Government are doing.

First, we are consulting on our manifesto commitment not to issue new licences to explore new fields. While we have always been clear that oil and gas will continue to play an important role for decades to come, the reality is that new licences for oil and gas awarded in the past decade have made only a marginal difference to overall production. To continue granting them would not help our energy security, would not be compatible with our climate commitments, and would not take one penny off bills. As such, we will not award new licences, but we will continue working with the sector to manage existing fields for the entirety of their lifespan. We will also provide the long-term certainty on its fiscal landscape that the sector needs. Yesterday, the Treasury set out plans for a new regime to respond to future spikes in oil and gas prices once the energy profits levy ends in 2030.

The second part of the consultation is about harnessing the North sea's unique strengths, including its offshore infrastructure, highly skilled engineers and deep supply chains, to make it a global clean energy powerhouse. In just eight months, we have already made significant progress. We have established Great British Energy in Aberdeen, so that it is in the perfect position to drive the roll-out of clean energy projects. We have improved the offshore wind auction, so that later this year there will for the first time be a new clean industry bonus to reward investment in good manufacturing jobs and clean supply chains. We have overseen a record-breaking renewables auction. We have kick-started the UK's carbon capture and hydrogen industries—the energy sectors of the future—with strong, early investments. Just yesterday, we awarded more than £55 million to the port of

[Sarah Jones]

Cromarty Firth for upgrades that will support the development of floating offshore wind, creating hundreds of jobs as we ensure Scotland and the UK remain world leaders in this next-generation technology. But that is just the start.

Our clean power action plan will drive £40 billion a year of investment to meet our goal of clean power by 2030. Research shows that jobs in offshore renewable sectors could increase by tens of thousands in that time. We will also make sure workers have the tools they need to take up these new opportunities. Already, we have worked with the Scottish Government and trade bodies to launch a skills passport, making it easier and quicker for oil and gas workers to bring their skills and experience into clean energy jobs. That idea has been stuck in the mud for years. Thankfully, we have made more progress in the past eight months than was made in the previous 14 years combined. At the same time, we are putting clean energy at the heart of our upcoming modern industrial strategy.

We are incredibly fortunate to have the North sea on our doorstep. For decades, the oil and gas buried there have fuelled development and charged our economy, but the North sea's long-term future lies in its incredible clean energy potential. We know that its stable winds and shallow shelves make it one of the best locations in the world for offshore wind farms. We know that the UK continental shelf alone has enough capacity to store up to 78 billion tonnes of carbon, which is roughly the amount this country has produced since the industrial revolution. With our skilled offshore industry and workforce, we are perfectly placed to seize this natural advantage and get ahead in the global race for new jobs in new industries.

Instead of sticking our head in the sand and avoiding the big decisions, we have set out a plan to deliver the future that the North sea's workers and communities deserve. It is a plan to co-ordinate the scale-up of clean energy industries, from offshore wind and hydrogen to carbon capture and storage; a plan to give the oil and gas sector the support and clarity it needs to continue operating for decades to come; a plan for energy security and sustainable economic growth; and a plan to keep working with the people who matter most—the North sea's businesses, workers, communities and trade unions—to take advantage of the tremendous opportunities of the years ahead together. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.7 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement.

Another day, another demonstration of this Government's total ignorance of our oil and gas industry and the north-east of Scotland, their incompetence on the economy and their disregard for the hundreds of thousands of workers in our North sea, as well as their dangerous ineptitude when it comes to our energy security. No other country in the world, especially at a time of heightened global instability and volatility, would actively

choose to aggressively and at pace shut down its domestic oil and gas industry, but that is exactly what this Government and in particular this Department, led by the eco-warrior in chief, are doing.

The consultation, announced yesterday, was trumpeted by Government spinners as the beginning of the end of the energy profits levy and a brave new dawn for the North sea. It is complete and utter rubbish. It is a total joke. The energy profits levy is higher now than it was before, because of the decisions of this Labour Government. The investment allowances have almost all been scrapped by this Labour Government. Crucially, the windfall tax is now in place for far longer—until 2030—because of this Labour Government. That is five years away, but the oil and gas industry does not have five years. Investment is drying up, and work is being put on pause. Companies are literally shutting up shop.

The truth is that the high-paid, good, long-term jobs that the Minister speaks of do not yet exist in renewables in the north-east of Scotland. People are leaving in their droves for other countries, such as the USA, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Norway, where the industry does have a future. She says we owe it to the North sea's workers and communities to come up with a proper plan for their future, but this Government's plan for the North sea is simply to shut it down. This Government's plan is a betrayal of those workers. This Government's plan will devastate the communities of the north-east of Scotland.

It is said that in every oil-producing country in the world you will find an Aberdonian. It turns out that the only country in which you will not find an Aberdonian working in oil in the near future is Scotland, driven by this mad rush to clean power 2030 and the Government's obsession with renewables at the expense of everything and everyone else. It may be "Drill, baby, drill" in the United States, but it is "Dole, baby, dole" under Labour in the United Kingdom. The Government's decisions will cost our economy some £12 billion in lost tax revenue to the Treasury, on top of the £12 billion in lost capital investment. This makes a complete mockery of their claim to be anything like pro-growth.

It is insanity to be doing all this to our own industry while becoming increasingly reliant on imports from abroad and causing more carbon to be released into the atmosphere: more imports of liquefied natural gas, fracked in the USA, frozen and then shipped across the Atlantic on diesel-chugging ships; or more imports from Norway, a net exporter, which is drilling from the very same sea from which we could drill ourselves. It is completely nonsensical. This Government are a complete joke, overseeing the wilful deindustrialisation of our nation. If the Minister will not take my word for it, perhaps she will take the word of the GMB leader, who said:

"In the new geopolitical reality—it's madness. If the North Sea is being prematurely closed down and we are increasing import dependence—that's bad for jobs, economic growth and national security."

Or perhaps she will take the word of the general secretary of Unite, who said:

"we need to resist any calls that amount to offshoring our carbon responsibilities for the sake of virtue signalling."

May I ask the Minister whether she has personally met any oil and gas workers since taking office, in order to understand what her Government's policy means for

them and their families, and whether the Secretary of State has done so? Will the industry receive an answer on the uncertainty surrounding the calculation of scope 3 emissions and environmental impact assessments? Given the announcement of £200 million to support the 400 workers affected by the closure of Grangemouth, how much does the Minister think the Treasury might need to find to support the 200,000 workers currently supported by the oil and gas industry? Does she agree with the Climate Change Committee that we will need oil and gas until at least 2050, and has she accounted for the higher carbon emissions associated with importing liquefied natural gas instead? Finally, let me ask whether she still sees the Department as a sponsor and a champion for the industry—because the industry certainly does not trust that to be the case.

Sarah Jones: The shadow Minister quoted trade union representatives, having not met them or supported them in government. That is always rich. *[Interruption.]* He says that he did; I stand corrected, although I suspect that he did not do it often. He quoted the general secretary of the GMB, so let me quote him back. The general secretary said:

“Tory ideology has left the UK vulnerable and exposed. Our Government stood by and exported the bulk of the jobs, closed gas storage and failed to invest in new nuclear and skills.”

I thank the shadow Minister for his questions, and I will come to them shortly, but I have to say that this is a fairly familiar story from the Conservative party: no acknowledgment of their failed record on the North sea, no acknowledgment of their having presided over the worst cost of living crisis in a generation, and no answers to the future challenges that our country faces. I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was his party that lost 70,000 North sea jobs in less than a decade. His Government were content for those workers to have to go around the world to find jobs, but this Government want to keep those talents here in the UK, which is why, unlike the last Government, we have a plan.

In my statement, I said that everyone accepts that the North sea is a declining basin. I do not know whether the shadow Minister understands the basic geology, but this is a super-mature basin, and the harder it becomes to drill for oil and gas, the less likely it is that people will be successful. Only one in 10 of the licences that have been offered and granted in recent years have ultimately led to any work.

The hon. Gentleman needs to establish what his party's view of this agenda is. The hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), who is sitting next to him, had some very peculiar things to say in Westminster Hall yesterday, and it is unclear exactly what their position is. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) was a Minister for the grid who opposed grid infrastructure, he was a Minister for solar who opposed solar power, and here he is now, the Minister for Aberdeen, campaigning against jobs and investment in his own community.

We are getting on with a plan for the future. First, we will invest in clean power. It is ludicrous that at this time when our bills depend on what Putin chooses to do and we have to respond, the shadow Minister is suggesting that we should do more of that. Even if there were no climate change, even if there were no push to clean power, if we drilled as much oil and gas from the North

sea as we possibly could, it would amount to less than 1% of the global market and would have no impact on bills whatsoever.

We will give immediate support to workers—we have explained how we will do that—and we will support Scotland more widely. We will support Great British Energy in Aberdeen. We will support Grangemouth with £200 million from the national wealth fund. Harland and Wolff in Arnish and Methil has been saved from closure. Yesterday, the Port of Cromarty Firth received £55 million through the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme. Twenty per cent. of the contracts in allocation round 6 of the contracts for difference auction are going to Scotland. We have hydrogen investment in Cromarty and Ayrshire. We have the biggest budget for the Scottish Government that we have seen. This is a party that is committed to supporting the people of Scotland, not overseeing managed decline.

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

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Minister was right to remind us that the North sea is a mature basin, she was right to remind us that 70,000 jobs have been lost there in the last 10 years, and she was right to praise the highly skilled engineers who have made such a contribution in the North sea and to the country. She mentioned the skills passport, and said that the Government were making progress with the industry in finding alternatives in the jobs transition. The Select Committee has heard, a number of times, evidence that one of the challenges is the fact that pay in the North sea is significantly higher than pay in equivalent jobs in the renewable sector, and offshore wind in particular. What, at this stage, are the Minister's thoughts on how we can make pay more attractive for workers moving from oil and gas into renewables?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Select Committee, which is very important. As he knows, for a long time we have been a bit stuck in trying to set up a passport system because of the slightly different skills and qualifications in each industry and the need to bring them together. The Government became involved to try to ensure that we could bridge that gap and enable people to make the transition. Oil and gas workers are highly skilled and greatly in demand, and, as my hon. Friend says, they are paid a good wage. We need to work with the new offshore wind companies; we like to see union recognition, and we like to see good salaries for people doing those jobs as well. There will be other jobs that people can go into. The plan is to help people make the transition rather than leaving them adrift as the last Government did.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement, much of which we can agree with.

The North sea gives the UK the opportunity to become a powerhouse in renewable energy generation, and it is time that we seized it. We urge the Government to make good their commitment to consult on a new

[*Claire Young*]

regime to boost investment in jobs. We want to ensure that the oil and gas industry is wound down in a way that supports the redeployment of skills and jobs, and provides the right incentives to encourage fossil fuel industries to invest in green technologies. What details can the Minister give us of the support that the Government will provide to upskill and redeploy those who were formerly working in the fossil fuel industry?

We believe that much bolder action is urgently needed to ensure energy security, to cut bills and, with Donald Trump threatening to pull the United States out of the Paris agreement once again, to resume the UK's global leadership role on climate action, which was abandoned by the previous Conservative Government. We urge this Government to introduce an emergency 10-year plan to insulate homes, starting with free insulation for the most vulnerable residents, and to introduce an energy social tariff to tackle fuel poverty and health inequalities caused by cold, damp homes.

We are deeply concerned about the cost of heating bills following Ofgem's decision to increase the energy price cap by 6.4% this April—the third increase since October 2024. The Government must decouple electricity prices from the wholesale gas price and toughen up their windfall tax on the profits of oil and gas giants, including by increasing the tax by another two percentage points to a headline rate of 80%. Time and again, we have been disappointed by the decisions that the Government have taken this winter to delay energy bills support for households. For example, the Government's warm homes scheme, designed to insulate homes, will not benefit households until—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. There is always a maximum of two minutes, and you have exceeded it. Please be seated.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. On upskilling and redeploying workers, as I said previously, we are introducing the passporting scheme and making sure that we can break down the barriers that exist in different industries, because the skills and talents of people working in oil and gas can be transferred to renewable energy. We want to make sure that we do that.

The hon. Lady talks about vulnerable residents and the cost of heating, and she is absolutely right to do so. We have all suffered from the huge cost of living crisis caused by Putin's invasion of Ukraine. We are doing what we can, and 6 million people will now get the £150 warm homes discount this winter, which will help with their energy bills.

The hon. Lady asks about the windfall tax. The clue is in the name: it is a tax on windfall profits. While the oil and gas industry is making windfall profits, there will be a windfall tax; when it is not, there will not be. That is the way the scheme works, but her points on the need to insulate homes—we are working at pace on that—and to support vulnerable people are absolutely right. The basic principle is that we have an energy bill rise driven by fossil fuels, so we must move to home-grown power for our energy security and for long-term bill reductions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. If questions are not kept short, Members will prevent their colleagues from getting in.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on setting out a plan that supports jobs, skills and communities in the face of technological change—unlike the Conservative party, which abandoned wholesale our industrial base in the 1980s. Like the north-east of Scotland, the north-east of England has jobs, skills and opportunities that depend on the energy of the North sea. Kinewell Energy, in my constituency, leads in wind farm design optimisation. Can the Minister confirm that she will work with the Mayor of the North East, Kim McGuinness, to ensure that the north-east of England benefits from the jobs and opportunities of the North sea?

Sarah Jones: I meet industry representatives all the time, and their response to Kim McGuinness is great. She is such a force of enthusiasm, knowledge and power for her communities, and people engage with her. They like what she says about investing in the north-east, and they are responding to her. She is making a real difference in her community. We are doing all we can, through all kinds of levers that the Government can use, to make sure that the investment in clean energy supports all our communities. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that we need to take advantage of the particular skills of people in the north-east.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): When I climb the hill behind my home in the Lincolnshire wolds, I can see, 20 miles away, a wonderful array of wind turbines in the North sea. We love it locally—we love it for our economy—but nothing in that precludes oil and gas exploration. If we in Lincolnshire are doing so much for green energy, why are we allowing the bread basket of England to be covered with solar farms? We have 10,000 acres of them around Gainsborough, and there is another application for 3,900 acres at North Clifton. Will the Minister and her boss please look at such mass applications in the round so that there is not overdevelopment in the bread basket of England?

Sarah Jones: The right hon. Gentleman paints a lovely picture of walking up the hill in his constituency—I am sure we would all enjoy doing that. He makes an important point about solar. We need to make sure that we are taking people with us and doing the right things, which is what we are trying to do. We know that even if we pushed as far as we could on solar, it would still account for less than 1% of the overall land and the same proportion of our agricultural land—it is a small amount. He is right to want to make sure that his constituents have an environment that they like and enjoy. It is equally right to say that we will need infrastructure in our communities, and that people should see a benefit where we ask them to have infrastructure. There is the solar taskforce, which is looking at all these issues.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see the Government taking a very sensible approach in the consultation to working with our European partners on how we develop renewable energy and get

energy costs down. As with so many other areas, our constituents have paid higher bills because the previous Government refused to work with our European counterparts. Can the Minister give us a bit more detail? As we look to expand our capacity to create renewable energy, she will be very aware that there is a risk of an £800 million charge because of the variation between our emissions trading schemes. Can she also tell us a bit more about what working with the North Seas Energy Co-operation might entail, and whether we might rejoin that organisation to help drive down bills further for our constituents?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend raises a number of thorny issues relating to ETS, for which I am responsible in the Department. We have been having lots of conversations about how we progress, what the EU does, what we do and what we need to do moving forward. These things are enormously complicated, because pulling a lever here will have an unintended consequence over there, so we are treading carefully, as she would expect.

On the EU partnerships and the new relationships that we have with our partners, they are incredibly important. Today the Prime Minister is with the Taoiseach in Ireland, and we are agreeing an energy partnership. We will be working together in the Celtic sea and the Irish sea to speed up progress on wind turbines by using data and our resources to look at our marine landscape and get to a point where private investors can invest quicker. These things are worth doing, and we will certainly carry on doing them.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am in favour of net zero, and this country has achieved a great deal in working towards that, but what planet is the Minister's Department on? Is she unaware that there is now a national security crisis that demands much higher defence expenditure? Is she aware that the costs of net zero are inflicting untold harm on our industry and have done for some years? It is now time to prioritise economic growth, to target cheap energy instead of net zero, and to generate growth and energy exports in order that we can afford the defence we need. The Department is living on another planet, and the Minister should listen to her Chancellor and her Business Secretary, who are trying to give her this advice.

Sarah Jones: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that I am on planet Earth and that we are well aware of what we are doing. We look at the world around us and see the enormous hike in energy prices, which is linked to our being attached to the global market for oil and gas. The previous Government spent tens of billions of pounds of taxpayers' money in order to protect people against the price hike, and we cannot allow that to happen again. It is absolutely right that we push for cheaper renewable energy, and I remind the hon. Gentleman that I sit in two Departments: the Business Secretary is my boss, and the Energy Secretary is my boss. They both agree with this policy, as does the Chancellor, because it is the right thing to do.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Through support for jobs, support for skills, the prominence of the industrial strategy and support for a clean transition, the Minister has demonstrated what is possible when there is political will. To quote her words back to her,

when will we be able to give the sector the support and clarity it needs to continue operating for some decades? The ceramics sector would love a package like this—or is the ceramics sector not sufficiently important enough?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I ask the Minister to keep her responses short.

Sarah Jones: Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am over-enthusiastic and have so many things to say.

I always worry when my hon. Friends quote my words back to me. My hon. Friend and I have talked often about ceramics, and I am well aware of the issues. We had a great debate in Westminster Hall this week on the ceramics industry's challenges with the transition and with energy prices. We are well aware of all of them, and we are working to fix them. I give as much time to ceramics as I do to any other industry, and I will continue to do so.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The Minister has previously said that energy security is national security. Why, then, is she cutting energy jobs in the North sea, yet imposing and buying from energy technology companies in China—at best one of our competitors, at worst our enemy—instead of investing in this country for high-paid, high-skilled jobs in the North sea?

Sarah Jones: I am not sure how many times I will have to go through this, but we are not cutting energy jobs. The North sea is declining because there is less and less oil and gas there. The work the previous Government did on renewable energies secured no supply chains for this country, so we were reliant on other countries, as the hon. Member points out. We are putting in place incentives for supply chains to be in this country, so that we make more. I am delivering a steel strategy to make sure that we use steel from this country for our clean energy future. These are the policies we are putting in place to make sure we have a managed transition, clean energy, lower bills and energy security.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, and for the role she played in securing a future for the Methil and Arnish yards in my constituency under the new ownership of Navantia, with new and secure jobs for the future. I am glad she is taking no lessons from the shadow Minister, given that under his Government's watch, 70,000 jobs were lost from the North sea. What we have today is an industrial strategy that looks after jobs, secures a future for the North sea and ensures that we will be there for another two generations. Can she explain how things such as a skills passport, our investment in GB Energy and our investment in the Cromarty firth—and, I hope, in ports such as Stornoway—will ensure that future?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; it has been a pleasure to work with him and to see the way he has championed his community during the conversations we have had about Navantia and Harland & Wolff. The industrial strategy is there for a reason. The previous Government were ideologically opposed to one, for reasons that nobody quite understands. We are setting up a British energy company, which the Conservatives oppose for reasons we do not quite understand. Whether

[Sarah Jones]

it is Grangemouth, Harland & Wolff, the FLOWMIS money for the port of Cromarty firth, our auction rounds for offshore wind, or hydrogen, we are putting in place the support to make sure that we build an industry we can all be proud of.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Energy bills are up £300 on Labour's watch, while our industry cries out for certainty from this Labour Government, who have offered little more than confusion, hostility and prevarication. The Minister talks about clarity and certainty, but what she has given us is another consultation. However, she does not need another consultation to give us certainty on the Acorn carbon capture project at St Fergus, which is a no-brainer if she is serious about economic growth. Will the Minister confirm today that Scotland will finally receive this long overdue investment for the Acorn project in the spring statement later this month?

Sarah Jones: If only I was able to confirm what will be in the spring statement, but clearly I cannot do that. We are hugely supportive of the Acorn project, which is an exciting opportunity. We will be investing £21.7 billion in carbon capture, after years of failure and prevarication by the previous Government. That is obviously subject to the spending review, and I cannot give the hon. Member the answer he is after, but I think this is a really exciting opportunity for Scotland. I have met representatives of many of the businesses involved and talked to them about what the potential could be.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the statement, particularly the Minister's commitment that oil and gas will be with us for decades to come. Was she as surprised as I was to hear the announcement from Reform UK of a renewables investment tax that would destroy jobs in the North sea and in places such as Hartlepool, which I represent, as well as expose us to Vladimir Putin, and does she suspect that that is what Reform UK actually wants?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is completely right to expose Reform's arguments for the nonsense they are. The CBI brought out a report a week or so ago showing that the net zero economy grew by 10%, which is much faster than the wider economy. This is delivering jobs already, as well as investment from around the world, in part because we are the second most attractive country in the world in which to invest, as PwC has told us. The reality is that we can bring down bills, secure good jobs and make ourselves more energy secure, and Reform is living in the past.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): As the Minister knows, the North sea renewables sector has been very beneficial to my Brigg and Immingham constituency, and I support proposals that will enhance and speed up the development of that sector. However, many businesses in the constituency are struggling because of energy costs, as my hon. Friends have mentioned. Can the Minister give an assurance that, particularly where energy-intensive industries are involved, the Government will bear in mind the consumer, be they business or domestic?

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and indeed for the good relationship we have built up from his speaking on behalf of his constituents in relation to steel and other sectors that we have talked about. Of course, energy-intensive industries talk to us about energy prices, and we are looking to see what we can do. I held a roundtable last week with the energy-intensive industries—steel, chemicals, ceramics of course, and others—and we are looking at what we can do to make sure they can be profitable and grow.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Conservative-led North East Lincolnshire council has embraced the green industries that are helping to reshape our identity in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and it is playing a critical role in decarbonising our energy estuary. Does the Minister agree that the Opposition's new anti-renewables position undermines the ambition of young people in my constituency, who are excited by this sector? They are keen to work with these companies, which do good, pay well, provide training and benefit the community.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is standing up for the jobs and the young people in her community, and it is a shame that the national Conservative party Opposition do not seem clear on what their policy is. Where people can see the jobs and the benefits, councils such as her Conservative-led council support renewables, but for some reason Conservative Front Benchers do not. I do not understand that, but we will keep backing this agenda because we know it will deliver jobs.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): A really interesting line in the Minister's statement shows, in my opinion, the Labour Government's complete misunderstanding of the role of the North sea. She said that

"the reality is that new licences...awarded in the past decade have made only a marginal difference to overall production."

However, that does not take into account the jobs they have supported, the tax intake that comes with them, and the skills, investment and expertise they have preserved and that will help in the transition to renewable energies. Is the Minister saying in her statement that she is actually willing to sacrifice all that to ideologically stop new licences in the North sea?

Sarah Jones: The previous Government oversaw a loss of 70,000 jobs that they cared not one jot about. They had no plan of support and no transition plan, and they allowed that managed decline without any commitment. This Government are doing exactly the opposite. We are supporting that transition, we are supporting those workers and we are making sure we can transition people, grow the economy and deliver energy security at the same time.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement, and indeed the fact that there is a plan. Although the Tories now accept that they did not have a plan, which is at least an important admission, the result of that lack of a plan is that have been left with uncertainty for both workers and consumers. In East Thanet, we need better jobs and lower bills, and surely she will agree with me that the overall security of our energy is also vital. There is one solution, which is to get off fossil fuels and shift to renewable energy as soon as possible.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She was of course referring to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), who said yesterday that

“one of the things our party did not get right in government was setting ambitious goals on...energy policy without having a clear...plan to deliver them.”—[*Official Report*, 5 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 171WH.]

I entirely agree with him.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome the Government’s commitment to no new oil and gas licences, and to putting workers and communities at the heart of the transition to a climate-safe economy. It is a bit disappointing to hear that so many Conservative Members still live on planet flat earth, with an ostrich approach to our energy future when what we need is a phoenix approach. I would like to ask the Minister a specific question. Can she confirm that the 4 billion barrels of oil equivalent currently in the North sea will not be pumped? If it is, it would be the equivalent of running 15 coal-fired power stations from now until 2050. She will know the climate implications. Will she confirm that the Government will stop consent for new production?

Sarah Jones: Our manifesto was clear that we would not issue new licences, we would not revoke existing licences, we would manage existing fields for the entirety of their lifespan, and we would ban fracking. The consultation is about the detail behind that. There are some complicated issues that we need to unpick, which is why we are having the consultation, why we welcome everybody’s views, and why I hope the hon. Lady will add her voice to it.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): We are in the midst of yet another fossil fuel price spike, caused by our overreliance on international gas markets. Despite my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages being landlocked and quite far from the North sea, I am very proud to have GE Vernova’s largest UK base there, supporting over 1,700 jobs and providing some of the technology for over 30% of UK electricity. Does the Minister agree that there is only one solution to the price spike: to get off fossil fuels and move on to clean home-grown power here in the UK?

Sarah Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend’s question. What GE Vernova is doing and the jobs it is providing are incredibly important for her community. We will continue to encourage growth in that sector and beyond through our industrial strategy with its eight sector plans, one of which is clean energy. These things are all connected. We can grow the economy and deliver clean energy, and we can do it together.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): BP’s global headquarters are in my constituency. As the Minister meets industry “all the time”, to use her words, she will be fully aware that it announced a major reset last month, whereby it is increasing its investment in upstream oil and gas to the tune of \$10 billion a year from next year. That is investors’ money, not taxpayers’ money. Is the Minister not concerned that by making Britain a hostile environment for oil and gas extraction, we are simply kissing away that investment to overseas?

Sarah Jones: I met BP yesterday to talk about that. If we look at somewhere like the US, there are massive supplies of oil and gas. BP has made its decision. We are working with it very closely on carbon capture and hydrogen in particular. If we drilled as much as we possibly could in the North sea, we would only find less than 1% of the global market. This is a declining basin—that is a fact. It has declined significantly over the past decade and it will continue to do so. We need to manage that process and support people. BP is working very closely with the Government on our renewables agenda, and on carbon capture and hydrogen.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The usual luddite tendencies are on display on the Opposition Benches after 14 years of abject failure. This Government are embracing the golden triangle: energy security to reduce bills, transitioning to net zero, and hundreds of thousands of secure British jobs in Scotland and across the UK. Does the Minister agree that if the shadow Minister, who has a great track record of losing jobs, does not want jobs in Scotland, we will have them in Cornwall?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is right to point to the golden triangle of energy security, jobs and climate, and how we can bring them together. I am working hard—not as hard as him; he is working incredibly hard—on bringing as many jobs as possible to his constituency. I look forward to continuing to do that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I keep repeating myself: short questions please.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As someone with two generations of their family who have depended on the North sea oil and gas industry, I know that we have to move away from fossil fuels and that we have to drive forward to the just transition, but we must also recognise that we are not there yet and that this is not the moment to push the industry off a cliff. It is declining naturally. We are leaving ourselves in a position where we will still need oil, so will we import it? We will need gas for hydrogen production, plastics, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. All of that is necessary. We also face a threat from the Chinese trying to infiltrate our renewables, so what are the Government going to do about that?

Sarah Jones: As I hope I made clear, we are not revoking existing licences and we will manage the existing fields for the entirety of their lifespan. As I also made clear, this is a declining basin and we need to manage the transition. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to point to the challenges, and I have great respect for her family history and for all those who work in oil and gas. She is right that we will need oil and gas for decades to come. We are trying to have a sensible plan to manage that process and I hope she will take part in the consultation, too.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): The Minister has already alluded to last week’s CBI report, which set out some of the huge opportunities that net zero offers for job creation, investment and growth. Will she outline to the House what steps her Department is taking to ensure we benefit from all that opportunity through Great British Energy and the National Wealth Fund?

Sarah Jones: The National Wealth Fund and Great British Energy will be incredibly important in this space. Most countries have a sovereign wealth fund like the National Wealth Fund. We have set that up. Most countries have their state energy companies. We have loads of state energy companies—just other countries'. It is absolutely right that we set up our own. We also have the clean energy bonus, which will mean that we are encouraging supply chains and jobs here in the UK, so we can move away from reliance on other countries.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): With due deference to the newly appointed Minister for Aberdeen on the Conservative Benches, the question of these jobs is not a matter purely for the north-east or purely for Scotland. Those 200,000 jobs are spread across every constituency in this country and they are all at risk. As we heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), they are being pushed off a cliff edge. The Minister talked about our energy bills being in the hands of Vladimir Putin. Does she not agree with me that we are stuck between a rock and a hard place? We have Vladimir Putin on one side driving up energy bills and her dogmatic Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero on the other.

Sarah Jones: I do not agree with that framing whatsoever. We have Putin who invaded Ukraine, leading to the massive global shock for energy prices, and we have a Secretary of State who is very pragmatically taking forward plans to, as the triangle tells us, protect and grow jobs, and give us energy security. I think most people in the country understand that. They get that we need energy security and to tackle the climate at the same time.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Scandalously, the workers of the Grangemouth refinery are to be the victims of a very unjust transition. The folly of a foreign state and private capital being in charge of such a key vital piece of energy infrastructure is laid bare, especially with no UK Government involvement.

I am curious as to what ownership role the UK Government will take in the new energy industries that will be at Grangemouth.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend will know about the announcements that were made recently about support for Grangemouth. In the last couple of weeks, I met INEOS to talk about its chemical factory and the huge contribution it brings in terms of jobs and the provision of chemicals. The £200 million investment from the National Wealth Fund is really important in this space. The work that the Government have done to look at possible businesses and industries for Grangemouth in the future is really important and I am very happy to have a conversation with him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Final question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): While I very much welcome the move towards clean energy, my concern is that we cannot allow energy prices to rise any further, especially when we take into account the loss of the winter fuel payment for many pensioners on the poverty line. How will the Minister ensure that clean energy and heat will not be out of reach for those who are already struggling: the elderly, the vulnerable, those in poor health and those in poverty?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. We know that energy bills have been rising because of the oil and gas we rely on and the impact of the war in Ukraine. We have massively increased the warm home discount so that 6 million households will get £150 to help towards their energy bills, but he is right to champion people who are going through a cost of living crisis. We will do what we can to support them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That marks the end of the statement. I could not get all colleagues in because questions were so long, and answers were occasionally just as lengthy.

Point of Order

12.49 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Second Reading of the Data (Use and Access) Bill on 12 February, I raised concerns over the accuracy and reliability of data with the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), particularly in relation to verification of sex. He undertook to write to me, which indeed he has:

“Digital verification services can be used to prove sex or gender in the same way that individuals can already prove their sex using their passport for example.”

That is a direct quote from the letter.

In fact, a passport does no such thing; it says what sex someone likely is. For example, if it says someone is female, it means they are likely female, but they could be male with a gender recognition certificate, or a male person who has a letter from their doctor saying that they are likely to continue living as though a female for the rest of their lives. This has been the case for many years.

I am worried that this letter, which has been put in both Libraries, may mislead the House, or indeed any constituent who may need to read it. How can I correct the record in this regard?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving notice of her point of order. I understand that she has notified the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore that she intended to raise the matter in the Chamber. The Chair is not responsible for the accuracy of ministerial correspondence. However, the hon. Lady has put her point on the record, and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will indeed take note.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Backbench Business

International Women’s Day

12.52 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Women’s Day.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am an ambassador for Ask for Angela, a great scheme whereby someone feeling unsafe in a club can go to the bar and talk to somebody, and they will help in any way they can. I am also an ambassador for fair pay with the global fair pay charter, which aims to improve the living conditions and pay for more than 25 million tea plantation workers worldwide, many of whom are women. As we know, financial independence is a route out of an abusive relationship.

I congratulate this Parliament on being the most diverse Parliament, with 41% female Members. We all know our number, Madam Deputy Speaker: I was the 286th woman to be elected to this House, and the first elected black female Minister in the UK, under Gordon Brown’s Government. As shadow Minister, I was instrumental in getting the International Women’s Day flag flown over the House and in getting the first IWD debate on the Floor of the House. I remember asking the Speaker at the time whether my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is now the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, could read out the names of the women who had been killed by men to start the debate—just that, without a speech. I think it still took about seven or eight minutes. Ten years later, that list is still just as long; it still takes that amount of time. How can that be? How can it be that a woman is still killed every three days by a partner or former partner? There are still women who are not counted, such as women who commit suicide because of domestic abuse and trans women and girls.

I have been thinking about this a lot. I have been told that heterosexual or straight white men and boys feel that there is no longer a place for them in society, and that is why they are turning to the far right. That really saddens me, because there is a place for everyone in society. There is, of course, a place for straight white men and boys; there is a very important role for them to play in society. We will hear a lot today about the fact that one woman is killed every three days, and that 97% of them are killed by men, the majority of whom are white. If we want to protect women, we need to reach out to men—the ones who are informed, kind and loving—and we need to say, “We need you now, more than ever before.” Right now, there are some serious, toxic, misogynistic men—some of whom are straight—and they are harming women, society, gay people and black people. This is the very foundation on which we live. We need to say no.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): In the UK, a woman is murdered by a current or former partner every week. According to research from Women’s Aid, 46% of women have faced some form of abuse in an intimate relationship during their lifetime. Given these harrowing statistics, we must confront domestic

[Steve Witherden]

abuse for what it truly is: a national emergency. Does she agree that lifesaving specialist domestic abuse services, which have been chronically underfunded, must receive the investment that they so desperately need?

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend hits on an important point. We absolutely need that investment. If we are serious about saving lives, we need to do whatever it takes. If we want to see a reduction in the number of women being killed, we need to invest in making that happen.

We also need to have those uncomfortable conversations. It is not tough to hit women, as is spouted by Andrew Tate, or to rape women, or to ridicule women or girls because they have said no. We have to have those conversations. We have to say, "This is wrong." We have to talk to all the men feeling like that. I am wearing a male shirt and tie today, but it does not mean that the world is going to run out of male shirts and ties. There is enough to go around for everybody, and we have to have that conversation.

We have to show men loving women. We have to educate boys and girls. It is interesting that some fathers treat their daughters like princesses, and think that by treating them that way, their daughter will learn how to be treated, but the reality is that they will learn by how their father treats his partner.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I cannot stay for the debate, unfortunately, but I wanted to have this on the record. The statistics on the murders of women in Northern Ireland are the highest in the United Kingdom. The Minister knows that. Does the hon. Lady agree that when it comes to addressing the murders of women across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we need a strategy that starts here in Westminster and sweeps out to the rest of the regions? We have to better manage and respond to this issue and protect our women and ladies and young girls, both in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom.

Dawn Butler: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am sure he will be forgiven for missing half of a debate today.

Women are being killed—that is a fact. We have got too used to talking about the statistics without thinking about who is at the end of it, and that we are losing a woman every three days to murder. It starts somewhere. At the end of the day, the way that women are demonised and attacked, and the way that we attack trans women—it starts somewhere. It is a deliberate act and action.

I also want to thank organisations such as the Fawcett Society, Centenary Action—whose all-party parliamentary group I co-chair with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies)—and the Asian Women's Resource Centre in Brent. It is important that we start to celebrate women, as the Mayor did in renaming the Overground lines. The line that I get on was renamed the Lioness line. At first, I was a little confused—I thought, "Am I on the right train?" Now, though, I smile, because I know that when people ask why it is called the Lioness line, the response will always be, "Because a really great female football team brought the cup home." Those are the little things

that we can do that will make a big difference. Many men feel insecure about that, so we need to tell them not to worry and to just chill.

There are men who say that we should not talk about firsts—women who are first to do this, or first to do that. I say that we should celebrate those women, because they show that we have made a bit of progress. For example, we have the first female Deputy Speaker of colour in the Chair—congratulations on that, Madam Deputy Speaker. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] We have the first female metro mayor, Tracy Brabin and the first registered blind MP for Battersea, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). I could spend my whole time talking about all those firsts, but we do still have a way to go.

There are more good people in the world than bad. I see men in power saying, "Don't celebrate women. Don't talk about women." Some even say, "Erase women", which is really quite scary. They are literally trying to erase women and our achievements, but I know that there are men who can and must speak out. The reality is that we have some aggressive, white supremacist males who are saying that women should not exist, or that we belong in the kitchen and that is it. We cannot go backwards. We have come too far, so that just ain't going to happen.

If I were to ban steps—I ask Members to bear with me for a moment—and replace them with a slope, would that stop people from getting to their destination? No, it would not, but would it help people who have problems with walking or who are in a wheelchair to get to their destinations? Yes, it would. This is not necessarily about taking something away. It can be about changing something to help other people also get to their destination. To all those boys and men who feel that they have to turn to the far right or to become incels, I say, "Is it time to change? Is it time for you to change how you talk, how you act, and the attitude that you take? Would you like your mother, your sister, your girlfriend or your partner to be talked about or treated in the way that you treat women?"

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I am sure that all those young women in Brent and north London who are watching her will be very proud.

One topic that often comes up in our local mothers' WhatsApp chats is social media. My hon. Friend is talking a lot about change. Statistics show that, after spending time online and on social media, 40% of young women and girls feel lonely and depressed because of all the online abuse. Does she think that social media platforms need to take some responsibility for the content that is amplified through their platforms?

Dawn Butler: Social media platforms have a vital role to play. They understand that negativity spreads faster than positivity. In the old days of legacy media, it was often said, "If it bleeds, it leads". Those platforms are absolutely aware of the damage that they do. They will not voluntarily make the changes that they need to make and, as a Government, we need to legislate for those changes to be made.

When I watched the story of the Women's Army Corps unit of colour, which stars Kerry Washington as Captain Charity Adams, I actually cried. The 6888th Central

Postal Directory Battalion contributed to the war effort in a unique way. They sorted through 17 million pieces of mail and delivered it to American soldiers on the frontline. Those 855 black women improved morale and brought hope to the frontline, yet after going through all of that, they were discriminated against and history tried to erase them. We have to wonder why that is. Why do people continually try to erase women and people of colour from history?

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this debate. As we mark International Women's Day, I have to say that I am proud—absolutely honoured—to stand here not only as a black woman, but as a former nurse. However, black people are four times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act 1983. Does she agree that we can only truly say that we have honoured International Women's Day when this glaring disparity is addressed?

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is also a first, so I congratulate her on that—and, yes, I absolutely agree with her on that point.

On average, we will all live to see 80 Christmases. The thing is, what are we going to do with them? Some people in the world are acting like they will live forever—God, I hope we do not, and I know that that will not be the case—but some pass through the world, leaving it just as they found it. Our job in Parliament is to change the world for the better. We need to leave an indelible footprint by ensuring that the world protects all women, not just straight, white women. We should start with the gay women, the black women and the disabled women. If we protect those, we will protect all women and the world will be a better place.

I often say that I cannot get my rights until everybody has their rights, because our rights and our lives are very much intertwined—whether we believe it or not. And just because I am pro-women, pro-LGBTQI+ and pro-black, it does not mean, as has been said online, that I am anti-white; far from it. I am pro-jerk chicken and rice and peas and I still love a bit of pie and mash and fish and chips. We can love more than one thing and be pro many things.

I want to end with a cold reality check. In Malcolm Gladwell's brilliant book, "The Tipping Point" and in his follow-up book "Revenge of the Tipping Point", he talks about the law of the very few, the overstory and the counterfactual line "what would have happened if". We were slowly winning the war on highlighting violence against women and girls, highlighting injustices and highlighting discrimination, but we did not appreciate the honest conversations that we needed to have around how epidemics work, or appreciate the power of group proportions.

We are fooling ourselves if we think that we bear no responsibility for this epidemic of violence against women and girls. Epidemics have rules and they have boundaries. They are subjected to overstories, and we in society are in a position of power to create those overstories. These overstories change in size and shape when they reach a tipping point and it is possible to know when we are reaching that tipping point. We are currently at that tipping point when it comes to violence against women and girls.

The opioid crisis in the US is a lesson for us all. Most of the medical profession acted professionally, but a tiny fraction—just a few—did not, and that was enough to fuel an opioid epidemic in the US. That tiny fraction was driven by a certain class of people, and those people can be identified. The tools needed to control an epidemic are right in front of us. They are sitting on the table, and we can either grab those tools or let the unscrupulous people grab them. If we grab them, we can build a better world.

We need to take action and have an honest conversation. We need to ensure that organisations that believe in diversity, equality and inclusion and fair pay get the procurement contracts. We need to be mindful about the social media platforms that we use, and we need to elect people who care for many people, not just the 1%. By doing that, we will accelerate action, which is the theme of International Women's Day this year.

I end with a message to the straight white boys and men in the middle of the table: "We need your protection, we need your love, we need your care and we need your kindness." We know, as I have said, that daughters and young girls learn how to be treated by their partners by watching how men treat women in their lives, and young boys learn how to be men from the men in their lives, so we need all men, regardless of colour, class and economic status, to lead by example. Women are literally fighting for their lives. I want every single man in the world watching this debate to join us in that struggle. We should all believe in fairness. We should all believe in ending discrimination and homophobia.

In the time that it has taken me to make this speech, one woman globally will have been killed by her partner or a family member. May her soul rest in peace.

1.10 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in today's International Women's Day debate. I thank the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for securing it. I want to use the opportunity to pay tribute to the extraordinary contribution of Scottish women, and particularly those from my constituency and the wider north-east Scotland.

When we are speaking about women breaking barriers, I need look no further than Methlick in Aberdeenshire, the birthplace of Dame Evelyn Glennie. Profoundly deaf from the age of 12, Dame Evelyn did not just overcome that challenge but revolutionised our understanding of how music can be experienced, feeling vibrations all through her body to become the world's first full-time solo percussionist. With over 100 performances worldwide each year and having commissioned more than 200 new works, she has shown how determination can transform what many would see as a limitation into a unique strength.

In Inverurie, the largest town in my constituency, we have Hannah Miley, who trained at the Garioch amateur swimming club before representing Great Britain at the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympics. What many do not know about her remarkable story, however, is that she spent her life training in a 25-metre pool rather than the Olympic-standard 50-metre facilities of her competitors, often sharing lanes with the public. She went on to become a Commonwealth gold medallist and now inspires the next generation of swimmers across Scotland.

In the realm of science, Aberdeen's Professor Dame Anne Glover stands as a testament to Scottish women's intellectual prowess. Not only did she serve as the first

[Harriet Cross]

chief scientific adviser in Scotland but she became the first chief scientific adviser to the president of the European Commission. Her pioneering work in microbial biosensors at the University of Aberdeen has placed our region at the forefront of scientific innovation.

In agriculture, which is so important to my constituency, we see women taking ever more prominent roles. Jane Craigie from Aberdeenshire exemplifies that leadership as a co-founder of the Rural Youth Project, which connects young people with opportunities in agriculture. The skills and determination of women farmers are essential to our local economy and the future of Scotland's agricultural sector.

It would be remiss of me not also to mention Professor Lorna Dawson CBE, who is based in Aberdeen at the James Hutton Institute. As of 2025, she has continued her pioneering work in soil forensics and has helped to solve numerous criminal cases, advising police investigations across the UK. Professor Dawson was recently awarded the Royal Society of Edinburgh's James Hutton medal for her exceptional contribution to earth and environmental sciences. Her work connecting soil science to justice demonstrates how expertise from our region is making a difference both nationally and internationally.

Of course, it would be wrong for anyone on the Conservative Benches not to acknowledge the groundbreaking legacy of Margaret Thatcher, the UK's first female Prime Minister whose determination to succeed in a male-dominated political world opened doors for women across the political spectrum. Her legacy continues to inspire women in politics every day.

Finally, and most important to me, there is my mum, who was, as far as has been reported, the first woman mechanic on an all-weather lifeboat when she joined the crew of a station in Ireland in 1998. There really is nothing more inspiring—if not a bit scary—for an eight-year-old to watch their mum pull on her drysuit and head out to sea in gale force conditions. She would not forgive me if I did not emphasise the open-mindedness of the men on the crew who, almost 30 years ago, were willing and able to see her potential, not her gender. Just this morning, my mum told me:

"I only became a mechanic because the crew were willing to give me a chance. Decades of tradition with fishermen took me to sea and allowed me to achieve it—particularly Tony the coxswain. If the crew hadn't been so open-minded, I wouldn't have become one."

Let us use this International Women's Day to reaffirm our commitment to empowering women and creating a more equitable future for all.

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

1.15 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for introducing this incredibly important International Women's Day debate. The debate is always well attended, but it is also one of the most informative and heartfelt debates we have in Parliament. I am incredibly proud to take part as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

It has been said that the Committee has had quite a flying start. We have done a lot, but I answer that with the fact that there is a lot to do. This year's International

Women's Day theme, as has already been said, is "Accelerate Action", and we know that we cannot slow down; we do have to accelerate, and not just with words but with action. On behalf of the whole Committee, I am proud to say that we will not be slowing down any time soon.

In less than a year, we have focused our work very much on key areas—we have also continued the fantastic work of the previous Committee—and particularly on health. Last year, we produced a report on women's reproductive health, which we called "Medical Misogyny". Some people said, "That's quite strong," but frankly we could not describe the evidence that we had seen in the inquiry as anything other than medical misogyny.

Diagnosis for adenomyosis and endometriosis takes on average eight years. That is the average, so there are people waiting much longer than eight years just for diagnosis, not treatment. That is women being ignored and being left in pain. I know women who have been eventually diagnosed with adenomyosis or endometriosis but were fobbed off time and again by medical practitioners and doctors. They were told, "Have some paracetamol, a hot water bottle and a lie down and you'll be fine." That, again, is an example of where women are ignored to the detriment of their health as well as our country's health and our economy's health.

Painful procedures such as hysteroscopies and intrauterine device fittings are still taking place for women without any offer of pain relief. A sharp pinch? No, not on my nelly is that a sharp pinch. Again, I am grateful that men do not have to endure that pain, but why is it that women still do? Even though the guidelines have changed, women are still having to go through incredibly painful procedures without the relief that they deserve.

One recommendation in our report made clear the need to educate our young people better about what to expect for women's reproductive health—that goes for boys as well as girls. We need to end the stigma of periods, and period poverty in particular. Young people also need to know what is normal. We were often told, "It's normal that your period will hurt. You'll bleed and you're going to be uncomfortable," but it is not normal to be curled up in bed for seven days. It is not normal for periods or menstrual cycles to be so painful that they stop us from going to school, taking part in PE or going to work. All those things are not normal, yet it has been ingrained in us that it is normal for us to be in pain and that it is normal for our lives to be disrupted by our hormones and everything that is happening with our bodies. Frankly, it is not. That is why one of the recommendations made it clear that we need to do better to educate ourselves and our young people and enable our educators to have the tools and the resources they need so that the next generation of women—and young men—know exactly what happens to a woman's body.

When it comes to research—this stuck in my mind when we were doing the report—far too much has been tailored towards men and men's medical needs. We know that the average paracetamol dose, for example, is the correct dosage for a western male, not for a woman. It is the same with seatbelts and everything else. But here is something: five times more research goes into erectile dysfunction, which affects 19% of men, than premenstrual syndrome, which affects 90% of women. When we talk about action, we need to see it across the board, particularly in health.

There is progress—absolutely, there is—and I am so proud that we will see the Employment Rights Bill come forward next week. But there are always ways to improve—always. The Committee produced a report in January that looked specifically at miscarriage bereavement leave. That issue is very close to my heart, and I know that many inside and outside this Chamber have long campaigned for the right to grieve the loss of a pregnancy following miscarriage. We have seen some movement, and that is incredibly welcome. Now is the time for action.

There are thousands of employers out there that already offer bereavement leave for workers who miscarry. Many are private sector employers and, let us be honest, they are not doing it out of the kindness of their hearts. They are doing it because it is financially rewarding, it is reputationally good and it is good for their workers. They include massive companies such as TUI, which I went to visit last week at the hangar in Luton airport. I did not contain my inner child when I sat in a cockpit, I will tell you that, but once I gathered myself, I asked, “Where are all the women engineers?” They said that they were really struggling, as they want to have more women engineers. I also asked, “Where are your women apprentices?” because they have fantastic apprenticeships there. They are so ripe and they are ready. I asked, “What are your workplace policies for miscarriage?” They said, “Do you know what? I wish more people knew.” TUI offers time off for grief, with miscarriage bereavement leave. There are companies out there—the Co-operative Group is another—doing the right thing and trying to make sure that the workplace is right for women.

In the case of public sector employers, the NHS offers miscarriage bereavement leave for its workers. The largest public sector employer of women in our country offers bereavement leave for those who miscarry. I have had representatives sat in front of me in two different Committees—the Public Accounts Committee pre-election and now the Women and Equalities Committee—and I asked them twice how much that cost. The chief finance officer for the NHS said it was de minimis. Translation: basically nothing. It is not costing them anything to offer that; if anything, it is saving them in terms of staff retention and length of time off sick. When we do not grieve well and do not have the space and time to grieve, we store up problems in the longer term. I think society has caught up with that; it is time the law did too.

We heard in Committee about the difference that a change in law could make, from women who were brave enough to give testimony of their experiences of multiple miscarriages, and of having to drive themselves to hospital because their partner or their husband could not take time off and nearly bleeding to death along the way. I know the difference a change in law could make and how angry I was when I had to take sick pay. When I had my three miscarriages, people were really lovely and I was very open about it, but not one single person said to me, “Get better soon.” They said, “I am sorry for your loss.” If society has moved on and realises that miscarriage and pregnancy loss is a loss and not a sickness, it is time our law did as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) mentioned maternal health in her intervention, and I know that we will hear more about

the need to close the gap on maternal death rates for black mothers. Clo and Tinuke at Five X More are doing fantastic work on that, and I praise everybody who is working to close that gap, because it is much needed.

Yesterday, at the Select Committee, we heard evidence on female genital mutilation. There are an estimated 137,000 victims of FGM in our country, and I fear that number is much higher from the evidence we heard yesterday on the levels of under-reporting. There was much noise and much movement and progress made 10 years ago, but that progress has stalled. Some of the training manuals for doctors and midwives are 10 years out of date. They are well past time for review, and in the last 10 years, we have seen about three prosecutions for FGM. I know that prosecution is perhaps not where we need to be, and I do not want to predetermine the outcome of the report, but prevention is a huge part of the answer. We will present our report accordingly.

Another area on which we have produced a report is technology, which has already been touched upon. We produced a very chunky report on non-consensual intimate image abuse, which is a deeply personal crime that can have life-changing and life-threatening consequences, as the lived experience of inquiry witness Georgia Harrison demonstrates. The Committee heard shocking evidence about the scale and impact of NCII abuse, with a tenfold increase in just four years and more than 22,000 reported cases in 2024.

Every victim of a sexual offence deserves to be treated with respect and have their case investigated promptly and effectively by the police; however, that is not what we heard. In many cases, police treatment of victims of intimate image abuse has been characterised by a lack of understanding and in some cases misogyny, with officers choosing to patronise victims rather than support them. That is totally unacceptable and must change.

We welcome the Government's proposals to make creating NCII an offence, but a legal gap remains. NCII can continue to circulate online years after the image was posted. Even though many sites will eventually remove the content when prompted, around 10% do not. There is not yet enough in the Government's proposals in the Crime and Policing Bill to address that concern. We would love to see the Government bring forward amendments to the Bill to make possession of NCII, in addition to their creation, an offence. That will put NCII on the same footing as child sexual abuse material in how they are treated online and, we hope, provide the necessary encouragement to block or disrupt access to such content, particularly that which has been hosted overseas.

We are also doing work on community cohesion, gendered Islamophobia, shared parental leave and women in business and entrepreneurs, which is incredibly important because the Government are focused on growth. Women must play a significant part in that.

There is a lot that I could talk about; there is far too much in this speech already, and I am sure that there will be loads in this debate. But we live in an increasingly divisive world, and women are at the sharp end of it. Why do we even need an International Women's Day debate? To be honest, I really wish we did not, but we need it because progress is not inevitable. We are seeing in countries such as Iraq the lowering of the age of consent to nine. “Nine” and “consent”: those two words do not go together; a child cannot give consent. Women's

[Sarah Owen]

bodies are being used as weapons of war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Kashmir, in the middle east and in Xinjiang—the list goes on. It is harder to be a woman than it should be.

One day, I really hope that we will need International Women's Day not to highlight the problems or ask for action but to celebrate the progress. There has been progress made, and I want to end on a high note, which is sport. Women's sport: I love it—absolutely adore it—and I know that there are some big fans here. From the Lionesses to Luton Town Ladies, there are fantastic successes. I was all excited when the Lionesses were on television, but I am so glad that when I said to my five-year-old girl, “Look at this! Look at women's football! It's on the television!”, she looked at me and went, “Yeah,” and shrugged her shoulders. For her, that is the norm; it is not something special. For me, it is something special to see that, but for her, it is the norm. I want it to be the norm for every little girl in our country.

I will now do something that is a little bit left-field for me. I went to a Sky Sports event and it was fantastic. Sporty Spice was there, so the 16-year-old me was even more excited than in the cockpit of a plane. There were fantastic sportswomen but also the people who support and show the sport and show that there is money and progress to be had from it and that people want to watch and consume it and cheer sportswomen on from the stands. At the start of the event, there was an incredible spoken word piece—there was also a song, but do not worry, I will not sing—by a fantastic and beautiful artist called Sophia Thakur. We all know that famous Barbie monologue; we have all heard it, haven't we? For me, this just goes one step further, and I will end by reading just a little bit of what she said.

It is called “Gladiators”:

They say you're strong for a girl. Or fast for a woman.
 How can she be a girl? How can gold be a woman?
 They call you a butterfly because they see those wings.
 I know you're the eagle type, high above these things.
 They say to act like a girl, but the whole world wouldn't be
 if we deceived our power.
 The land trembles as we rise from the dust came our towers.
 But we meet these mountains that we are expected to climb.
 But with no sweat, no muscles, no grind.
 But with makeup and gentleness,
 and the kind of competitiveness that's comfortable for them
 and kind.
 They're like, “Would you mind maintaining your shape? Your
 figure 8.
 Don't get too strong. Practise a soft voice and some grace.
 But still win. Still first place but like a lady might.”
 Funny there. It's when I'm my strongest, I feel most like the
 lady type.
 When these legs activate and I can jump to crazy heights.
 When these shoulders broaden and I can carry both the world
 and its opinions straight to the finish.
 God bless the strength in these arms. Ah, how they have held
 me over the years.
 And God bless the sisters I have found sat across from my
 fears.
 This table is laid before us in the presence of our frenemies.
 We're celebrated for our wins. Whilst they berate our anatomy.

To be a woman is to live twice. To live firstly for the thing that
 you love

and then a second life for the fight.

One mind for the game and then this other for the might
 that it might take to still choose this day after day.

Give the girls two gold medals.

Give the women double the pay.

Give them triple their portion.

Let your applause reverberate.

Sing her song when you sing of the greats and strike for a
 woman from after her name

because if she has changed the face of the whole game, she is
 victorious over history.

Would you like to be as you grow? Who would you like to
 become as you age?

Would you like to be pretty, have your face across pages, or
 would you like to be demure?

Known for your softness and your patience or a girl.

Tell me how would you like to become a gladiator.

To all the women gladiators in this place, past and
 present, and outside it—thank you. One day, International
 Women's Day will be about the realisation of all our
 hopes and ambitions. Until that day, I am proud to be
 gladiators with you.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order.
 We start with an immediate four-minute time limit.

1.32 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am
 honoured to speak in this debate in advance of International
 Women's Day on Saturday 8 March, which I will be
 celebrating with the all-women steam train crew at Rheilffordd
 Talyllyn railway in Tywyn.

International Women's Day remains as relevant now
 as ever. We, and the generations of women who have
 come before us, have achieved so much since the first
 International Women's Day in 1911, but we still have a
 long way to go. When we talk about a gender-equal society,
 let us be clear about where we mean: in the home, in
 public spaces, in the workplace.

Here in Westminster, we celebrate that 40% of this
 Parliament are now women. Indeed, we were taking a
 photograph just yesterday morning to that effect. In the
 Senedd, the cross-party women's caucus has been re-
 established—a bold show of force between women across
 the political divide. Those are positive steps towards a
 gender balance but not necessarily towards gender equality,
 including equally safe workplaces, which I will speak
 about now.

Members will know that a 2023 TUC poll found that
 three in five women have experienced sexual harassment,
 bullying or verbal abuse in the workplace. Reports of
 sexual assault, rape, stalking and coercive control from
 colleagues make up around 50% of calls made to the
 Rights of Women sexual harassment at work advice
 line, but as it stands, protections are limited.

The Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act
 2010) Act 2023 created a preventive duty for employers
 to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in
 the workplace, but an automatic investigation into a
 breach of that duty only takes place after an individual

successfully brings a claim of sexual harassment, and many other forms of gender-based violence in the workplace are excluded.

Meanwhile, the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, which is so familiar to employers, places a duty on employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of employees at work. Why not use the toughest mechanism we have in the workplace to tackle workplace gender-based harassment and violence too? That is exactly what my Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (Amendment) Bill, developed with the brilliant Suzy Lamplugh Trust and Rights of Women seeks to do, alongside new clauses 39 and 40 to the Employment Rights Bill, which would have the same effect. I hope that hon. Members will consider supporting those new clauses.

My Bill would introduce clear, actionable duties for employers to protect workers from violence and harassment, including risk assessments, policy development and the provision of recognition and prevention training to all employees. Those boring-sounding things would make a difference in the workplace and to people's lives. The Bill would mandate the Health and Safety Executive, which does not currently consider gender-based violence a workplace hazard and is not viewed as the primary authority for bullying, harassment or domestic abuse in the workplace, to develop and publish an enforceable health and safety framework on violence and harassment in the workplace and to issue guidance for employers. Leveraging health and safety legal frameworks that are already in place would require employers to actively work towards eliminating gender-based violence, while establishing a systematic and publicly enforceable approach to the prevention of, and safeguarding from, the spectrum of gender-based violence in the workplace.

If these are the differences we wish to make—differences to women's lives in the workplace—let us use all the powers we have at our disposal and make them work for women more effectively than they presently do. Let's use all our powers. I hope everyone enjoys International Women's Day on Saturday.

1.35 pm

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): It is an honour to be here today as the first MP to represent Bolsover who is a woman. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you. I am surrounded by fantastic women not only here, but in Bolsover—women who run businesses and nurture our next generation, such as foster carer Sonja Dayson in Creswell, women who inspire us as community leaders, such as Helen Marriott of Pinxton scouts, with nearly four decades of dedication, and women who support charities to thrive and fight to make a difference with tenacity, like Edwina Cant of Bolsover Woodlands Enterprise. I will spend this week celebrating them all and more.

Today I want to talk about the hidden issues that affect us women—too often our private burden. If we look at the last Parliament, the BBC was discussed more often than childcare. Fishing was five times more likely to be mentioned than menopause. This historic House, which women died to get us into, spent more time discussing football than rape.

My daughter—she is brave and wonderful—tells me, "Mum, every time you talk about rape, every time you say the word, I bristle. Please do not stop." My baby—my little baby—is about to start big school. The data tells

me that while she is there, she will witness sexual harassment and potentially be sent dick pics, and there is nothing that I can do to protect her from that.

This is not a class or age thing; it does not matter how far we go back. It is an accepted part of the story of Mary Queen of Scots that the nobles chose among themselves who was going to rape her with the intention of impregnating her. Yet we still do not accept that that happens in the UK. Ten births happen every day from rape. There is no charity to support those women and no advice on the NHS website. The men can access those children at any time they like. Every single one of us has either been raped or knows someone who has been raped. Rape is a part of our story as women, yet it is a part that we do not tell.

I want to tell you about rape and being an MP. Rape threats are an accepted part of the job. I thank the Minister for speaking up about this disgusting truth. I am the 690th woman MP. Rape Crisis estimates that a quarter of women have been raped or sexually assaulted. If we apply that data to MPs, that means that 172 of us have been raped, and half of them—86 woman MPs—will have been raped more than once. Statistically, 28 of them will have reported it. Given a miracle, or on an optimistic day, one could have led to a conviction—at the very best.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way during her extremely powerful speech. Will she remind everybody of the importance not only of the fact of rape, but of prosecuting and convicting the perpetrators of those rapes, so that we remember that this is not simply about a passive violence against women and girls, but about identifying the causes and the people who do those crimes?

Natalie Fleet: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention.

I am proud to be part of a Government who have set out an unprecedented ambition to halve violence against women and girls, but what I want us to think about on this day is how we tell our story. I have spoken publicly about giving birth after being the victim of statutory rape, and I am sick of being told I am brave. I do not want to be brave; I want it to be expected that we tell our truth. Courage calls to courage everywhere. Let us make it normal to talk about rape—in workplaces, in kitchens, with friends. Instead of bristling, let us talk about it like we talk about football; let us talk to our boys about consent and celebrate the men who are our allies. Most importantly, listen to her, support her and, for God's sake, believe her. If you are one of the colleagues, friends or constituents who have told me about your rape, I ask you to tell each other. You will be surprised how many people believe you and then share their story with you, too.

I am the very proud nana of a beautiful granddaughter. She is four weeks old and named after one of the suffragettes who helped me to get here today. I genuinely believe that if we are brave now and make speaking out the norm, we can have a world in which she tells her grandchildren about the fact that they did it and we hid it. I want that to be the part that her grandchildren do not believe. There is a lot to do and it can feel overwhelming, but let us put our arms around each other and use our power to force that shame to change sides.

1.41 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I think that International Women's Day is fantastic because it gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to someone whose birthday would have been on International Women's Day had she not been born in 1909. I hope that she passes the "gladiator" bar to which the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) referred.

Beatrice Shilling is one of the most consequential people of the 20th century that people have never heard of. She was born in Waterlooville, Hampshire, and soon became one of those children who loves taking things to bits—she won a Meccano prize. She saved up her pocket money and bought her first motorbike at the age of 14. By 1936, she was only the second woman ever to record an average speed of 100 mph around the Brooklands circuit just over the River Thames from my Spelthorne constituency.

By 1939, Beatrice Shilling was at the Royal Aircraft Establishment. Obviously, the second world war was upon us. Crucially, the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine used in the Hurricanes and Spitfires had a fatal flaw: once pilots went into a negative G-force dive, the engine had a propensity to flood and cut out. The Germans did not have that problem because they had a fuel injector, and they soon worked out that the British pilots faced the dilemma of whether or not to follow them. That could have been catastrophic, so people turned to Tilly Shilling, as she was universally known, to come up with a solution. She invented a small thing—the size of a thimble—with a little hole in it, which could, crucially, be fitted to the fuel line of the Merlin engine without taking the plane to bits, meaning that the much-needed air power of the second world war could remain in the fight.

Beatrice Shilling faced a certain amount of male condescension. The device she had designed was referred to as "Miss Shilling's orifice". However, no one minded the fact that, when fitted to the planes, the devices kept them in the fight. She contributed an extraordinary amount to the winning of the second world war. I welcome International Women's Day because it gives me the chance to tell that story. At a time when clouds are again darkening around the world and the nation has to re-arm, and, as we have heard, we must encourage the Tilly Shillings of tomorrow to come forward to contribute to our defence and aerospace industry, I hope that her story will inspire many people across the country to see that they can make a huge contribution to our national defence.

1.45 pm

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): In my almost 10 years in this place, I have become somewhat vocal on women's issues. Some would call me a "ferocious campaigner", others a "challenging mouthpiece", but I will take both. My passion for ensuring that women get access to the support and services they need is what drives me—from women struggling through the menopause to women in prison, and women who are victims of domestic violence, human trafficking or modern slavery. It has been my mission to use this platform to be their voice.

Today, I will speak about an industry that is powered by women but is all too often overlooked and undervalued. As a former co-chair—alongside you, Madam Deputy Speaker—of the previous Parliament's all-party parliamentary

group on beauty and wellbeing, which we are reconvening, I have often spoken about the personal care sector. We championed such businesses during the pandemic, when they were belittled by those in power and were among the last businesses to reopen. Since then, we have continued to promote the contribution that they make to our economy, as well as the physical health and mental wellbeing benefits that they bring to society.

More than 80% of those working in the personal care industry are women, and the industry has one of the highest rates of business ownership compared with other sectors—especially for women. In fact, women are four times more likely to own a personal care business than a business in any other sector. "The Future of the High Street", a report published by the Federation of Small Businesses last year, recognised that women owners of small and medium-sized enterprises were more likely to engage with their communities, but also highlighted the difficulties women faced, such as excessively high rental costs, when women typically earn less than their male counterparts and bear the brunt of the time and cost demands of raising a family.

It is especially encouraging therefore to see that beauty and wellbeing businesses, which are predominately owned and staffed by women, continue to open and thrive—and they really are thriving. In 2023, there was an 11% year-on-year growth in the GDP contribution of the industry to £27.2 billion. The same year saw a 10% increase in the industry's workforce, with businesses employing 418,000 people. Professional services, such as salons, directly employed 224,000 people, of which 180,000 were women.

Every day, the industry plays a role in our lives—from the products we buy to the services we use. It keeps us clean, enhances our appearance and helps us to protect our physical and mental health. Will the House join me in wishing every woman who works in the personal care sector or owns a business—let us face it, they will probably be working all day Saturday—a very happy International Women's Day? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am imposing an immediate three-minute time limit. I call Seamus Logan.

1.48 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a true privilege to speak in this year's debate. I will start by acknowledging just some of the women in Scottish politics who are inspiring and paving the way for future generations of women in Scotland, especially the next generation of female politicians. There is our Chief Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who would have loved to be here today but sadly could not make it; Karen Adam, our MSP for Banffshire and Buchan Coast; and two—only two—of our local councillors in Aberdeenshire: Gwyneth Petrie, our opposition group leader, and Louise McAllister, our group chair.

I pay tribute to the tireless work done by Sally Donald, a member of staff for my neighbouring MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter). As co-chair of ParliGender, the workplace equality network advocating for gender equality

in Parliament, she has introduced a mentorship scheme for female members of staff, which has been very popular, showing the demand for such schemes in this place.

While I stand here and thank the women who have committed their time, energy and lives to the people of Scotland, I want to take a second to note that at our current pace, a girl born today will be nearly 40 years old before women in this place hold as many seats in Parliament as men. That is a devastating statistic in the face of this year's theme: rights, equality and empowerment. Although we are honoured to be in a Parliament that has the highest number of female MPs in history, let us not forget that women were only able to stand in elections as late as 1918. Up until 1997, women had never held more than 10% of the seats in Parliament.

On this day dedicated to the rights, equality and empowerment of all women, I want to acknowledge the additional challenges that exist for women in today's society, the obstacles they face to enter the world of politics and those that persist once they are here. I want to acknowledge how much stronger and more diverse this House would be with more female colleagues sitting on these Benches.

I pay tribute to the great women of our independence movement in Scotland. There are too many to mention, but I will name two: the late, great Winnie Ewing, who was an MP here, and the late president of the Fraserburgh SNP branch, Nancy Duthie. I am endlessly inspired by my female colleagues and the female Members on these Benches. I ask the Minister what initiatives the Government are taking to encourage more women and girls to access a career in politics, so that they may follow in the footsteps of all my female colleagues and ensure that the equal rights of all women are at the core of everything this Parliament is working towards.

Finally, I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) on securing this debate and on the powerful speech she made. The hon. Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) talked about the need for us to speak out about rape cases. In the debate on SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—in November, I brought to the Minister's notice a rape case. I was promised a ministerial meeting, and I am still waiting on that meeting. That was five months ago, so perhaps the Minister here today could respond to that.

1.51 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for securing this important debate. It is with huge pride that I stand here today as the first woman MP for Huddersfield—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]—but hopefully not the last. Female leadership continues in my local area, with a female leader of the council and our fantastic West Yorkshire Mayor, Tracy Brabin, and deputy Mayor, Alison Lowe. Of course, I have to mention you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as a proud Yorkshire woman—that is fantastic.

International Women's Day is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate the achievements of women, but it also marks a call to action to accelerate women's equality. Around the world, we are witnessing a growing push-back against women's rights—advances that were made painstakingly over decades. As parliamentarians, we have a particular responsibility to ensure that we do everything we can to progress women and girls' equality and fight back against the culture wars from those who

try to give easy and angry responses to complex problems, which too often pit us against each other when many of us are fighting for the same goals.

I recently attended a Reclaim the Night march in Huddersfield, the first of which took place in Leeds back in 1977. As with those first powerful marches in the 1970s, we were there to renew our commitment to building a future free from violence against women and girls and to assert our right to go out without fear, whatever time of day or night it is. Recent data shows that 2 million women are estimated to be victims of violence perpetrated by men each year. That is one in 12 women. Police chiefs have warned of young men being radicalised online by so-called influencers. As the Safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), said,

"The scale of violence against women and girls in our country is intolerable, and the Government will treat it as a national emergency."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 492.]

I am very glad that she is in that role, doing this work.

I am proud that we have more women in this Parliament than we have ever had, but we are only at 40%, so there is still more to do. I am glad that a women's caucus has been established to look at issues on a cross-party basis, but the onus cannot just be on women; we must all act together and say, "Enough is enough."

I want to note a couple of local organisations in Huddersfield that work really hard to support women, including the Pennine Domestic Abuse Partnership, Kirklees Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre, WomenCentre and the Lipstick Project, among many others.

When it comes to the responsibility of social media giants to curtail behaviour online, we must simply ask, are they doing enough? If the answer is no, we have to demand more. It cannot be right that at times, algorithms are driving this destructive and divisive behaviour.

1.54 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): As the 649th woman to be elected to this House, it is an honour to contribute to this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for her contribution and for securing the debate.

I am struck that, with 650 Members of this House, we are only now in this Parliament reaching the threshold where the number of female MPs matches that. I am particularly proud to be one of only eight newly elected Conservative female MPs, standing alongside 18 distinguished incumbent Conservative female colleagues who have set the bar high. Their dedication, resilience and leadership continues to inspire me and countless women across the country.

My journey to this place has been a long one, and it began 15 years ago when I first joined the Conservative candidates list. However, like many, my journey actually started far earlier, as I spent far too many years thinking of running without ever putting my name forward or making it known that this was what I might want to do.

As Conservatives, we champion equal opportunities for everyone across the United Kingdom, ensuring that individuals, regardless of their sex, race or background, can achieve their full potential. We are the only political party to have elected a female Prime Minister, not once, not twice, but three times. We made history with Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979, and we continue to make

[Alison Griffiths]

history today under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), our fourth female leader.

In government, we took action to support women at work, ensuring that over 2 million more women entered paid employment between 2010 and 2023, boosting our economy and securing financial independence for many. We launched the women's health strategy, ensuring better healthcare outcomes for women, and we restored sex-specific language to the NHS, to protect female-only medical care. We introduced 30 hours of free childcare per week for working parents, easing the burden on families and supporting mothers who want to return to work. However, there is still more work to do, and there always will be. As Conservatives, we will always fight to ensure that every woman, no matter her background, can reach her full potential.

1.58 pm

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler). International Women's Day, observed every year on 8 March, is a day dedicated to recognising the invaluable contributions that women have made in every sphere of life—social, political, economic and cultural. It is a day to celebrate women's successes, but it is also a day to look at the challenges that remain and to reinforce the resolve to dismantle the barriers that continue to impede the progress of women and girls everywhere.

In 1908, a group of women garment workers in New York city took to the streets to protest for better wages and working conditions. That same year, the Socialist party of America organised the first National Woman's Day in honour of those women who were demanding their rights. It was not until 1975, however, that the United Nations formally began recognising 8 March as International Women's Day.

What began as a call for social change in the early 20th century has evolved into a global celebration and recognition of women's achievements and struggles. As we celebrate, we must remember that this day is not only about celebration; it is about progress. While so much has been achieved, we must also acknowledge the challenges and inequalities that persist. For example, women in many parts of the world still earn on average only 70% to 80% of what men make for the same work, and that gap widens in the corporate world where women are often under-represented in leadership and decision-making positions. Around 33% of women globally face physical or sexual violence, and rates are higher in conflict zones.

Educational opportunities for girls, especially in underprivileged regions, remain a challenge, and the list of issues continues. Moreover, women of colour, LGBT women and women with disabilities often experience multiple layers of discrimination which amplify the challenges they face. That intersectionality reminds us that gender equality is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour, and it is crucial that we consider the unique experiences of all women as we work towards more inclusivity. Throughout history, women have been leaders, innovators and change-makers, often in the face of immense adversity. From Marie Curie's groundbreaking scientific discoveries to Malala Yousafzai's advocacy for girls' education,

women have demonstrated resilience and strength. In politics, leaders such as Angela Merkel, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Jacinda Ardern have proved that women can lead nations with wisdom, compassion and strength.

Women have been the driving force in movements for social justice, environmental sustainability and human rights. The #MeToo movement, started by activist Tarana Burke, has empowered countless women to share their stories and demand an end to sexual harassment and violence. Those women, and countless others, remind us of the transformative power that women hold when they are given the opportunity, support, and resources to succeed. They have pushed boundaries, shattered glass ceilings, and paved the way for future generations of women to thrive. Their efforts demonstrate that when women are empowered, all of society benefits.

2.1 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Many women in my constituency are doing incredible things, and I am pleased to speak in this debate on International Women's Day. Judith Ballard, Moira Allen, Molly and Rachel Fitton, and Joy Russell are all leading members of the Save Pawlett Hams action group, who successfully convinced EDF that it should not destroy a beloved local area of natural beauty with an unwanted salt marsh. Rose Stacey is a successful local business owner, who I nominated for an MP HERoes award for her work in our community and the local people she employs.

Niki Miles visited me in Parliament to raise awareness about the dangers of gambling addiction, in memory of her brother Del. Amy Branson, along with her husband Ben, has campaigned on the injustice of sentencing guidelines, in memory of their daughter Bethany who was killed by a drunk driver in 2022. Emma-Elizabeth Murphy is a special constable who brought my attention to the fact that specials cannot request unpaid time off work like magistrates or councillors. She inspired me to table an amendment to the Employment Rights Bill, and Labour Members can show their support by co-signing new clause 30.

I particularly want to pay tribute to the Nelson Trust Somerset women's centre, based in Bridgwater. Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, the Nelson Trust provides one-stop shop support to more than 5,000 women annually, from its network of women's centres across the south-west and Wales. The centres are safe women-only spaces, provided for women who are experiencing multiple unmet needs, such as homelessness, addiction, mental ill health, domestic and sexual abuse, and familial separation. Having seen the huge difference that the centre makes to some of the most vulnerable women in my constituency, I pay tribute to Gemma Berry and Lorna Griffiths for their incredible work, and for their service not only to women but to our whole community.

2.3 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) on introducing this vital debate. She is a true champion of women's issues and an inspiration to many.

Twenty-one fifty-eight—2,158 is not my number; we have a long way to go before we get to that—is the year when, at the current rate of progress, we will see full gender parity. That is 133 years away and five generations of girls who will continue to live under a system of

gender inequality. Imagine if the leaders of the Suffragette movement had known that in spite of their heroic actions it would take another 10 generations before we achieved equality of the sexes. That is why this year's theme, "Accelerate Action" is appropriate, because the current rate of action is unacceptable.

A number of areas will require focus if we are to accelerate progress, but I want to focus on women's health. Members will have heard me speak often about racial disparities in maternity care and the disproportionate fatality rate for black mothers, and more must be done to address that. However, issues around maternity are now worsening for all women in this country. When I first raised the issue of black maternal health in the House, black women were four times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth. That has now reduced to just over three times. Awareness has played a huge role in that, and I pay tribute to Five X More and other organisations that have done so much to raise awareness. Regrettably, most of that decrease is not because maternity services are improving, and the rate of women and babies of all ethnicities dying in pregnancy and childbirth in this country has increased in the past two decades.

The UK sits in the middle to low range of maternal mortality compared with the global standard, but we should not settle for that, just as we should not settle for racial disparities or poor maternal care, especially when our maternal mortality rate is far higher than that of other-high income countries such as Iceland, Norway, and Finland. It is not just in maternity care where women are being failed, because women's health issues have long been overlooked, as men have historically been treated as the default.

For many men, as we have heard, there is just a physical exam and a few questions in order to be diagnosed with something such as erectile dysfunction, but it takes eight years for a woman to receive a diagnosis for endometriosis. Every seven and a half seconds a man is prescribed ED medication, but it takes eight years for a woman to be diagnosed with endometriosis. We still know next to nothing about the causes, symptoms and diagnosis for the management of conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome, despite that impacting one in eight women.

We know so little even about periods, yet almost every person who has experienced one understands the pain and discomfort involved. For any men who are still wondering, yes, a period cramp is typically at least more painful than testicular trauma, while at its worst it is as intense as a heart attack. Only 2.5% of publicly funded research is dedicated to reproductive health, although 90% of women suffer from such issues. Women feel gaslit by their GPs, they are told to go on painkillers, and there is so much more that they are not receiving when they ask for help with their healthcare.

We cannot fight for gender equality when the disparity in the treatment of women's health conditions is so stark. I do not imagine that by next International Women's Day we will have complete gender equality, but I hope we will see some concrete steps towards getting there on health.

2.7 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): There is a saying that has always resonated with me: "When you get to the top, send the lift back down", and those of us privileged to sit on these Green Benches

bear a responsibility to speak up for and support women. I am proud to be an honorary vice-president of the Conservative Women's Organisation—the oldest women's political organisation in the world, which does so much to inspire, encourage and mentor women as they progress in roles in politics and public life.

Time is short, but I want to take a few moments to share with the House some examples of inspiring women in Chester South and Eddisbury. They are women such as Dianne Worby, an entrepreneur who owns and runs her company, Global Air Training, near Tattenhall, and an industry leader who is putting Chester South and Eddisbury on the aviation map; and women such as Helen Bebington, a dairy farmer near Tarvin, who gets up every morning at 4 am to attend to her stock, and who works from dawn till dusk to keep her farm going. According to a recent survey by the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, women in farming, particularly young women, have the worst mental health scores. I have spoken on numerous occasions in this House about the importance of our family farms and mental health, and women are the backbone of the rural community and they deserve to be celebrated today. There are women such as Councillor Rachel Williams from Malpas, who every month cooks a community lunch, bringing people together, combating loneliness and isolation, and supporting others.

International Women's Day is a chance not just to celebrate women, but to highlight where there is still vital work to be done. Too many women face domestic violence, and it is important that women know that we in this House are here for them. I very much welcome the Government's commitment to halve violence against women and girls. I was pleased to support the Institute for Addressing Strangulation at the end of last year by writing to the Minister to emphasise the vital work that it is doing. Two thirds of cases of domestic violence will at some point include a woman being strangled, and it is a red line in the escalation of violence. If a woman has been subject to strangling, the probability that she will go to be murdered in the future increases sevenfold. I am grateful to the Minister who has committed to funding the Institute for Addressing Strangulation for another year, to ensure that the vital work it does can continue. Together, we must speak up and deliver change on behalf of all women on matters such as these.

It is the honour and privilege of my life to be the 575th female Member of Parliament to be elected to this House. I am committed to using the time I have here to do what I can to inspire, support, champion and speak up for women and girls. Together, we can accelerate action.

2.10 pm

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for securing this important debate and all hon. Members for their powerful contributions. My constituency has a proud history of electing only women since the seat was reintroduced in 1997, and I am honoured to continue that tradition today as the 680th female MP. Representation matters.

Stourbridge is home to many incredible women who provide much for our constituency, but I worry that, in a society that can move so fast at times, we may forget to take the time to make our appreciation truly known

[*Cat Eccles*]

to one another as often as we should. In my role, I am fortunate to interact with many amazing women in my constituency, and this year I launched the Sisters of Stourbridge Awards as a chance to shine a light on some of the incredible women making a difference every single day. I would like to tell the House about them.

Chloe Cox is an English teacher at Ridgewood high school who bravely returned to the classroom after surviving a life-threatening brain tumour. Pupils and colleagues alike are so happy to see her back and her resilience is inspiring.

Mandy Hobbis campaigns tirelessly for road safety laws to protect cats, ensuring they are treated with the same respect as dogs. As a champion for animals and the owner of three cats myself, I believe the work that Mandy is doing is important in helping to raise awareness and deliver parity for our pets.

Kate Cooke overcame a stroke to become a human resources manager at one of our great local businesses in Brierley Hill, Emmiera, and has introduced programmes that support children and college students with opportunities for work experience and apprenticeships.

Judith Moreland is a leader in the arts, keeping her In Sound Company community choir alive since 2012, performing at prestigious events such as Community Spirit at Birmingham Symphony Hall and at the Commonwealth games. Her dedication has fostered growth, inclusivity and perseverance, and did so especially during lockdown.

I will also be celebrating Rosemary Taylor, who is in her 80s but still goes out every day, in all weathers, with her little trolley, litter picking all around the area. Heather Cruickshanks turns 80 this year, but she still runs a Rainbow unit and helps the Guides and Trefoil Guild. She was described as an amazing woman by constituents, who are so grateful for her.

Let me not forget Elsie Gayle, who is a driving force behind the all-party parliamentary group on Black maternal health and is fighting to improve maternal care in the UK. Another nominee, Emma Kilbride, is raising funds for Mary Stevens hospice through her Stourbridge jigsaw library. In just 15 months, she has raised more than £26,500.

Anji Burford works at Atlantic House supporting local people in recovery from drugs and alcohol. Last but not least is Samantha Billingham, who I have mentioned in the Chamber before. She is a fierce campaigner for domestic abuse survivors—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Jerome Mayhew.

2.13 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): This is not my first International Women's Day debate, but each one presents a fantastic opportunity to learn about the exceptional women who have made our history and to be reminded, as though I need it, that many of those exceptional women are in the Chamber today.

My contribution for Norfolk is Elizabeth Fry. I am particularly proud of her, because she happens to be my five times great aunt—that is as close as I get to real commitment and fame, I am afraid. In the early

19th century, she was horrified by the conditions in prisons. She visited Newgate prison and instead of walking on by, she took action. She funded prison schools for the children who were incarcerated along with their mothers in those days; she taught employment skills; she promoted rehabilitation as a concept, which was new at that stage; and she developed a wider movement for reform.

In 1818, Elizabeth Fry was the first woman ever to give evidence to a House of Commons inquiry. Directly because of her campaigning work, we have the Gaols Act 1823 and the Prisons Act 1835, which were the beginning of the end of the truly terrible conditions of the 18th century. We talk now about violence against women and girls, but that is not new. In her personal diaries, she expressly discussed the need to protect female prisoners from rape and sexual exploitation.

I recognise that things have improved beyond recognition from those days, and we should celebrate that today and at other times, but too much remains the same. Under the last Government, new offences of stalking, non-fatal strangulation, coercive control and public sexual harassment were introduced. The fact that that new legislation was needed demonstrates our corporate failure to change attitudes. Those conditions would have been familiar to Elizabeth Fry back in the 1820s.

Our work is not about legislation, because that is not the solution. Legislation deals with and treats symptoms, but the problem is the generational transfer of attitudes, I am sorry to say, typically from father to son. It is our work to challenge those generational attitudes. I do not often agree with the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), but on this I stand shoulder to shoulder with her.

2.16 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker. As the previous chief executive officer of the Women's Equality Network Wales, I have a long history of campaigning for women's equality. I was really proud of the work we did on the Diverse5050 campaign to get more women into public and political life, and to make care fair, recognising the huge army of unpaid women carers out there.

The theme of IWD this year is "Accelerate Action", and my goodness me, don't we still need more action? Yes, a whopping 47% of all Welsh MPs are now women, which is brilliant, but there are only two women leaders of Welsh local authorities, one of whom, I am proud to say, is Mary Ann Brocklesby, our very own leader in Monmouthshire.

One of the most difficult issues that women face today is healthcare inequality, and my inbox is full of cases. For many years, women's health has been underfunded and people have not wanted to talk about periods or the menopause. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has done a huge amount in that area. Thanks to her, this place has signed up to the menopause mandate, and it is thanks to her that I feel able to share today my own story, as she has given me the courage to do so.

My journey with the menopause was difficult. For me, it happened overnight. I had increasingly heavy and painful periods that stopped me going to work some days because of the heavy flow; I could not be more than one minute away from the loo. Eventually, the

bleeding was so bad and unstoppable that I ended up in A&E, thinking I had a haemorrhage. It was fibroids, with one as big as an orange. Later, I finally got the hysterectomy I needed and the story ends happily—here I am—but with the hysterectomy came an immediate, overnight menopause. I stupidly thought I could get through it without the help of drugs, and I refused the patches offered to me in the hospital. Despite being the CEO of a Women's Equality Network charity, I had not done my research. I am grateful to my incredible friends and the NHS for helping me to understand what was going on.

I am proud of our Government's bold and important commitment to halve violence against women in a decade, but connected to that is an issue that fills my inbox: the inefficiency of the Child Maintenance Service, which creates an impossible situation. To my mind, it is unforgivable that after a woman has made the difficult decision to leave her partner, she can continue to be abused by her husband financially as the CMS fails to prevent that.

I would like to take a moment to thank the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who has inspired me over the years and done so much on violence against women. Finally, I highlight the talented, inspiring and wonderful women of Monmouthshire who came to my International Women's Day event in Chepstow on Saturday. It was a pleasure to be joined by so many inspiring women, and we raised £500 for Cyfannol Women's Aid.

2.19 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): As other speakers have said, International Women's Day was born out of struggles waged by past generations of women whose efforts and sacrifices will by and large not be recorded in the history books, but whose actions have enabled other women to walk an easier path through life than they perhaps did.

Unfortunately, the continuation of that struggle seems more pertinent now than at any other time in my adult life, as there is a concerted attempt to roll back the hard-won gains of the women's movement. We see that in the toxic influence of a resurgent, reactionary politics, amplified via two loosely regulated social media platforms enabling misogyny literally to reach into the bedrooms of young teenage boys. I am referring to not just the Andrew Tates of the world, but the Donald Trumps of this world, who ridicule the very notion of there being an unequal playing field that hinders the lives of women—indeed, Trump and his supporters state the exact opposite. In their world, it is men, and white men in particular, who are the real victims of moves to tackle inequality.

Two things about that narrative worry me. First, it is getting traction in this country. A study conducted by the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London found that nearly one in two Britons—47%—say that when it comes to giving women equal rights with men, things have gone far enough in Great Britain. That is a notable increase on the 38% who said the same last year, and a stark increase on the proportion who felt that way as recently as 2019. That means that for the first time, Britons are now more likely than Americans to agree that women's equality has gone far enough.

Secondly, those views normalise misogyny and encourage violence against women and girls. They literally put women's lives in danger. It is therefore critical for MPs to reassert the reality of institutionalised misogyny and sexism, which more often than not is denied, whether in the House of Commons, the police force or the military, where instances of misogyny are put down to some bad apples and the institutions involved are let off the hook. We have to demonstrate more forcefully a zero-tolerance approach to hate and abuse against women. We also need more practical measures right now to make it safer for women to live their lives free of harassment and to go about their everyday lives without fear of attack. Two years after the murder of Sarah Everard, it should be the least that we can do in her memory, and in the memory of approximately 450 women murdered by—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order.

2.22 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for allowing us to do what this House does at its best: speak as one and work together.

International Women's Day is an opportunity for us all to celebrate the achievements of women, reflect on the progress we have made and, crucially, recommit to the work still to be done. As we have been rightly reminded throughout this debate, there are still many, many battles to be won, whether in our local communities, across the nation or globally. Women have always been at the forefront of change, often having to fight to have their voices heard, yet they have made significant contributions and led movements for justice and equality. The fight for women's rights is a fight for economic justice, reproductive rights and freedom from violence and discrimination. It is a fight against exploitation, trafficking and the silencing of women's voices.

The theme for International Women's Day this year is "Accelerate Action". While every single one of us in this place has a role to play in that, it is also necessary for our communities. Like other Members, I will take a moment to share the stories and celebrate the achievements of some really spectacular women in my constituency. However, not a single one of them would say that they were spectacular or that they are doing something above and beyond. They are women like Lavinia McElhinney, the ladies' president at Woodilee bowling club, whom I met at the club's fundraising coffee morning last year. Women's sports, such as bowling, are just as important as the sport on the telly.

There is Louise Carberry, a primary 7 pupil at Kilsyth primary school, whose app-designing skills saw her win the Make It Happen Club app design challenge. Her "save the whale" idea was not only recognised, but developed into reality—yet another woman going into science, technology, engineering and maths. There is also RSE, an engineering company in my constituency that is overwhelmingly recruiting graduate women engineers in the water industry. There are the inspiring women of Kilsyth and Stepps guiding. I must admit that I am biased—I was a Guide, a Brownie and an occasional adult volunteer—but the volunteers there are bringing young women forward.

Our fight is not finished. The battle for equality continues everywhere, so let us recommit ourselves to not only celebrating progress, but truly accelerating action.

2.25 pm

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): As I grow older, I find myself becoming more and more intensely aware of the injustices that confront women and girls every day in the UK. I will cover a few points, beginning with health. It is alarming to note that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recognises that up to nine out of 10 women suffer from period pain—three out of 10 of them severely—and that up to three in eight adolescent girls and women face heavy periods, with one in 20 women in their 30s and 40s taking the difficult step to consult their GP each year because of heavy periods or menstrual problems. Those issues are very common, but we should not accept them as normal—I really welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) on them.

It is equally alarming to recognise the error bands in those statistics; they are huge, with the upper limits being five and 10 times the lower limit values for the two stats that I opened with. We simply do not know enough about these conditions. We have a deficit in research, knowledge and clinical solutions, and we need to do more. Those issues are the lived experiences of women, but they are the responsibility of us all.

I will talk about an issue that sits primarily with men. I have listened to the stories of men in my constituency of Worcester talking about the impact that pornography has had on their mental health, on their relationships and, by extension, on the women in their lives. Pornography is wildly addictive, harmful to men and hazardous to women. We are now in a world where it is industrially available and increasingly violent, and it is silently fuelling sexual violence and exploitation. I want us to move rapidly to implement regulation and enforcement that is fierce, fast and forceful to make our country safe.

I will also raise a local issue in my constituency of Worcester, which is very urgent and important. The DAWN project supports survivors of domestic violence in Worcestershire. I have heard at first hand the stories of survivors who have found their lives transformed by the service. It is saving lives and restoring futures, but it is at risk, as funding streams are drying up. Local people in Worcester are digging deep and trying to crowdfund money to support the charity in the meantime, but I would be very grateful if the Minister would meet with me to discuss ways in which we can secure the future of the DAWN project in Worcester.

2.27 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for bringing this important debate to the House.

It is vital that we honour International Women's Day to not only recognise the remarkable achievements of women in my city of Gloucester and across the country, but accelerate the drive for equality that is still so desperately needed. Sadly, far too many women come to my surgeries with harrowing experiences of discrimination in the workplace, inequalities in the healthcare system and violence and domestic abuse at home. Many are deeply concerned about the alarming rise in violence, and last year, sadly, we saw sexual and domestic abuse and violence reach record levels in Gloucester.

On the latter point, I am proud to have presented my ten-minute rule Bill earlier this year, which seeks to provide victims and survivors of domestic abuse with

the right to access 10 days of paid safe leave. I have had the privilege of working with employers and organisations such as the Hollie Gazzard Trust, Women's Aid, FearFree, SafeLives and the Gloucestershire Domestic Abuse Support Service to develop that Bill. We know that one in four women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, meaning that the Bill will help many women to rebuild their lives, and I encourage the Government to add that to their mission.

The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "Accelerate Action", and I am encouraged by the Government's commitment to do just that. We have committed to an ambitious plan to halve violence against women and girls by introducing Raneem's law; protecting victims of stalking, domestic abuse and harassment; criminalising spiking; improving healthcare and maternity services, particularly for women of colour, and closing the racial mortality gap; tackling sex-based discrimination at work; supporting women during maternity and the menopause; and closing the gender pay gap.

I would like to take this moment to celebrate some of the inspirational women in my city, including the fantastic Gloucester-Hartpury women's rugby team, who go for their third successive title next Sunday; my good friend Mary Smith, the only female leader of Gloucester city council in the past 30 years; Carol Francis, the first black female councillor in Gloucester, who continues to champion her community; Zafeera Karim, who as the Member of the Youth Parliament for Gloucester and the Forest of Dean gave a brilliant speech in this House just last week; and Julie Kent, who founded the charity Emily's Gift and will soon become high sheriff.

Earlier this year, we lost Baroness Sally Oppenheim-Barnes, who died in January after years of service to our city. We also thank other inspirational women for their service to Gloucester and the wider county as they step down this year, including Sally Byng at the Barnwood Trust, Anne Whitworth at the Gloucester Law Centre, Sue Cunningham at GL Communities and Mary Hutton at the Gloucestershire integrated care board. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) about the Nelson Trust, which does brilliant work in my constituency. I will continue to use my position in this House to celebrate the successes of women in Gloucester, but also to advocate for a brighter future for women, which I hope we can all agree will lead to a brighter future for Gloucester and for our country.

2.30 pm

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The first time I saw the Alison Lapper Pregnant sculpture in Trafalgar Square, it took my breath away. The swollen belly of Lapper spoke of a body that was loved and carried life. It said, "I exist—bodies like mine exist, and therein there is beauty. We shall no longer be invisible."

However, unlike non-disabled women, our experiences of pregnancy have not been celebrated or discussed. When I found out in 2017 that I was pregnant, I was filled with joy and a deep connection to my body and unborn child. Growing up, the absence of disabled women's representation in discussions of sexuality, relationships, menstruation, menopause and maternity left me feeling that my womanhood did not count—that it was vitiated by my visible physical disability. In contrast, when I was pregnant, my body was no longer just a topic of medical scrutiny; my womanhood was no

longer invisible. I wanted my maternity to be embraced by a healthcare system that supported me in my journey, but that was not my reality. Instead, the system was unprepared for a body like mine.

Early on, I was triaged to a genetic counselling service. I was left feeling devastated. As my pregnancy progressed, there were no specialist midwifery teams, and the lack of awareness of the interaction between my disability and maternity continued. I had to be induced at 37 weeks, leading to a caesarean section. My core muscles were severely impacted and I was left debilitated. After birth, the en-suite room I was put in was inaccessible—the very space that was meant to aid my recovery became another barrier. Upon discharge, the occupational therapy team had no specialist advice on how I could breastfeed outside of my home or carry my baby. I became increasingly dependent on family members. I was exhausted and lost my confidence, not because of anything I had done, but because the structures that were meant to support me did not know how to do so.

My experience came eight years after the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities raised concerns that the UK had failed to mainstream disabled women's rights into healthcare. This week, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine has published a report demonstrating that disabled women are more likely to experience stillbirth, have lower rates of breastfeeding, and endure longer post-natal hospital stays.

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. Does she agree with me and with my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) that health services for women of colour are also lagging very far behind?

Dr Tidball: I certainly do, and I want to ensure that our health services take a more intersectional approach. Indeed, UK maternity policy continues to overlook women's needs. Now it is time for action.

Disabled women should experience high-quality, inclusive maternity care. We need joined-up, meaningful, inclusive maternity care pathways throughout pregnancy, birth and the post-natal period to improve access, experience and outcomes for disabled women. Crucially, there must be nothing about us without us. Disabled women must be central in improving maternity care services, and while I met some wonderful clinicians, we must increase their understanding through better training and update clinical guidelines to secure appropriate care. Finally, we must ensure that healthcare facilities, equipment and information are accessible, and that reasonable adjustments to maternity wards enable disabled women to recover from birth with dignity.

2.35 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) for her incredibly powerful speech, all the women who I have heard speak today, and those who have formed such a supportive group as new MPs in this House.

However, the people I primarily want to thank today are the women who look after my children, and all the women who look after all of our children. Of course, childcare is not solely the provenance of women, but the overwhelming majority of the childcare workforce

in this country are women. It is some of the most undervalued work in our society—it is often paid at minimum wage—and other parents cannot work without it. I know that nursery providers are currently deeply concerned. Labour is putting £1.8 billion into the early years, and we want 75% of children to be school-ready. That is an ambitious target, and I am proud of it, but the people who will deliver that work are our childminders and our nursery staff.

Childcare is key national infrastructure, for which we need a stable and well-trained workforce. If we do not fund early years and childcare well enough, the risk is that the only businesses that will survive in this sector will be major chain nurseries backed by private equity. Those are the businesses that can manage economies of scale, which will enable them to thrive in most environments. There is nothing wrong with those nurseries—I do not wish to suggest that the staff who work in them are anything other than committed, or that their owners are working for anything other than the greater good. However, I do not want to see small, passionate, women-owned businesses squeezed out of the sector, which might happen. That is partly because that is the kind of childcare I had for my children in the early years, so I want it to be an option for all children, but it is also partly because in Australia, when the ABC nursery chain went bust, 19,000 families lost their childcare overnight. I guarantee that it was predominantly women who did not go to work the next day, not those children's fathers.

A consolidated sector is an inherently fragile one. As such, I hope that in the upcoming spending review, we will look at the rates that we pay for three and four-year-old childcare, as I understand that that is part of what is causing concern. I also hope we will make sure that our breakfast club places are kept for as long as we can possibly manage, and that they are well funded, so that their uptake is—as we all need it to be—100%.

I want to say thank you to all the women who have inspired me, both in this Chamber and beyond, and all those women who have helped me. Most of all, though, I want to say thank you to the women who looked after me and the women who look after my children.

2.37 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), who is an incredible activist for women. I cannot express what an honour it is to speak in today's debate. My number is 567, and it is the honour of my life to have it.

This year's theme, "Accelerate Action", could not be more relevant. My constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages has a proud history of women taking action against misogyny and inequality, and today I want to honour that legacy while also shining a light on the challenges we still face. One of the most remarkable women from Stafford's history is Alice Hawkins, a suffragette who worked in the Stafford shoe industry before moving to Leicester, where she became a key figure in the fight for women's right to vote. Alice lived on Red Lion Street, and her activism reminds us that change happens when ordinary working-class women take extraordinary action. We owe it to Alice and the generations before us to continue that fight for equality today.

However, while there is much to be proud of, there are also areas in which we must act with urgency. The statistics on violence against women and girls are shocking

[Leigh Ingham]

—women are three times more likely to be killed by a partner than by not wearing a seatbelt. That is the reality we are dealing with, and in Staffordshire, the situation is dire. In the past five years, Staffordshire Women's Aid, which is based in my constituency, has seen a 361% increase in referrals to its sexual violence services and an 851% increase in referrals to its specialist counselling services. Despite working in the women and girls sector for years, when I heard those figures, I was devastated. Violence against women and girls is happening in every corner of this country, and I firmly believe that it is a national emergency.

In my own casework, I continue to see women, many with children, who are forced to flee their homes and start over again because of domestic abuse. Time and again, it is the women and children who have to uproot their lives, while the perpetrators face far fewer consequences. When I stood for election last year, I was so proud to be a member of a party that has promised to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade, but we must go further. I thank the Minister, who notified me in advance that she will later be referring to my constituent, Rebecca Simkin, who was murdered in July last year. I will be following the debate closely, and I express how grateful I am to the Minister, both as a Member of Parliament and as a woman, for her tireless work in this space. Speaking as someone from this space, she is a very inspiring woman.

Whether it is Alice Hawkins's fight for the vote or women in my constituency striving for equality today, our mission remains the same: to build a society where women can live free from fear and reach their full potential.

2.40 pm

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I rise today as the youngest woman in Parliament and the first woman to represent my constituency of Kettering. I was raised by women: my mum, my nan and my aunt Emma. I am proudly a gen Z woman. Like many others my age, I grew up on social media. I watched this series of "Love Island". This weekend, I am going to see Sabrina Carpenter, and I am still shocked about Molly-Mae and Tommy Fury's break-up. However, absolutely none of that takes away from my ability to serve my constituents.

Being a young woman in this place has its pitfalls, and I know that women MPs bear the brunt of online abuse, making ourselves read daily online comments that criticise our appearance, question our intelligence and threaten our safety. In a post when the election was called last year, more people asked me if I had an OnlyFans account than about our manifesto pledges. Online, I am called "Barbie", I am a "stupid girl", and a "child playing politics" and many more creative things that I cannot say in this House. I know many great women who have not stood for Parliament because of online abuse or worries about their safety, and this House is worse off because of it. My message for women who are thinking about getting into politics is that there is a place for you here, and we need you.

Dr Tidball: Does my hon. Friend agree that she is a phenomenal role model, as a woman with a great knowledge of business? She brings her special expertise to Business and Trade Committee, having worked in the fashion industry.

Rosie Wrighting: I thank my hon. Friend for those really kind comments. The things I see on my screen also translate to real life. When I walk back to my flat tonight, I will not have my headphones on, so I can hear if someone is following me. When I go out with my friends, I will not put my drink down, because I am worried I might be spiked. When a man asks for my number on the tube, all I am thinking is how I can let him down gently, because I am worried how he might take it if I say no.

Ms Billington: I would just like to remark, in support of my hon. Friend's observations about the experience of being a female Member of Parliament, that as candidates we were advised by a bunch of white men about security by this place. We looked at each other, we female candidates, and observed that almost everything they were suggesting that we do—"Walk in the light. Don't have your headphones on. Be careful where you stand on a platform"—was basically the advice we had been given by our mothers at the age of 12.

Rosie Wrighting: Yes, I absolutely agree. I am sad to say that that advice was not new to us. Those, sadly, are things that we have had to learn just through our own experiences. I also put on the record my admiration for colleagues across this House from ethnic minority backgrounds and the LGBTQ+ community and for female Members who have disabilities, because they fight a fight I cannot even imagine.

I am surrounded, though, by many great male colleagues in this place, and I know that we cannot accelerate action or uplift or empower young women without also engaging young men. We have to be clear that we cannot tackle violence against women and girls without supporting young men at this vital point. My constituency is not unique in having women who have been killed by a family member or partner, and I want to take a moment to mention a horrific case of Anju Asok, who was a well-loved nurse in Kettering. She was killed alongside her two children in December 2022 by her husband. Anju went to work every day to look after others and support our vital public services, but when she needed support the most, she was let down.

We have so much more to do to make women feel safe at work, walking down the street, and even in our own homes. I know that Members across this House will continue to work together to make sure that we can accelerate that action.

2.45 pm

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): Every year more than 1.6 million women in this country experience domestic abuse, and my constituency of Knowsley has recently had the highest rate of femicide. I am determined to do everything in my power to keep women safe in my constituency.

Paula Leather was from Knowsley and in her family's words, Paula was

"beautiful inside and out...so kind, so loving and she was the person that was there for everyone."

She worked at Asda and was the mum of Jason, Jessica and Matthew and the proudest nanny to her first grandson, but Paula's husband barbarically murdered her in their home, stabbing her up to 300 times. Behind each statistic we cite are real lives and people, such as Stephanie

Owen, Sharon Hayter, Teresa Wishart, Valerie Turner, Magdalena Pacult, Lorraine Cullen, Karen Dempsey and Courtney Boorne—all women from Knowsley killed by male violence against women. Some were murdered by their own sons. One in 10 women killed by men are killed by their own son.

I turn to the urgent issue of funding for specialist domestic abuse services. They are a lifeline for many survivors, but the fact is that they are struggling financially. Services are stretched, underfunded and in some cases shutting their doors. We cannot accept that. Many survivors are more likely to turn to them and to have more trust in them than the state and the police, so these services must be at the heart of this Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls. We have to put our money where our mouth is.

The First Step, the only independent specialist domestic abuse service in Knowsley, literally saves lives. I commend the chief executive, Caroline Grant, and her team, on what they do for Knowsley. She is up in the Gallery. They are being forced to turn women away, however, because the stability of funding just is not there. That is why I have written to the victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), to ask that sustainable, multi-year funding is committed to specialist domestic abuse services, including the First Step in Knowsley.

I welcome Raneem's law and everything the Government are doing on this urgent matter. We have made incredible progress and have great ambition for women. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is on the Front Bench today, for all her work. No funding was pledged for domestic abuse in the last Budget, and I very much hope that that changes in the spring statement.

2.48 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for moving the motion. We have just heard some extremely powerful testimony from my hon. Friends the Members for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting) and for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley), but, if the House will forgive me, I intend to shift the tone slightly and talk about a moment of joy that I experienced yesterday. First, however, I want to acknowledge the proud achievements of our Labour party in advancing the cause of women over the last century, and to pay particular tribute to the members of the women's sections in our labour and trade union movement for the work that they do in their local communities.

Yesterday I paid a lovely visit to our marvellous education centre, where I met students from St Joseph's Catholic primary school in Billingham, in my constituency. As always, I was asked the best and hardest questions by the students. One of those questions was, "What are MPs going to do to help women who play football receive the same pay as men who play football?" What a great question.

We have heard a bit about women's sport today, and we are seeing the rapid growth and transformation of football for women and girls. We have heard about the Lioness effect. The England women's team have been fantastic role models, and, on the main stage at Wembley under the floodlights, they have laid their critics to rest.

However, we should not forget what they have been up against. The Football Association now has ambitious targets to grow the girls' game, but on 5 December 1921 the FA met at its headquarters in London and announced a ban on the women's game, stating that

"the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged."

Before that, there were about 150 women's football clubs, attracting 45,000 fans to their games. We have to wonder whether the FA was motivated by the fact that the women's game was taking fans away from the men's.

I think that if women had been asked about this before the ban, they would have said there was a bright future for the women's game. There certainly is now, because since the ban was reversed in 1971 it has gone from strength to strength, and I commend the FA for the work that it has done to improve access and opportunities for women and girls. Tomorrow, to celebrate International Women's Day, I shall be joining pupils at Bewley primary school, also in Billingham, to watch a training session and a football match run by the Hartlepool United Community Sports Foundation. The "Let Girls Play Biggest Ever Football Session" sends the strong message to girls growing up today that they can look forward to the same success and achievements in our national game as boys.

Let me end by saying that it is incredibly inspiring for me to work with such brave, talented, dedicated and hard-working women in Parliament, including everyone who is speaking in today's debate. Our women Members are wonderful role models.

2.51 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Ahead of International Women's Day, we must remember that violence against women and girls is not inevitable. Men who kill, men who rape, and men who abuse and sexually harass do so in the context of an entrenched sex discrimination that normalises male predatory behaviour and quickly blames victims, but with sufficient will and a change in that context, it can and must be ended. That is why the most welcome change since last year's International Women's Day is that we now have a Labour Government.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on commercial sexual exploitation, I have a particular interest in prostitution. The reports from the Femicide Census—whose authors, Clarrie and Karen, are here today—are harrowing but none the less groundbreaking. The latest report, published yesterday, looks in detail at 2,000 completed cases of women killed by men that are on the database. That is 2,000 too many. Forty-five of the women who had been killed were identified as being involved, or having been involved, in prostitution, but as women were only included in this cohort if their involvement in prostitution had been explicitly mentioned in either official documents or the media, that is likely to be a huge undercount. The researchers found that of this cohort, women killed by men in the UK who had been involved in prostitution tended to be younger and were less likely to have been born in the UK than any other women killed by men, and the data shows that women involved in prostitution are also the most vulnerable in society.

A Home Office report noted that approximately 50% of women involved in prostitution in the UK started being paid for sex acts before they were 18 years old, while up

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

to 95% of women involved in street prostitution are believed to be problematic drug users. They are indeed the most vulnerable—and this not a job; this is not work.

Women involved in prostitution are disproportionately victims of violence, including fatal violence. In their deaths they are more likely to be subjected to sexual violence, and after death their bodies are more likely to be desecrated. That is not a coincidence. Prostitution is the oldest form of sexual exploitation—a form of violence against women and girls. It is another manifestation of sexual inequality.

Dr Tidball: Is it not a positive development that our Government announced this week that young girls would no longer be placed in young offender institutions?

Tonia Antoniazzi: That is fantastic, and it is at the heart of what our Ministers are doing to support women and girls.

All in all, women and girls matter, including those who are exploited in the sex trade, to whom I wish to dedicate my speech.

2.54 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make a contribution to this debate on International Women's Day. I am proud to be the first woman to represent my constituency of Scarborough and Whitby.

In my acceptance speech, I pledged to play my part in ending the epidemic of violence against women and girls, and to see the very first women's refuge built in North Yorkshire. Today, I rise to pay tribute to a constituent who has spent a lifetime overcoming what happened to her as a young girl to become an outspoken survivor and an advocate for victims of child sexual abuse. When I say "a lifetime", I mean a lifetime. Abused at 10, Suzanne buried what had happened to her to build a successful career and raise a family. She told me that it was only once her children had grown up and left home that she felt able to deal with what had happened to her. At 48, she went to the police. When she was 50, and after a very traumatic and drawn-out investigation and trial, the perpetrator was sentenced to 13 years. Such perpetrators serve only half of their sentences in prison, and he is due to be released in the summer.

As a childminder and early years inspector, Suzanne loves where she lives. Of course she does—it is her home. But as she waits for the decision of the Parole Board, she is planning to sell her home, because when her abuser is released, he will move back to his family home, which is a few streets away from her—a house that she has to walk past to reach her parents' home. The man who abused my constituent as a child will live literally two streets away from her, in a house that is a three-minute walk from her home, a mere 322 metres away, and visible from her upstairs rooms. Understandably, she cannot face the thought of coming face to face with her abuser.

Suzanne told me that she was very fortunate to have been signposted to IDAS, a specialist charity supporting victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence. She says that without its support, she would have taken her

own life. Why should a man who has abused a child in their close neighbourhood be allowed to return to live just a few streets away? It goes beyond whether perpetrators are seen as a risk, and it continues the suffering of women and girls who have suffered abuse.

I am sure there are no easy answers, but I pay tribute to Suzanne for allowing me to share her story. I thank her for her courage. We want women to feel safe on the streets and in their homes, including survivors like Suzanne.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I inform the House that we will begin the Front-Bench speeches at 3.15 pm. We have six people left who are hoping to speak.

2.57 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Much like my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles), I am the fifth woman in a row to represent Falmouth, which is part of my constituency. The first woman to represent Falmouth, in 1997, was selected through an all-woman shortlist.

It is more than 50 years since Barbara Castle introduced the Equal Pay Act 1970 to the House of Commons. She was obviously a pioneering woman—the first female Secretary of State for Employment. She supported the Ford factory workers' strike in Dagenham, which paved the way for equal pay legislation. However, it was not until 1984 that female workers at the Ford factory received full skills recognition in line with the men. Just last year, the Fawcett Society reported that the mean gender pay gap for full-time workers is still 11.3%.

Decades after the first equal pay legislation, we still have a long way to go. It is hard to get equally paid work before having children, and it is even harder afterwards, so I am pleased that this Labour Government are bringing in measures that will help us get there, such as flexible working and better childcare provision. Our expansion of free childcare and universal breakfast clubs for primary school children will relieve some of the pressure on working parents—let us be honest, we mean mothers, who still often carry far more of the mental load.

When my son was small and I became a single mum, my income dropped exponentially. I had left a job in a city to move to Cornwall and start a family. I found a job that fit in with school hours, but despite such jobs being vital, they are often low paid and less secure, so improving childcare in this country and making it more important is crucial to eliminating the gender pay gap.

The Employment Rights Bill, which was introduced in the House in October, has many provisions that will help. Flexible working will become the default where practical, and it will be harder for employers to refuse flexible working requests. This will allow women with caring responsibilities to balance them more easily with work. It will also benefit women suffering from health conditions such as endometriosis, who will be able to manage their symptoms and appointments. I have met a number of constituents with endometriosis who have shared stories of their chronic pain and multiple surgeries making it difficult for them to work. They also struggle to feel heard and supported by the medical profession,

feeling that they have to fight for treatment and sometimes having to wait years for diagnosis, as has been pointed out.

Companies with more than 250 employees will be required to create action plans addressing gender inequality, including menopause. I know from bitter experience that migraines, sleeplessness and hot flushes can be debilitating, as can basic words dropping out of my head. Having arrangements and an understanding in place will enable more women to keep working.

Skilled social care workers are chronically underpaid for what they do. The job I found as a single mum and retrained for was as a teaching assistant, and working in a school in a supporting role is another sector where the pay is very low. I am very pleased that the Bill gives respect and recognition to social care workers and support staff in the school support staff negotiating body and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order.

3 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for bringing this debate to the House. I am especially proud to speak in this debate as a member of the Women and Equalities Committee. I am also the first woman to represent my constituency—frankly, far too many of us are. I hope that changes.

On Monday, I was proud to host a coffee morning in aid of Fortalice, which provides refuge accommodation, wraparound support and one-to-one sessions for women and children to work through their trauma. It also has an outstanding nursery on site to help kids smile, and it provides a lifeline for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. I also hosted two events on Tuesday, and spoke proudly about Endeavour, which is the UK's first domestic abuse service to provide pet fostering. It recognises that women facing domestic abuse may also feel trapped because they do not want to leave a pet behind, and it removes a huge barrier to finding help.

Today is a day for honesty, and as we have heard in so many wonderful contributions to this debate so far, it is a dangerous time. We are seeing women's rights being rolled back across the globe. We face the stark reality that, while amazing work is being done by so many women—and having followed her career so closely, I am honoured to be in this place with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), and reassured that she is on our Front Bench—we have a long way to go in this country. Women must fight for everything in society, and we have to keep working together to fight for and protect women and girls.

We are still fighting for equal pay. We are still fighting for safety on our streets and in our homes, and now in the digital world we are seeing abuse of and violence against women and girls taking on new forms as technology evolves. We have seen the creation of deepfakes, non-consensual image-based abuse and online harassment. Let us not forget that social media platforms—those that shape our conversations, our culture and sometimes even our self-worth—are owned and controlled by men.

Yes it is true that women have more opportunities—we are able to work, to go out and earn our own wage and to have our independence—but the expectations placed

on us remain. We still carry the mental load, we are still the primary caregivers and we are still in charge of household chores and of managing childcare, so we have to keep fighting for, working for and demanding better. We tell young girls that they can be anything and that they can have it all, but we do not tell young boys about making sure they take on their share of the housework, manage the household and become a good parent. This must change: we cannot create a safer and fairer world for women and girls without working with men and boys.

3.3 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for bringing forward this debate, and all the hon. Members who have spoken. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball), whose experience of maternity services is shocking, but sadly not unique. I hope it is an experience that, together, we can eradicate.

On International Women's Day, we celebrate the achievements, resilience and contribution of women and girls across our community, and what better way to honour this day than by shining a light on a place in my constituency that welcomes new life into the world and champions the health and wellbeing of mothers? I am talking about Portsmouth Hospitals University NHS Trust maternity services, including the fantastic all-female team at Queen Alexandra hospital. In the past year alone, this remarkable unit has delivered 5,000 babies, and the dedication of the 24/7, 365 days a year midwives goes far beyond the delivery room. I would like to highlight some of the trailblazing initiatives that help make life for parents and babies easier and safer.

A new care pathway has been developed by the trust team and Portsmouth Down Syndrome Association to provide additional support and information for all families who are expecting a baby with Down syndrome. It includes appointments with specialist midwives and paediatricians, including feeding specialists, additional specialist scans and an offer of induction at 39 weeks. A new partnership also allows babies to be registered in the hospital. This service supports new parents through the registration process and takes only 10 to 15 minutes, enabling them to get a head start on applying for important documents such as a birth certificate, taking the pressure off and allowing all parents to get support and be treated equally as new parents whatever their background. Thanks to the introduction of lifesaving neonatal bedside resuscitation units, even the tiniest and most vulnerable newborn babies have the best chance of a healthy start. Babies born at 24 weeks have a fantastic 80% survival rate, while the national rate is 18%.

The trust's dedication has earned it a place among the finalists in the NHS parliamentary awards, proving that its hard work is felt not just in Portsmouth but nationwide. I was proud to go along and meet the team at the ceremony, where it was shortlisted for the nursing and midwifery award, and the future NHS award. I am looking forward to going to the unit. Finally, the trust has been awarded the prestigious UNICEF baby-friendly award, the latest UK healthcare facility to be so awarded.

International Women's Day is about celebrating progress, and the Queen Alexandra hospital maternity unit is a great example of that. I am proud to be woman MP

[Amanda Martin]

No. 686 and to be able to celebrate the women in my constituency, of whom there are many. I am proud that the women of my constituency have such a dedicated team to support them through childbirth: 281 midwives, 101 maternity support workers and countless students. To them, I say thank you.

3.6 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Last Saturday, women from across East Thanet came together for a conference on tackling violence against women and girls. They gave their testimony on what they most want to see improved: public services, in particular mental health provision; the quality of policing; the lack of reliable, affordable, safe public transport; and safety in the workplace and in the streets. Those issues were all brought up time and time again.

Natalie Fleet: Women are over-represented in informal and vulnerable employment. Does my hon. Friend agree that the protections afforded in the Employment Rights Bill are really important for those women?

Ms Billington: It is indeed true. It was powerful to see people talking about the strength of increased representation in the workplace by trade unions, giving them greater protections.

Housing, housing and housing—my hon. Friend the Minister will recognise that it is key for the kind of security and safety that people, women in particular, require.

We spend a lot of time on International Women's Day talking about the importance of opportunity, because it has been restricted over centuries and we celebrate the smashing of glass ceilings every day. Whether it is because of legislation, a lack of rights, or culture, women's access to opportunity has been limited. I will, however, give the House a particular example that was raised at the conference by Oasis, our local domestic abuse service. It pointed out that, because in Thanet we have a particularly high level of youth unemployment at about 10% and a high level of young people not in education, employment or training, young women are being "encouraged", meaning forced, by their "boyfriends", meaning soon-to-be pimps, to set up their own OnlyFans account to secure income.

We need to remember that that is why we need confidence in the law, to ensure we are all safe: security in the home; security in the community; and security for our country. The violence against women and girls conference I hosted brought those issues to the surface. Given the increasingly unsafe and unpredictable world in which we live, this is becoming only more important. It is in that context that I pay tribute to the Government and their commitment to increase spending on the defence of our country. Security and safety are not just personal, but based in the community and throughout our country.

However, we need to acknowledge the crucial role of aid in increasing security here and abroad, including for women in the UK and elsewhere. For women across the globe, international aid has been a lifeline, and has given them both the security and the access to opportunities that otherwise they were unlikely to have had. I understand that we are having to make difficult decisions, and I absolutely support increasing defence spending. I simply

wish to remind the House of the role of international aid and its impact on women across the globe. We know that 30% of the people who come across the channel on small boats are women and children, and aid can reduce that number. If those women have security and opportunity at home, why would they undertake that dangerous journey?

I finish my remarks in my constituency again. Claire Knights would have been my constituent if she had lived, but she was killed while walking her dog on the beach in Minnis bay in August 2023. Last week, her killer was convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison. However, it is important to note that he escaped arrest for upskirting the day before her attack.

We will hear the names of the women who have been killed at the hands of men this year from my hon. Friend the Minister. Making those women visible is important, and is part of the struggle to eradicate the violence against and hatred of women.

3.11 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): There have been many powerful contributions by hon. Members across the House this afternoon. My contribution will not focus on abuse, violence, intimidation or even health issues. Instead, I would like to speak a little about domestic equality and fairness.

It is an incontrovertible fact that women have been discriminated against by men for centuries. The historical struggle for equality and fairness that women have had and continue to have is incredible. The fact that it took until 1928 for women to receive equal voting rights with men is astounding, and it is wrong that it took until the Equal Pay Act 1970 to make equal pay compulsory between male and female employees.

On the issue of pay, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for securing both this debate today and a Westminster Hall debate on pay gaps just a few weeks ago. In a Scottish context, pay gaps are a very current issue: the Scottish Trades Union Congress has shown that women in Scotland can expect to see themselves earn an incredible £3,000 a year less than men, and the gender pay gap in Scotland has risen from 6.4% in 2023 to 8.3% in 2024. This is unfairness in action and shows that the fight is very much ongoing, as workplace gender inequality is still tolerated in modern society.

Now we are in government, Labour would do well to heed the political power of women, especially those born in the 1950s, because their discontent at pension inequality has become a national movement—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. Now that we have the power that could correct the injustice suffered by the WASPI women, we really should deliver on what is right and deserved.

Credit to the WASPI women: they continue to fight against the injustice of which they are victims. They are not going away. Theirs is a movement based on the values of fighting against discrimination and inequality, a struggle women know so well. We on the Labour Benches, as socialists, and especially my female comrades, know that power concedes nothing without demand. It never has, and it never will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the final speaker from the Back Benches—with just a very short speech, Naushabah Khan.

3.13 pm

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this International Women's Day debate as the first female MP for Gillingham and Rainham. I am surrounded by so many hard-working and driven women from across the House. Regardless of the party we represent, politics has always been a vehicle for smashing gender stereotypes, pulling down barriers to entry and forging trailblazers.

However, despite the progress made in our politics, there is still work to do, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting) so eloquently outlined, and the under-representation of women in certain industries unfortunately extends beyond Westminster, with real implications for our society and our economic prosperity as a nation.

Let us take construction as an example. The ONS reported that, as of 2023, only 15% of the construction workforce were female. When I visit MidKent college, which serves my constituents, I am inspired by the young women who are passionate about entering the industry, but the reality is that they will be entering a sector with low female representation across the board and systemic barriers to career progress.

Our armed forces and the defence sector are vital components of the Government's strategy to deliver economic growth and national security. It is therefore critical that women can look to the military feeling confident about their own careers, yet we still hear stories of those in the military facing misogyny, harassment and bullying. One woman who faced sexual harassment took her own life.

The need to recruit women and ensure that they stay in our forces is a challenge for our society and, indeed, our Government. Looking back at our history, we see lessons that we can learn from the important efforts of female service personnel who were pivotal in the British war efforts in world war one, world war two and many subsequent conflicts. Indeed, one of Medway's key cultural assets is a reminder of such triumphs. HMS Cavalier was built solely by women in only nine months in 1944—I do not what that says about nine months!

Our investment in our national security needs to ensure that we have accessible pathways for women to join our armed forces, but also, importantly, to stay there, fulfil their potential and keep Britain safe, as they always have done.

I recognise that, across all these sectors, significant work has been undertaken to address inequality, but there is a battle to fight on outdated gender stereotypes, which are imposed from a young age and go on to have lasting consequences. Britain has always been at its best when women are given the opportunity to excel in their chosen pursuits. On International Women's Day, with its theme of accelerated action, I remind this House of its obligations to enable women across the UK to pursue the occupations they are passionate about and create new pathways so that they can realise their ambitions.

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

3.16 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): Ahead of International Women's Day this Saturday, I want to celebrate women's achievements. I start by congratulating

the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) on securing this important debate today, on being a trailblazer for this Parliament's diversity, and on speaking so passionately.

We have made the most amazing progress since the inaugural International Women's Day following workers' rights protests in the early 20th century. Women in this country can now vote, start a business or undergo surgery on their own body without consulting a man. The absence of those rights might feel faintly ridiculous now, but they were hard won in our relatively recent past, and we must remember that they do not apply universally across the world. We must also recognise that, while so much progress has been made, given the current global political environment, this progress has never felt so precarious.

This year marks 250 years since Jane Austen's birth, in our beautiful Hampshire countryside. Austen's novels, despite high praise and popularity, were published anonymously, and it was her brother who often dealt with her publishing negotiations. One of her first books was simply written under the authorship: "By a Lady". As we celebrate World Book Day today as well, it is a perfect opportunity to reflect on the enduring impact of authors such as Austen, who not only shaped our literary world but challenged the societal norms in their time.

Thankfully, women's literature in the UK is no longer published anonymously, but we still live in a world where 122 million girls are out of school, 496 million adult women worldwide cannot read or write and women make up two thirds of the global illiterate population. Issues of education and illiteracy will be worsened by the recently announced cuts to international aid. That policy, as highlighted by the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), will disproportionately harm women.

We need foreign policy with gender equality at its heart not just because it is the right thing to do, but because countries that educate girls do better economically for everyone. We must also increase international development funding initiatives that aim to eradicate sexual violence and abuse in areas of conflict. The UN confirmed a 50% rise in conflict-related sexual violence between 2022 and 2023. Women and girls made up 95% of the victims. It is not just sexual violence: 61% of preventable maternal mortality—that amounts to about 500 deaths a day—occurred in 35 crisis-affected countries, and the average incidence of child marriage was 14.4% higher in conflict-affected countries than in non-conflict settings.

Women continue to be abused across the world. Murder is still the leading cause of premature death in women, and as we have heard, every 10 minutes a woman or girl is murdered by her intimate partner or a family member. We heard powerful testimony from the hon. Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) on rape and sexual assault. We must develop our support mechanisms by embedding domestic abuse specialists in every police force, increasing protections for refugees and expanding our rape crisis centres to tackle these crises.

I am proud to be the first female Member of Parliament for North East Hampshire—the 658th female MP on the list—and a Member of the Women and Equalities Committee. I support the powerful personal and professional testimony of our Committee Chair, the hon.

[Alex Brewer]

Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who spoke on health inequalities, as did the hon. Members for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball).

Strides are being made in the House to improve the lives of women and achieve equality. The Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019, which was originally introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), criminalised upskirting.

It has been heartening to hear such powerful speeches across the House on a wide range of topics, but women must also be protected financially. Right now in the UK, women continue to be economically disadvantaged in the workplace. Median hourly pay for women is 7.7% less than for men, and in Hampshire that gap almost doubles. The gender pay gap also worsens with age: among full-time employees aged 40 and over, the gap widens considerably due to the motherhood penalty. That is not a fact that we should accept. Women deserve better from their workplaces and from the societal structures that enable that to continue. Policies such as increased paternity leave will help women to have a fair share of wages. Improving policy for women also improves it for men. As the hon. Member for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting) said, equality benefits everyone.

Today, I speak proudly as a progressive, internationalist, cosmopolitan woman inspired by the strength of women leaders. Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand impressed the world with her management of crises from terrorism to the pandemic while being the second-ever elected world leader to give birth in office. Kamala Harris was the first female, the first black and the first Asian-American Vice President of the USA. Sanna Marin, who became the world's youngest Prime Minister in 2019, guided Finland to become the 31st member of NATO. In the face of sexism in political life, who can forget Julia Gillard's 2012 speech on misogyny in which she powerfully addressed the sexism to which she had been subjected? It is that persistence, resilience and fortitude that women and girls must continue to have in political, public, professional and private spaces across the globe so that we continue moving in the right direction towards equality for all women. We are not there yet, but our progress must be celebrated.

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

3.23 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is always a pleasure to be part of this debate, and especially so today on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition. I am proud to be a shadow Cabinet member as the shadow Minister for Women. We have had a poignant, proud, challenging and sometimes joyful debate. It has been informative, as always.

I thank the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, and the Backbench Business Committee for securing the debate. I thank all Members for their contributions; I will touch on their remarks as I go.

It is also Women's History Month. I thank Mr Speaker for the event in the House last night where we celebrated women's history. In fact, it was a particular pleasure to hear today from my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) about Tilly Shilling.

International Women's Day is important in allowing us to take stock and be realistic, but also to celebrate our progress, as women, towards equality. It is also, as we have heard today, a time to recognise that more can and should be done. Yesterday, I had the pleasure of joining the Nordic Council at the British and Nordic breakfast in Westminster with its secretary general, along with Helen Pankhurst, the convener of Centenary Action, and the co-ordinator of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians. We exchanged views and experiences on women in democracy and civil society and the importance of inter-parliamentary co-operation and support. As we have heard in the Chamber today, that is vital.

I am especially pleased to welcome this year's International Women's Day on 8 March as we mark the half-century since the first woman was elected a party leader. She sat on the Conservative Benches and went on to be the first Head of Government in the western world who was a woman. I am, of course, talking about Margaret Thatcher. I could not help noticing that she did not get much of a mention from Government Members, so it was up to me to make sure to add some balance.

In Margaret Thatcher's time in office, more women entered the workforce, were professionals and became trailblazers. We see her statue just outside the Chamber in the Members' Lobby and remember that they, like she, were iron ladies in their fields. She really challenged the status quo, allowing us all to do that. As women, we stand on the shoulders of the women who came here before us. I am the 380th woman elected to Parliament, and I must say to men and women in the Chamber that no one is ever here just to make up the numbers.

I say to the hon. Member for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting), who works with me on the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs, that the power of young people really matters. We agree furiously on that. It was famously said that we were all the future once, so hon. Members should not worry. I am pleased to work with the hon. Lady on shaping that future, and it is vital that young women and men work together.

Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge should be praised for her work as a young woman in Parliament, taking on deepfake pornography—I cannot even think of the words I want to say about that, at least not at the Dispatch Box. It is really important that I remind the House, in keeping with our Conservative values, that a meritocracy is not a tick-box and is not tokenism. Our rise and our success as Conservative MPs is not about making up the numbers.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball), who shared her experience as a pregnant woman with her disablement, and showed her incredible strength in talking about it. Just getting here just shows what a strong voice she is in sharing that.

In subsequent years, we have had three more Conservative women leaders—we like female leaderships in our party, don't we? So come on, folks on the Labour Benches; put yourselves forward. We now have my right hon. Friend

the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) leading us and I am extremely proud to sit at the shadow Cabinet table with her. I am sorry to say that in the last year, I have lost many dear colleagues—female MPs who have not come back to this place. The voters, I am afraid, bit back, but we will keep pushing on our side of the House.

We will hear from the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), about the short, cruelly shutdown lives of those who have been robbed from us by femicide. We will acknowledge the impact on their families and friends. I welcome the new Government's Minister for Women and Equalities, Baroness Smith of Malvern. I thank the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), for her sisterhood and her kindness to me in her previous shadow role and in government. But it would be remiss of me not to say at this Dispatch Box that I am disappointed that the role has not been retained in this House. Perhaps the Minister might have found time to take it on, because I have worked with her over the past 10 years, including on the first Women and Equalities Committee, and there is an admiration—I hope—on both sides.

I turn to some of the amazing women in my constituency, including Rev. Canon Martha Mutikani, the new vicar of Scaynes Hill, who follows Rev. Bev and who is in place today; Sabrina Cohen-Hatton, the West Sussex chief fire officer; and Katy Bourne, the police and crime commissioner for Sussex. Many people know that I have two daughters. One of them was born on International Women's Day, so it is always a cake-versus-marching day, and cake has won this weekend. One of my young daughters is now a degree apprentice in a frontline role, and I know exactly what it means to take on challenges. I must mention Kathryn Hibberd-Little from the Mug Tree in East Grinstead. She is an amazing woman entrepreneur, and above all, she is making the birthday cake, so she is wonderful.

I must also mention Helen Tomlinson, the cross-Government menopause champion. I am proud of her work on "No Time to Step Back". During my time in government, with the now Minister, we worked on women's employment, progression, safety, spiking and standing up for women, including menopausal women, and that is roundly supported across the House.

As March is Brain Tumour Awareness Month, I would like to mention my friend and constituent Holly Vivian. She is a young mum and nurse living with brain tumour. It is Wear a Hat Day soon—please do that for her to raise awareness and fundraise.

Turning to accelerating action on issues affecting women and girls, there is a fundamental right to be safe from violence. I remind the House that criminality in the home is called domestic violence, and we should never accept it. We should always remind women and anybody suffering from domestic violence that there is a safe people for them, and we as MPs will be there for them in the community.

I remind the House about my concerns, along with those of Women's Aid, about the early release scheme. I am sure the Minister will continue to look at the safety of women regarding that scheme, and I hope that Equalities Ministers will work with Justice and Home Office colleagues to ensure that dangerous criminals guilty of offences related to sexual or sex-based violence

are not among those getting the chance to leave prison early. Just last week at Maidstone Crown court, it was reported that a prisoner from that scheme groped a woman within 15 minutes of being released. I hope the Minister can assure the House on this issue.

On safety, I reiterate my party's calls around the time-limited independent inquiry on grooming gangs. I thank all Members of this House who stood up on this matter, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who, like many others, have continued to work on the matter. We can and should go further to ensure that victims are adequately heard and that we continue to protect women and girls from those appalling crimes. The victims of the Wales-wide grooming gang have asked for that, and I hope that the Government, particularly on this day, will listen.

The hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) talked about mothers murdered by sons. As I said, domestic violence is criminality in the home, and I found that a particularly stark part of this afternoon's proceedings. The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) talked about erasing women and that we have come too far to go backwards. I know that she will not let that happen. We do not always agree on everything, but we can definitely agree on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) spoke about her gale-force mum—an incredible woman—as well as amazing farmers and Olympians in her constituency. I also thank the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for talking about her work and highlighting FGM, which is extremely pertinent.

If I can find my final note—I have so many notes here—I will bring my remarks to a close; otherwise Madam Deputy Speaker will drag me out. Madeleine Albright said:

"It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent."

On the theme of "Accelerate Action", it is time to listen. MP stands for "most persistent," and we must all do what we can, together with men and boys, to deliver true equality, safety and fairness for all, on today's International Women's Day and beyond.

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

3.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—and all the Madam Deputy Speakers who sat through the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for securing the debate. She said in her comments that she was the 286th female Member of Parliament. Ten years after she was first elected, I became the 311th, so there were only 25 women between the two of us. Yet someone said today that they were the 649th, so the pace accelerated in the following 10 years. Accelerating action is what International Women's Day is all about this year, so let us keep that up.

International Women's Day is a moment to celebrate the achievements of women here in the UK and to recognise the enormous contribution they have made

[*Jess Phillips*]

across every sector—many Members have done that today. It has shone through in the debate, and it has been a privilege to listen as Members have reflected on the women who have influenced and inspired them. However, it falls to me to do the thing I do every year. I wish I could be entirely uplifting, but while we celebrate the women who have lit up our lives and helped to change the world, we lament the loss of those who did not have the chance.

The statistics show that, on average, a woman is killed by a man every three days in the UK, and that one in five homicides are domestic homicides. We cannot allow that to continue; we must act now and be relentless in chasing the change. Many Members have mentioned Raneem's law, which the Government have brought in to embed specialists in 999 control rooms. I hope that that shows how important the issue of women being killed is to the Government—it drives our actions. I read out the names Raneem Oudeh and her mother Khaola Saleem on the years in which they were killed.

We have also set about putting in place the new domestic abuse protection orders, which are a huge step forward and already means that, where perpetrators breach their orders, they are arrested swiftly and incarcerated. That comes entirely from every domestic homicide review that I have read—they tell me that the consequences can be fatal when a perpetrator breaches an order and we do not respond.

The Government are also seeking to push forward massively on stalking laws. Many women whose names I have read out from the list over the years have died because we did not take stalking seriously. One thing the Government will do is allow people to know the identity of their online stalkers, which is not currently the case. That proposal is based on the case of Nicola Thorp; I am going to call it Nicola's law. I want to start having laws for women who did not die—for women who did not have to die so that we change the law. That is what we have to get to. We must go further and push harder.

Unfortunately, it is too late to protect those already taken from us. To ensure that we do not forget them and all the women who have suffered due to violence against women and girls—men's violence against women and girls—I will take this opportunity to read the names collated by the amazing women at the Femicide Census. They collate the list of the women and girls aged 14 and above, and this year four children are included on the list, who have allegedly been killed or are known to have been killed by men in the past year.

This is the 10th year I have read this list. I do it now for the first time from the Dispatch Box of the House of Commons. I do it in front of and to honour the families of these women and the women who have appeared on the list in the past. Last year, I said that I felt tired, angry and weary and that I was sick of the failures. But as I stand here today, on the Front Bench, placed here by a Prime Minister inspired to action, who mentioned the reading of the list in the first ever speech he made from this Dispatch Box as the Prime Minister, alongside a Home Secretary and a flight of brilliant Ministers who are totally dedicated to this, I feel hopeful. The women whose names I am about to read out left us breadcrumbs—they left us clues as to why they died.

We cannot stand and say any more that lessons will be learned. What I promise is that I will actually learn the lessons.

Here is the list this year: Zhe Wang; Pauline Sweeney; Carol Matthews; Ursula Uhlemann; Tiffany Render; Frances Dwyer; Ruth Baker; Kennedy Westcarr-Sabaroche; Samantha Mickleburgh; Rachel McDaid; Lisa Welford; Karen O'Leary; Sonia Parker; Tarnjeet Riaz; Anita Mukhey; Bhajan Kaur; Kathryn Parton; Emma Finch; Margaret Parker; Amie Gray; Maria Nugara; Patsy Aust; Veronica Chinyanga; Delia Haxworth; Joanne Ward; Lauren Evans; Maxine Clark; Scarlett Vickers; Sophie Evans; Joanne Samak; Carol Hunt; Louise Hunt; Hannah Hunt; Jenny Sharp; Alana Odysseos; Laura Robson; Kulsuma Akter; Rebecca Simkin; Olivia Wood; Courtney Mitchell; Nina Denisova; Alberta Obinim; Stephanie Marie; Sophie Watson; Vicki Thomas; Eve McIntyre; Montserrat Martorell; Cher Maximen; Brodie MacGregor; Zanele Sibanda; Bryonie Gawith and her children, Oscar Birtle and Aubree Birtle; Davinia Graham; Barbara Nomakhosi; Christine Everett-Hickson; Juliana Prosper and her children, Giselle and Kyle Prosper; Rachel Simpson; Mary Ward; Luka Bennett-Smith; Anita Rose; Mashal Ilyas; Rhiannon Skye Whyte; Catherine Flynn; Sandie Butler; Rita Fleming; Cheryl McKenna; Carol James; Phoenix Spencer-Horn; Harshita Brella; Alana Armstrong; Margaret Cunningham; Kristine Sparane; Margaret Hanson; Karen Cummings; Astra Sirapina; Mariann Borocz; Gemma Devonish; Joanne Pearson; Teohna Grant; Heather Newton; June Henty; Leila Young; Julie Buckley; Jamelatu Tsiwah; Dianne Cleary; Claire Chick; Margaret Worby; Carmen Coulson; Rita Lambourne; Megan Hughes; Lisa Smith; Ana Maria Murariu; Leanne Williams; and two women from Birmingham whose names have not yet been confirmed. Finally, though the suspects have not been identified, I would like to honour the lives of Dora Leese and Christine Jefferies.

In the last year, Sharon Holland, Chloe Holland's mother, asked if Chloe could be remembered, because her name would never have been read out on this list. I ask that we remember Chloe, and that alongside her we remember the list of women who died from suicide, or in unclear, sinister and hidden circumstances where we know there was a history of domestic abuse or sexual violence. Those women's names will not make it on to this list, because nobody has ever been held accountable for their deaths. Today I promise that we are working on these hidden homicides. They deserve better. They deserve justice.

I will finish by thanking everyone who has contributed to the debate. I note in this year's debate the number of people who talked about women who had been harmed in their constituency, and the calls for action and change have been incredibly heartening. We have heard about making work pay, keeping our streets safe, and women who have fought tirelessly to embed true equality into our everyday lives. This a fight that demands the very best from all of us, and we must rise to the occasion. Under this Government, this issue will get the attention that it deserves. We will keep honouring and celebrating women as we build a society in which they are respected and protected, and we will back up our words with action as we seek real and lasting change, undeterred by those who sit on the sidelines while the list of names grows longer.

3.47 pm

Dawn Butler: I thank the Minister for doing what she does and reading out those names. This was a very difficult debate to have had, and I feel more emotional than normal because I fear that things are going to get worse. I fear that that list is going to get longer, because we are at a tipping point. If we do not stop what is going on around the world, and if we do not call it out, it will get worse.

I thank everybody who contributed to the debate. It has been a powerful debate, and it is wonderful for Members to have an excuse to talk about the brilliant women in their constituencies. It has been great to hear about them, and I would love to meet them all. Women have talked about their lived experiences: about being pregnant and how they were treated as a disabled woman; about being the youngest woman in Parliament and how they are treated; and about being raped and how they have come through that. I hope that everybody outside the Chamber hears that lived experience and hears those stories.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): And we should never need an excuse.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Women's Day.

Political Finance Rules

3.49 pm

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that loopholes in regulation allow for opaque funding of political parties; expresses concern over the prevalence of substantial financial contributions from corrupt individuals and foreign governments, which render political parties susceptible to manipulation and undue influence; acknowledges the risk these opaque funds pose to national security and the health of our democracy; further recognises the need to strengthen the powers and independence of regulators to help the regulation of political donations; and calls on the Government to tighten the law on permissible donations to make clear that political parties cannot accept money from impermissible sources or from companies that have not made enough money in the UK to fund the amount of their donation or loan.

Before I start my remarks, I pay tribute to everything that was said from the Dispatch Box in the last debate by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips). This House and our Government are stronger, more effective and more compassionate because of her contribution and her work.

I begin by declaring an interest: I am a member of a political party. I have spent many years actively involved in party politics as a campaigner, a local councillor and now as a Member of Parliament, so I know that political parties sit at the centre of our political landscape and that they are key pillars in our elections and our broader democratic system. Of course, those parties need funding to fulfil their day-to-day functions and to contest elections. Our pluralistic democracy depends on lively and active political parties that can campaign and engage with the public. Indeed, tomorrow evening I will be back out on the doorstep, clipboard and leaflets in hand, listening to voters and campaigning with my local Labour party. Those very activities would be impossible without political donations.

However, far too often the financing of political parties involves suspect donations making their way into party coffers. And the numbers are not small. Research by Transparency International found that £115 million in donations—almost £1 in every £10 of reported donations—came from unknown or questionable sources between 2021 and 2024. How has that been allowed to happen? Unfortunately, the UK's political finance rules, designed to block foreign donations and dirty money from seeping into political parties, are ripe for abuse and riddled with loopholes.

Hostile state actors, kleptocrats and international billionaires are easily able to sidestep the UK's permissibility rules and funnel money, via UK-registered shell companies, into our political parties. As it stands, a British company is permitted to make donations using money raised overseas, even if the company has not generated sufficient funds to support that same donation. That means that foreign actors or any mystery donor could legitimately use shell companies as a conduit to channel money into political parties here in the UK.

This is symbolic of a much bigger problem. It should not be that easy to pump money into British politics behind a layer of corporate secrecy. Donations that could come from anyone, anywhere pose a significant threat to the security and integrity of our democratic system. Foreign interference in British democracy and elections is a direct attack on our sovereignty, our national interest and our vital democratic institutions.

[Lloyd Hatton]

We have been warned about the problem for many years. A series of independent review bodies and the security services have sounded the alarm time and again. They have made it clear that risks are posed by opaque donations coming in from overseas. In 2020, a report by Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee identified that multiple members of the Russian elite with links to Vladimir Putin had tried to donate or successfully donated to British political parties.

Later, in 2022, MI5 warned that an alleged Chinese agent had sought to influence parliamentarians on behalf of the Chinese Communist party. In 2023, concerns were raised in Parliament about alleged links between the Chinese Communist party and party fundraising. The then Minister of State for Policing, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), noted that

“all political parties need to be alert to the danger of representatives of hostile states seeking to infiltrate or influence their activities.”—*[Official Report, 19 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 249.]*

I fear that our unhealthy dependence on a handful of large donors also poses a risk of undue influence and capture by narrow vested interests. We know that of the £85 million of private donations made in 2023 alone, two thirds came from 19 mega-donors, each giving well over £1 million. Just recently, one would-be mega-donor dominated headlines for that very reason. Elon Musk, the richest man in the world and not a British citizen, was giving “serious thought” to donating millions of pounds to a British political party—Reform UK. As a South African-born billionaire who lives in the United States, Elon Musk cannot legally make a personal donation to a British political party, but, as we know, he could easily go through the UK subsidiaries of his various companies.

Although that rumour has not yet come to pass, the risk that it poses to the integrity of our democracy cannot be overstated. I repeat: it should not be this easy to pump money into British politics, especially from halfway across the world. Our democratic institutions and elections should never be the plaything of a billionaire who cannot even vote in a British election, and a UK-registered company should not be a convenient vehicle to allow them to make such a donation. Even the perception that our political parties are captured by those with deep pockets has a corrosive effect on public trust in politics and in us as politicians. At a time when that trust is regrettably at a historically low level, we need to tackle that perception head-on and show that our politics is not for sale and cannot be unduly influenced.

How do we go about toughening up the rules? First, we close the loopholes I have outlined once and for all and ensure that companies are able to make donations only from profit made in the UK in the last two years, as well as introducing a requirement for political parties to identify the true source of donors' funds. Secondly, we need to have a tough deterrent for those who break the rules, because even if Elon Musk were ever to breach election law, why would he care? The maximum fine that the Electoral Commission can impose is just £20,000—not even small change to the world's richest man.

Unfortunately, the previous Government only made matters worse when they stripped the Electoral Commission, which is tasked with regulating political finance, of its

independence and further opened the floodgates to mega-donations by drastically increasing spending limits during election periods by around 80%. Strengthening the rules around donations to political parties is a manifesto commitment of this new Government. I know that the Government and Ministers are committed to restoring trust and protecting British democracy, so I hope they will act swiftly on that commitment by restoring the independence of the Electoral Commission and empowering it to impose much larger fines.

The Government should also look closely at capping donations and spending, perhaps in line with recommendations put forward by the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life. Smart tweaks to existing regulations, such as increasing fining powers, lowering reporting thresholds and capping spending limits, do not require primary legislation. Those changes could be enacted quickly and still have a significant impact on cleaning up our politics and ensuring that our parties are all free from suspect donations. Finally, I sincerely hope that Ministers will look closely at the role that shell companies play in allowing opaque donations to be made here in the UK, often originating from overseas.

I am proud that this Labour Government were elected on a mandate to restore integrity in politics. As the Prime Minister rightly stated in his victory speech in the early hours:

“The fight for trust is the battle that defines our age.”

I wholeheartedly agree with him, and I look forward to hearing from the Government and from hon. Members here today exactly how we can win this crucial battle. Only by doing so can we protect democracy, clean up our politics and rebuild trust with the public.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. As Members will be able to tell, we have considerably more Members wishing to speak than we have time for, so perhaps we will start with an informal time limit of no more than five minutes.

3.59 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for securing this debate on such a crucial topic.

Public trust in politics is at an all-time low; only 12% of people trust political parties, and only 15% of the population think that political funding is transparent. There is clearly a problem at the heart of British politics. As the hon. Member said, it is particularly bad in our country, because we have an Electoral Commission with very little in the way of teeth or of limits. That leaves our democracy open to corrosion and dark money, which we have to be particularly worried about guarding against. As the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) said in the previous debate, we must guard our democracy against those anti-democratic forces and against dark money—the influence of money in politics is a core part of that corrosion.

In the UK, there is no limit on individual donations. That is not the case in Canada, in France, or even in the US. Why is there no limit on how much money an individual can donate, and on how much influence they can therefore exert on British politics? Corporate donations are allowed here, but are banned in so many other

countries. Foreign donations are theoretically banned here, but loopholes mean that an individual such as Elon Musk could quite easily work within existing, very bendable rules in order to exert what would undoubtedly be a very corrosive influence on our politics. The hon. Member for South Dorset mentioned the Electoral Commission's lack of enforcement powers: the maximum fine it can impose is £20,000, yet the influence in our politics totals tens of millions of pounds. Just over the past decade, £115 million has come from unknown sources. This is clearly a serious problem.

I welcome the fact that the current Government made a manifesto commitment to strengthen the rules on donations to political parties, in order to protect our democracy from foreign influence. I very much hope that in her summing up the Minister will be able to clarify exactly what that will amount to. What actions do the Government intend to take in order to protect our democracy from foreign influence? Can she commit to taking measures such as strengthening the powers of the Electoral Commission to issue fines, reducing the reporting thresholds in order to increase transparency, and clarifying spending limits? Those measures would not require primary legislation, so can the Government set out the timetable by which they will bring forward those urgently needed measures to protect our democracy?

Big money in politics is a corrosive influence. This Government have the opportunity to put a stop to it—to bring us up to the standards that other democracies have put in place. Will the Minister set out her timetable for doing so, and clarify precisely what she will do?

4.2 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I intend to make a short contribution on one particular aspect of political funding that I believe is especially corrosive to faith in democracy in our country. Across North East Hertfordshire, from Buntingford to Thundridge, local communities have worked hard to create local neighbourhood plans that are pragmatic but full of hope for the future. However, time and again, those plans are overruled, and residents get development that could hardly be further from what they have sought to secure—poorly designed, palpably unsustainable, and outrageously overpriced. So often, the reason for this is the enormous financial and political pressure that big developers are able to bring to bear on the debates around the future of our towns and villages in their relentless pursuit of profit maximisation.

Our constituents will never have faith that our planning system will deliver fair outcomes that put nature, community life and genuinely affordable homes before developer greed for as long as those same developers—and the lobbyists they employ—are pouring vast sums of money into the bank accounts of political parties. Given the constant clamour for planning deregulation and the already enormous profits that these developers are making, it is hard to escape the conclusion that those sums of money have been a very wise investment on their part.

The Labour Government have inherited the Conservative party's housing crisis; we must not inherit the same issues of influence that plagued the previous Administration. Trust in politics will return only when we make our position unimpeachable, and the future of development in our towns, villages and countryside is too important even to appear to have been subverted on behalf of

private interests. If we want the public to believe that the planning guidelines that we set nationally and locally will be fairly adhered to, it is my contention that we must ban all political donations from developers, those who work for them and the lobbyists they employ.

4.4 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for securing this important debate. The lack of transparency in the funding of our political parties is well documented, although I suspect not so well known among members of the public, who tend to associate the corrupting influence of money in politics with other countries, usually very far away. The reality is that it is taking place on our doorstep.

According to research done by Transparency International, almost £1 in every £10 reported by political parties and their members since 2001 has come from unknown or questionable sources. Some £42 million comes from donors alleged or proved to have been involved in other corruption, fraud or money laundering, and £38.6 million comes from unincorporated associations that have not reported the source of their income, despite Parliament introducing new transparency rules in 2010. The rest of its findings highlight millions from donors alleged or proved to be intermediaries for foreign funds and/or a hidden source, and millions from companies that have not made sufficient profits to support the political contributions they have made.

Other research has confirmed that successive Governments have invested trillions in the defence industry. Our new Government are also proposing to increase defence spending to 2.5% and then to 3%. The defence industry is reportedly responsible for approximately 40% of all corruption worldwide, and much of the money that we and other countries spend in defence is funnelled back through opaque channels into political parties and members. The industrial military complex needs to be investigated and dismantled.

The fact is that our political finance rules are too weak on hidden money, making the system vulnerable to subordination from rich individuals and secretive vested interests. My constituents and people from our country are concerned by the malign influence on Government policy of parties, Governments and Opposition Members and other Members accepting millions from state and industry lobbies, corporations and mega-rich donors.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a case. Does he agree that foreign money has no role in our democracy, and that one of the strongest ways in which we can clean up our politics and indeed strengthen our democracy is to make sure that the Electoral Commission has real teeth and has higher fining powers? Does he also agree that where we have concerns about foreign money coming into our country, we should have particular concerns about money coming from people such as Elon Musk?

Iqbal Mohamed: I completely agree with the hon. Member. The action that the Electoral Commission should be permitted to take should not just be limited to bigger, greater fines for donors. There should be consequences for those accepting donations and potentially being influenced.

[Iqbal Mohamed]

My constituents and the people of this country see and feel in their daily lives the deep impacts of pro-rich, pro-war, anti-poor and anti-consumer decisions and policies. The solution lies in reforms: to tighten spending rules; to shine a light on the source of financial contributions; to lower spending limits to reduce campaign costs and reliance on large donations; to introduce donation caps of £10,000 a year for individuals and organisations, as recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life; to remove the corrupting influence of big money in politics; and to close loopholes to ensure that overseas trips for parliamentarians are funded only by trusted sources.

The UK used to lead the way on funding transparency. The UK was a founding member of the Open Government Partnership, and placed third in the 2014 OECD open data index, but in recent years the UK has slipped. The most recent OECD rankings saw the UK fall to 24th place, with stories about dodgy dealings, personal protective equipment procurement and Ministers' disappearing WhatsApp messages all contributing to the decline in the trust that the public place in their politicians.

As has been mentioned, it should be a cause for grave concern that of the £85 million of private donations in 2023 alone, two thirds came from 19 donors giving more than £1 million each, the highest ever share of mega donations. If we do not want our politics to go the way of American politics, with British equivalents to the likes of Elon Musk and his fellow tech billionaires blatantly using money to buy influence and remake politics in their own interests, we need tighter regulation of political finance than we currently have, and full transparency for the public.

4.10 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I thank my fellow Dorset resident, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton), for securing this important debate. It goes to the heart of the concern that the public have, namely that economic dominance leads to political influence. Money is used to influence politics, and politics is then used to enable those people to make more money through changes in laws or regulations. This is the issue that worries the public. We also know that civic participation diminishes if people feel that they have no influence compared to those with large amounts of money.

Public trust in our political system is at an all-time low. That flows in part from a sense that politicians are unable properly to represent those who elect them, that money in our politics exerts undue influence that is often obscured from public view, and that those who break the rules that do exist are not adequately punished. Nearly 60% of the public think that funding of political parties is not transparent, and only 30% think that political parties that break the rules will face any action. That is why Labour's manifesto made the welcome pledge to

"establish a new independent Ethics and Integrity Commission, with its own independent Chair, to ensure probity in government."

The commission must be empowered to challenge the corrupting influence of not only the developer lobby but other big money donors, including those from the oil and gas industry. We should also close loopholes to

ensure that overseas trips for parliamentarians are funded only by trusted sources, and publish clearer guidance on the acceptance of gifts and hospitality.

It is worrying, too, that UK political parties are relying increasingly on a small number of extremely wealthy people to bankroll their election campaigns. The last Government increased national campaign spending limits from £19 million to £34 million, which has intensified the demand for donations across all our political parties. As the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) said earlier, Transparency International UK claims that between 2001 and May 2024, £42 million came from donors alleged or proved to have been involved in corruption, fraud or money laundering. Political parties should therefore be required by law to identify the true source of funds as part of a risk-based approach to donations, and a donation from a company should not be allowed to exceed its net profits generated in the UK within the preceding two years. A UK-registered company is permitted to make donations using money raised overseas, which is why political parties should be required to conduct checks on donations to assess and manage their risks.

There are real concerns about unincorporated associations. Such associations are not required to check that those who donate to them are permissible, which means that they could legitimately make donations using funding from otherwise impermissible sources, including from overseas. As other Members have said, the Electoral Commission should therefore be given powers to investigate candidates' compliance with the rules and to impose sanctions.

Finally, banning companies that win public contracts from making political donations would end the potential conflict of interests that this creates and the perception that political friends have received political favours.

4.15 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

As the Prime Minister declared last year, and as we see so graphically on the world stage now, the "fight for trust" will be

"the battle that defines our political era."—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 56.]

It is clear that if we MPs are to achieve the changes that people need most in their lives, we need a functioning democracy. If those we represent do not trust politicians to act in their best interest, we will not be an effective institution. Currently, it is simply not the case that they trust us. Both in the UK and across the globe, faith in politics and politicians is at an all-time low. In the UK, 76% of people have little to no trust in Members of this House—up from 54% a decade ago. I note with no great relish that this may not be surprising after years of a Conservative Government who were more concerned with their internal politics than the concerns of people around the country, but it should be a deep concern for us all. Rebuilding trust in politics is the goal, regardless of our political colour or persuasion. I am sure that all Members of the House can support that, but it will not happen overnight.

Research from the Electoral Commission shows that only 15% of people agree that there is transparency around the money spent and received by parties and

campaigners—down from over a third in 2011. We should be clear that political donations are not inherently wrong and are part of a vibrant democratic system. Individuals should be able to take part in the democratic process through political donations, which can help people to further the goals and ideals that they believe in. Banning any donations would entrench power, leaving new or smaller parties unable to campaign against incumbents. It would work against many of our democratic principles, but it is clear that although political donations are a good thing, we must have adequate transparency as to the source of the money. That is currently not the case.

The legal framework for the political finance system is now over 25 years old, and though it was explicitly intended to ban foreign donations to UK political parties, there are clearly many loopholes. There is no doubt that foreign nations have an interest in altering our politics. Dictators such as Putin and Xi Jinping have made it perfectly clear that they do not believe in democracy and are willing to undermine our institutions, but our current system has built-in loopholes that allow foreign interests to channel money to our politics to shape it in their interest. At present, UK-registered companies are permitted to make donations using money raised overseas and, as has been said previously, unincorporated associations can legitimately make donations using funding from otherwise impermissible donors.

It is not just foreign donations that should cause concern; the sheer amount of money coming from a small number of extremely wealthy donors is also worrying. Of the £85 million received in private donations in 2023 alone, two thirds came from just 19 donors. Money helps direct the political winds, and having that amount of money come from such a small number of powerful individuals risks bringing our democratic system into disrepute.

We must introduce a cap on donations. No matter how noble the intention, no individual should be able to donate excessively, as large donations can at the very least give the impression that undue influence is being exercised over our democracy. This would not only be a positive step in cleaning up politics; it would be popular too. A recent YouGov poll found that more than two thirds of the British public support a limit on political donations. Personally, I also have concerns about the capacity of union barons to exercise what might appear to be undue influence via the vast amount of money accumulated through the political levy, which they can donate or withhold as they see fit. However, I acknowledge that the issue is complex.

We are at a crucial juncture, and it is in everyone's interests that the Government get a proper handle on this issue. We cannot enter the next general election with so many questions left unanswered.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Stella Creasy, with a four-minute time limit.

4.19 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Like everybody in the Chamber, I must be sure to draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

"Follow the money" is one of those phrases we always hear, as if there is somehow a crushing inevitability that money determines outcomes in all areas of life, whether personal or political, but now in our democracy

there is a clear and present danger that the loudest voices and largest wallets will dominate, and that the two are connected. Even in these difficult political climes, it is extraordinary to think that the existential threat to our country's democracy posed by the suggestion that Elon Musk could donate £100 million to any political party here has not caused a Cobra meeting to be called, because it is a national security threat. A foreign agent, who is now part of the structures of a foreign state, is openly talking about interfering in our democracy—buying it, and boasting about doing so—and he is not the only one.

I guess that, for many, the idea that politics is so infused with money is not a surprise. After all, we have been trying for over 160 years to regulate foreign donations—and indeed local donations—in this country. For the avoidance of doubt, donating to a political party is a noble thing for people to do, given the concerns and passions they may have, and we in this Chamber have all sought donations. However, we have seen scandals through the years, starting with David Lloyd George and including the cash for questions affair and the personal protective equipment issue. Time and again, Transparency International has drawn our attention to the current data on this, and that is before we even get to Taylor Swift, because she is right: "It's me, you, hi—we are the problem". As politicians, we have not regulated this, even though we have seen these problems time and again.

In the short time available to me, I want to make a plea to the Minister to ensure she is looking at the impact at local level. When money is channelled through unincorporated organisations, many of us will have seen the impacts in our communities and our constituencies and, frankly, the failures of the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to intervene. In America, a 527 group is created primarily to influence the selection, nomination, election or appointment of candidates at local level, and many of us now have third-party organisations that are active in our local communities and trying to create disinformation to disrupt our local democracy.

People may ask what the problem is in my constituency, because I have a substantial majority, but given that one in five MPs have a majority of less than 5%, these activities—fake leaflets, third-party adverts on Facebook and so on—could be critical to the outcome of local and, indeed, national elections. We have gagging laws for charities, but we have nothing to deal with the businesses that are behind this and that are funding these activities. It is a grave irony to me that many of us came here yesterday to defend aid as part of national security work, because part of our aid budget goes on tackling disinformation and disruption in the democracies of other countries, but we are not doing anything about it at local level.

Just the other week, *The Guardian* reported that a network of Telegram channels with Russian links is encouraging UK residents to commit violent attacks on mosques and offering cryptocurrency in return. These activities are also happening online, as we have all seen. The online is now the offline threat, and vice versa. We saw that with Cambridge Analytica, and nobody really acted then. Members are right about the scale of the challenges with regulation and fines, but we need to do something about the fact that much more pressure can be brought to bear on MPs at local level because the results have been much closer.

[Ms Stella Creasy]

This is not some Netflix drama; this is the state of British democracy at the moment. Everybody in this Chamber has a vested interest in resolving it so that we can have free speech. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

4.23 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton), who plays an instrumental role in the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, for securing this important debate.

I was really proud to stand on a manifesto commitment to strengthen the rules on donations to political parties, and I welcome the Government's commitment to bring forward an elections Bill in due course. I hope today's debate will help inform what is in that future Bill, because as others have said, restoring trust in our political system and ensuring that everyone has a voice in the decisions that affect their lives is absolutely crucial to British democracy.

We know from international evidence the risk of allowing ever increasing amounts of money to dominate politics. I lived in Washington DC for almost 10 years and saw at first hand the impact of that system, including the world's richest man spending a quarter of a billion dollars to bankroll the last election. When billionaires and corporate interests drown out the voices of everyone else, we should not be surprised that people lose faith in democracy working for them. It continues to amaze me that representatives of Reform, who unsurprisingly have not turned up for this debate, seem eager to take that approach to politics. They preach populism on the one hand, while courting foreign billionaires and their policy agendas on the other. That is not in keeping with British values.

But this is also about places such as Moldova and other countries where we have seen Russian operatives shipping money in to buy elections. We should not be complacent. Other Members have covered the threat to the UK, and I would like to pay tribute to Transparency International UK, Spotlight on Corruption and all the other great organisations helping to shine a light on the issue. I will move on swiftly to some areas on which I hope the Minister will consider reforms: transparency, company donations, the Electoral Commission and a cap.

On transparency, unincorporated associations, as we have heard, are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Since 2010, over £40 million has come through unincorporated associations and we have no idea where 95% of that money came from. As it stands, they are not required to check that those who donate to them are permissible, so they could be foreign donors. They are easy to set up, we do not know who are behind them and there are no transparency requirements in law for donations to candidates, as opposed to political parties or campaigners. I hope that in a future elections Bill, the Government will introduce reforms to clamp down on those loopholes, including provisions on identifying people responsible for unincorporated associations, permissibility checks for political donations and lower reporting thresholds.

We have already heard that company donations are a big issue. I fully endorse the proposals made on the issue by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset.

Thirdly, we need robust independent oversight and to restore the independence of the Electoral Commission. We need an urgent review of the requirement for the commission to submit a strategy and policy statement to the Government. I believe that was part of an entirely confected agenda on voter fraud in the Elections Act 2022. I hope we will repeal that as soon as possible.

Finally, I believe it is now time to consider caps on political donations. The previous Government's massive increase in spending limits and the increasing reliance on major donors has convinced me that a well-enforced cap would be healthy for our democracy.

This is an issue that should unite us as a House. It is about the health of our democracy. There is a lot more we need to do: votes at 16, automatic voter registration, improving citizenship education, and ensuring citizens have a voice between elections and not just at them. But on this particular issue, with trust so low, it is vital that we act urgently.

4.27 pm

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Last week gave me two really clear reminders about why this issue matters. First, I spoke with my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) at a rally to mark the illegal invasion of Ukraine. We saw a frank reminder of authoritarianism right on our doorstep. Then, on Thursday, the Labour party lost a by-election in Vincent Square. While I do not like that result one bit, I am very proud to live in a country where a community can come together and make a decision about who represents them. We currently see more of that sort of politics in this country, with people able to go out to the polling station, but sadly we are at real risk of seeing it decline.

We cannot ignore the fact that there are forces intent on weakening our voice, our vote and our rights in the media, in business and in politics, and that they are co-ordinating to replace democratically elected regimes with those that would do their bidding. These forces are spreading conspiracy theories, which have driven division and violence in our communities. They give a platform to those who would question fundamental British values, and they undermine the democratic process as they question free and fair elections around the world. This is not a question of competition within our democracy, but of democracy itself. We need to preserve a system where the voters are the ones choosing their leaders, not billionaire autocrats. Keeping their money out of our politics is becoming a difficult task. Our finance flows are becoming more elusive, with cryptocurrency enabling money laundering at scale, and our politics has a growing demand for more cash, with ever-growing competition for voters' attention. What Member has not had to struggle with an inscrutable Ring doorbell or security gates? Understandable changes to home security and design have real impacts on our political finance, as we spend more and more money trying to reach voters through online ads and direct mail.

However, getting this money out of our politics is more important than ever at a time when trust in politics is at an all-time low. Politicians must be effective natural communicators as well as thoughtful legislators, and even the suspicion that we might not be acting in our constituents' interests will further erode the trust that voters do have in their representatives. Fixing political finance is, therefore, an essential part of restoring faith

in democracy. We have already heard that a tenth of the money in our politics comes from unknown or questionable sources and is donated through loopholes in existing law. Now, we have to come to the solutions.

Enforcement is made more difficult by loopholes and a weak enforcement system: Companies House reporting rules are too loose, while the Electoral Commission lacks the independence to investigate potential breaches swiftly and thoroughly. Reporting obligations for parties, elected officials and candidates require tightening up, as they allow some individual candidates to accept money without reporting. Meanwhile, the disincentives for bad behaviour, such as fines, are set well below the level that would impact bad actors.

We need to close the loopholes around unincorporated associations, open up political parties to greater transparency and give more power to enforcement entities. We cannot take for granted that voters will always be able to speak truth to power, and we need to fight to preserve a system where British elections are decided only by British voters. The forces of foreign interference are knocking at our door, and we need our Ring doorbell more than ever.

4.31 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): As colleagues have done already, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this debate.

I rise to speak as someone who dedicated almost 15 years of my working life before coming to this place to being an anti-corruption professional. It is an issue that goes to the heart of our politics, so it is somewhat disappointing to see that no Back-Bench Members from the official Opposition are present to speak in this debate. This is a vital issue on which we need to build consensus across party lines.

We have heard about low turnout at elections, which, as I think we all know, tears at the very fabric of our society, corroding democracy and the social contract between the citizen and the state. Foreign political donations might well be banned in the UK, but the current restrictions are far too easy for determined actors to circumvent. In response, we must be bold in reforming our outdated oversight of political donations.

The risk posed by foreign interference plagues all our parties. Although it is not just about one person, individual or party, I have taken the liberty of raking back through donations of years past to illustrate my argument. Indeed, just before the election, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism made what should have been impermissible donations to all six major parties. All but one—Labour—failed to correctly identify that the donation could not be accepted under current rules and return the money.

Elsewhere, the Intelligence and Security Committee's 2020 report on Russian interference made it clear that Russian money has been used not just to buy up sprawling mansions, but to attempt to buy influence in our politics. We have seen Lubov Chernukhin, the wife of a former Putin Minister, donating more than £2 million to the Conservative party. One might ask, what does £2 million buy? Well, in return, Lubov was awarded with a tennis match with Boris Johnson and dinner with Liz Truss and Theresa May—they picked up the bill, presumably. Let us also take the case of oligarch Alexander Temerko, who ran a Russian state arms company and has coughed up more than £700,000.

Separately, we know that the Russian state and its proxies have a well-documented history of interfering in the politics of other countries and subverting hard-won democracy, whether that is in the United States, France or Moldova, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) mentioned. We should not be so arrogant as to assume that Britain is immune to this interference.

So what can we do? First, I hope that we will see an elections Bill in the next Session, which would provide a golden opportunity to close the loopholes we have heard about today, give the regulator real powers and safeguard our democracy against foreign influence. If the Minister is looking for inspiration, she need only look to organisations such as Spotlight on Corruption, Transparency International UK, as well as the Electoral Commission itself. We should include proposals around making sure that we introduce “Know your Donor rules”—or KYD. Introducing such rules would require parties themselves to conduct proper checks on the sources of a donation. Where that cannot be established, the parties themselves will be required to reject that money.

Secondly, we should close the current loophole in our donation system that allows donations from shell companies that have never even turned a profit in the UK. Thirdly, we must crack down on unincorporated associations, such as the Carlton Club, which can channel donations to political candidates. Some unincorporated associations have become opaque slush funds to channel money into politics, allowing money from undisclosed foreign sources to trickle into our election campaigns.

If we fail to act and send a clear message, we undermine democracy and trust in our politics. We must not allow that to happen, and I urge the Minister to be bold.

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

4.35 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for his work in securing this important debate, and Members from across the House for their contributions this afternoon.

The Liberal Democrats support this motion, which aligns with our long-standing stance on political finance reform and protecting democracy from foreign influence. We have long called for reforms to prevent foreign interference and increase the transparency in political donations. We support strengthening the Electoral Commission by restoring its independence and increasing its enforcement powers, including higher fines for breaches of political finance laws. Our democracy should never be up for sale to foreign billionaires, oligarchs, or hostile states and, as such, we support this motion, which acknowledges some of those risks.

The Liberal Democrats will continue to push for strong measures to protect our political and electoral system. We want to take big money out of politics by capping donations to political parties. I am proud that my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) presented a Bill in this House to do just that. And we want to enhance regulatory powers to protect British democracy from the unprecedented threat posed by foreign interference and attacks on our democracy. Liberal Democrats will make protecting our democracy a national security priority.

[Sarah Olney]

We are seeing record levels of disillusionment with the political process, with citizens becoming increasingly disengaged. Research from the Electoral Commission highlights a significant drop in the rate of public confidence in political finance transparency, falling from 37% in 2011 to about 15% today. It has also recently pointed out the threat of foreign influence on social media, highlighting the rise in misinformation and artificial intelligence deepfakes in the run-up to the general election in July last year, as well as new issues arising from the changes to fact checking on popular websites.

Public trust in our electoral process was not helped by the disastrous record of the former Conservative Government. It was not just their successive sleaze scandals, which created a crisis of democracy in this country, or their exorbitant voter ID scheme, which disproportionately disenfranchises the young and those from ethnic minority communities, but their shameful decision to weaken the independence of the Electoral Commission, and that is a decision that will go down in ignominy. If we are to strengthen our democratic safeguards, and correspondingly strengthen public trust in our democracy, that has to start with empowering the Electoral Commission. That is why we need to reverse the Conservatives' changes. We want to strengthen the Electoral Commission by repealing the Government's power to designate a strategy and policy statement for the commission.

The former Conservative Government also failed to take the threat posed by Russia seriously. They were content to allow Russian money to flood into the UK and also to allow Russian money to flow into the coffers of their own party. And the manner in which Boris Johnson let the Russia report sit on his desk was shocking. When that report was finally published, it laid bare the extent to which Russia is a threat, including to our democratic institutions. The report said:

"The UK is clearly a target for Russia's disinformation campaigns and political influence operations and must therefore equip itself to counter such efforts."

It called Russian influence in the UK "the new normal" and said that the Government had underestimated the response required to the Russian threat. We continue to call for the full publication of the unredacted report.

The Russian Government have been accused of orchestrating a widespread campaign of interference and disinformation that seeks to undermine the global order. In September 2024, the heads of MI6 and the CIA jointly warned that the international order is under threat in a way not seen since the end of the cold war, accusing Russia of a

"reckless campaign of sabotage across Europe".

I hope that the Minister shares my concern that this week United States Defence Secretary Hegseth has announced the stepping back of US counter-cyber measures against Russia. That is an incredibly concerning decision by the Americans, which threatens not only their cyber-security but our own. Will she update the House on what measures the UK is taking to step up our defence of our democratic institutions? We will continue to urge the Government to designate protecting our democracy as a national security priority.

Turning to foreign oligarchs, it would be remiss of me not to mention Elon Musk. Let us recall that just weeks before Musk became a US Government official, he

suggested that America should liberate the people of Britain and overthrow the UK Government. I hope that other parties will join the Liberal Democrats in unequivocally condemning such remarks. That incident further proves that we urgently need to tighten up political funding. That includes a cap on big donations. We must prevent foreign oligarchs from being able to interfere in our democracy.

The Liberal Democrats want to take big money out of politics by capping donations to political parties, and we support the motion. A fair cap will ensure that politics serves our constituents and not big money. Over two thirds of the British public support a cap on political donations. We must deliver the reforms that people are demanding.

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

4.40 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I will start with a confession: I am one of the readers of *The Guardian* on the Conservative Benches, and I pay tribute to the helpful article it published today with the latest update of what has been happening in the world of political donations. It illustrates that, despite the increase in spending limits set out in the previous Parliament, the spend at the last general election reduced as political parties on all sides reined in their spending.

The article also sets out in some detail the fundraising efforts of the parties in the Chamber and helps to put some of the figures quoted in public debates into context. While there may be those promising to donate \$100 million to British political parties, the party in question managed to raise £280,000 over that quarter, which is approximately an eighth of the funds raised by my party and a bit less than a quarter of the funds raised by the Labour party over the same period. As a dedicated fan of *Private Eye*, it is clear to me that the transparency brought by the reporting of these donations is enormously helpful; indeed, it has led to many of the contributions to the debate.

On the whole, the debate has been positive, by and large avoiding much of the casting of aspersions we often see and focusing on the practicalities. I have some brief points to make and then some questions to put to the Minister that are very much about the practicalities of taking forward the work that is under way.

First, there is the need to respond as political parties and a state to the evolving roster of challenges that we face. We know that practices are being imported from the United States, such as the funding of issue-based campaigns, which have enormous political impact, including on the election of politicians, but are not donations to specific political parties. The Opposition would clearly be keen to work with the Government to ensure that donations for a political purpose—without being to a political party—are open to the appropriate level of scrutiny.

A loophole has recently been created by the decision of Labour in Wales and the SNP in Scotland to extend the franchise to a greater proportion of foreign citizens, allowing them to vote in British elections, because the principle that underpins reporting is that people can donate to a political party only in an election where they are also able to vote. The fact that two areas of our

country have different rules on that enables such citizens to donate to those parties, because the political parties there operate nationally. That is a loophole and an issue that I hope the Government will be addressing.

Political finance is seen not just in the form of donation to political parties but in the lobbying, to which a number of hon. Members referred, the trips and the research input. In the last Parliament, there was the lobbying scandal that revolved around a Chinese spy donating about £700,000 to Labour party organisations. That is reflected in the challenge that has come from Opposition Members to the Government's position on the Chinese embassy. While the Government may feel that it is a legitimate foreign policy objective to cosy up to China, many members across parties express the view that the influence of China in British politics is a significant concern.

Let me put some questions to the Minister. First, why have the Government chosen to abandon the commitment made by Parliament and the last Government in the National Security Act 2023 to enhance the powers so that regulators, law enforcement and security services could share information with political parties? That process would have specifically helped to avoid the kind of situation that occurred with Labour's Chinese spy problem, by enabling parties to be more informed about who the individuals are who are coming forward.

Will the Government take steps to close the loophole created by the Labour Welsh Government and the SNP Scottish Government that, for the first time, allowed Russian, Chinese and Iranian citizens resident in those countries to donate to UK-wide politicians and political parties? Why has the Minister chosen not to include China in the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme? While we recognise that the Government are pursuing greater trade with China, which is a legitimate political expectation, is that not a green light to the Chinese Communist party to enhance the degree of influence it seeks to transact in British politics?

Does the Minister and do the Government accept that UK politicians themselves are low risk? It is important that we are here having this debate and seeking the highest possible standards. In the past, we saw gold-plating, with the politically exposed persons rules that saw parliamentarians on all sides of the Chamber being deprived of access to basic financial services. Does the Minister believe that we need to remove the risk of genuine, legitimate UK politicians being debanked because of their political views?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in the context of the need to maintain consensus, why are the Government failing to consult the political parties on their plans for changes to political finance law, contrary to the precedent set by past Administrations of all parties? Does the Minister accept the long-standing convention that the Government of the day do not unilaterally seek to impose measures affecting political finance to their own partisan advantage? Will she undertake that there will be discussions with the Parliamentary Parties Panel and that there will be formal consultation with the parties? Will there be discussions through the so-called usual channels or on Privy Council terms? That way, we can ensure that in the context of electoral law that is complex—and for good reason: to protect the integrity of our democracy—we can retain cross-party confidence that those rules are not being used by the Government in pursuit of their own political advantage.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for opening this debate and congratulate the Backbench Business Committee and its key members on granting this debate. I am extremely grateful to hon. Members for their insights and excellent contributions, all of which are incredibly valuable as we make progress on such an important agenda. I have heard real passion and conviction in today's speeches. In those powerful speeches in defence of our democracy, our desire to protect it from those who would distort and disrupt it was clear.

The UK's democratic system has evolved over time to create a stable and adaptable political ecosystem, with strong institutions that are rightly held as exemplars the world over. We can be proud of our historic commitments to expanding democratic rights and making our system more representative and inclusive. We must not be complacent, however. Democracy is hard-won and fragile. The price of our democracy is eternal vigilance, and nowhere is that truer than in campaign finance and political funding.

This Government are committed to strengthening our democracy and ensuring full participation in our elections. We will set out the Government's approach to elections and electoral reform for this Parliament in a published document before the summer recess. Effective regulation of political finance is crucial in maintaining public trust in our electoral systems, and that point was well made today in the speeches by hon. Members.

The UK has a strong political finance framework that makes it clear that only those with legitimate interests in UK elections can make political donations. Foreign money has no place in the UK's political system, which is why the law is clear that foreign donations are not permitted, with the exception of donations from certain Irish sources to Northern Ireland political parties. That recognises the special place of Ireland in the political life and culture of Northern Ireland and is consistent with the principles set out in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

Accepting or facilitating an illegitimate foreign donation is rightly a criminal offence. Political parties are required by law to take reasonable steps to verify the identity of a donor and whether they are permissible, and there are rules that safeguard against impermissible donations through the back door. While it is clear that foreign donations to political parties and other campaigners are illegal, the Government recognise the continued risks posed by actors who seek to interfere with and undermine our democratic process—a point well made by a number of hon. Members.

We do not think that the current rules provide strong enough safeguards. That is why the Government committed in their manifesto to

“protect democracy by strengthening the rules around donations to political parties”,

including enhanced safeguards against foreign donations. We are considering a series of policy interventions, such as enhanced checks by recipients of donations and tighter controls on donors, including more restrictions around company donations.

Hon. Members have mentioned the important role that the Electoral Commission plays in the UK's democratic system as the regulator of political finance. Robust

[*Rushanara Ali*]

regulation and enforcement of political finance rules are crucial for promoting public confidence and trust in democratic processes, ensuring integrity and combating the threat of foreign interference.

As part of delivering on our commitment to strengthen the rules around political donations, we are reviewing whether any changes are required to the role and powers of the regulator to ensure that enforcement provides a clear deterrent against breaking the law while remaining proportionate. The Government are developing proposals to give effect to those commitments. In the meantime, I assure hon. Members that we are carefully considering evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, including recommendations from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the Electoral Commission. At its core, that work is about protecting the integrity of our democratic process. It is therefore vital that we remain responsive to the full range of threats to our democracy and continue our efforts on the related issues of election security and preparedness.

Working across government with the intelligence agencies, the devolved Governments, the police and external partners, the Government will continue to monitor and respond to emerging issues, such as protective security cyber-threats, as well as misinformation and disinformation.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I am pleased to hear the Minister say that the Government are awake to the evolving nature of the threat, especially in cyber and on social media platforms. One of the things that I hope they look at is the various ways that social media can be used to directly or indirectly benefit political parties.

Rushanara Ali: The defending democracy taskforce, chaired by the Home Secretary alongside the Deputy Prime Minister, is very much looking at those issues.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend talked about the evolving nature of the threat. Members on both sides of the House have spoken of Elon Musk, and I feel compelled to do so, too. This is a man who, when our country was going through riots, said that we were on the verge of civil war. This is a man who said that one of our own Ministers should be put in jail. Is she able to say for the record that that is exactly the type of person who we need to investigate, and that his money has no place in our politics?

Rushanara Ali: It is crucial that we focus on ensuring that our democracy and its integrity are protected from interference and that we have public confidence, and that is our focus. Instead of going into specific individual cases, my focus is on ensuring that we build trust in our system and protect our democracy against interference, and political finance is a key part of that.

In closing, I thank hon. Members from across the House for their contributions to this important debate, which was rich with suggestions and ideas. As we make progress in the coming months, I very much look forward to working with colleagues, across parties, to ensure that we take the necessary action. We want a robust,

vibrant and representative democracy, and that means fighting foreign interference and unfair funding. I look forward to bringing forward further details, before the summer recess, on how we intend to strengthen our democracy and uphold the integrity of elections.

4.55 pm

Lloyd Hatton: I thank all Members for a thoughtful and constructive debate. I thank the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) for their particularly thoughtful contributions, my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for his powerful remarks about the relationship between donations and public trust, and the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for his consensus-driven contribution.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) for outlining the urgent need for change—we cannot keep waiting for reform to materialise—and my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for setting out the important context of our global responsibility to fight dirty money and clean up politics. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), who is no longer in the Chamber—[HON. MEMBERS: “Yes she is!”] Oh, she is. Apologies—she has been playing musical chairs. I thank her for highlighting what is at stake if we fail to defend our vibrant democracy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) for outlining robustly the risks posed by Russian oligarchs and their dirty money. We must stand up against it.

Before I bring my remarks to a close, I gently say to the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) that this is an important discussion—I think we all agree on that—but we must always be driven by facts and evidence. Oversimplifying the arguments means that we will not get the right outcomes. I believe that one can support a policy such as increasing defence spending to 2.5% without somehow being in hock to or in the pocket of the military industrial complex, as he put it. That is a gross oversimplification, and I gently remind him of that.

Finally, I thank the Minister for her contribution. I welcome the Government’s commitment to setting out their thinking on this important issue later this year. I thank her for reconfirming that foreign donations have no place in British politics and for making it clear that the Government agree about the need for stronger safeguards. The Electoral Commission will play a crucial role in this. We must ensure that it is fully independent.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises that loopholes in regulation allow for opaque funding of political parties; expresses concern over the prevalence of substantial financial contributions from corrupt individuals and foreign governments, which render political parties susceptible to manipulation and undue influence; acknowledges the risk these opaque funds pose to national security and the health of democracy; further recognises the need to strengthen the powers and independence of regulators to help the regulation of political donations; and calls on the Government to tighten the law on permissible donations to make clear that political parties cannot accept money from impermissible sources or from companies that have not made enough money in the UK to fund the amount of their donation or loan.

PETITION

East Park Energy Solar Farm

4.58 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Further to my online petition of residents in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire that has received 1,100 signatures, I present this petition from constituents of Huntingdon and north Bedfordshire who will be impacted by the proposed East Park Energy solar farm.

The proposal announced by Brockwell Storage and Solar to build a solar farm, known as East Park Energy, which will, at 1,900 acres, be bigger than Gatwick airport, has caused great concern among residents in the parishes of Hail Weston, Great Staughton, Little Staughton, Keysoe and Pertenhall. The development has been designated a nationally significant infrastructure project and is being built on farmland, 75% of which is graded as best and most versatile land—grade 2 and grade 3a. The proposed solar farm stands to have a significant impact on local life, as 700,000 photovoltaic panels are installed on 250,000 pile-driven metal posts. The site has even been built on top of a Roman town that has been identified but not excavated.

Local residents feel that their voice in opposition to the scale of the project being foisted upon them has not been heard, and that the Government are unprepared to listen to them.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to not approve the East Park Energy proposal and to take immediate action to remove its Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project status.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire,

Declares that the announced proposal by Brockwell Storage and Solar to build a 1,900-acre solar farm, known as East Park Energy, has caused great concern amongst residents of Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire, who are deeply worried as to the scale of the development, and that the development has been classified as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project, which has raised additional concerns about its impact on residents; further declares that the proposed site would result in the loss and permanent damage of Grade 2 and 3a agricultural land, removing it from food production; and notes that an online petition on this matter received 1,067 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to not approve the East Park Energy proposal and to take immediate action to remove its Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project status.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003050]

Geothermal Energy

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

4.59 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am grateful to have been granted this Adjournment debate, as it provides a welcome opportunity to put on the record in this new Parliament the benefits that deep geothermal could deliver for our country, in particular for parts of our country that most need investment, while making a contribution to the vital issue of energy security.

Helping me in this effort is the all-party parliamentary group on deep geothermal, which the Association for Renewable Energy and Clean Technology helps to administer. I am delighted to spot the hon. Members for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) and for Rushcliffe (James Naish) in the Chamber, who are all members of the APPG, which provides me with an opportunity to recognise and thank them for the work they are doing for the cause.

Deep geothermal energy remains an underutilised resource in the UK, despite its potential to provide reliable renewable heat in particular, and also power. With growing pressure to secure our energy future and decarbonise heating, now is the time to give this technology the attention it deserves. As we work towards energy security and decarbonisation, we must explore every viable renewable energy source. Deep geothermal offers a stable and sustainable solution, yet it remains largely untapped in the UK. To unlock its potential, the Government must take the lead, providing the necessary support to get projects off the ground and demonstrate their long-term viability.

One of the biggest challenges we face in the journey to net zero is the decarbonisation of heating, which must be treated as a priority. The UK has more than 28.5 million homes and 1.9 million other buildings—including offices, hospitals, shops and warehouses—the vast majority of which rely on gas boilers for both heating and hot water. These buildings alone account for nearly one fifth of the UK’s total emissions. The Climate Change Committee has identified decarbonising heat as one of the most difficult yet essential steps in reaching net zero.

Achieving net zero by 2050 requires us to use every tool at our disposal. While much of the Government’s attention has been focused on air and ground source heat pumps, alongside other electrification methods, which have an important and certainly dominant role to play, converting the entire housing stock to those technologies will put immense pressure on our electricity grid and supply chains. That is where deep geothermal stands out. It offers a reliable, low-carbon solution for heating that is not dependent on sun or wind—it is there all year round, whatever the weather—and has been successfully deployed in other countries to great effect.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Member agree that geothermal, as a baseload energy source that can be developed quickly, should be included in the Government’s clean power plan and have the priority that that affords for grid connections?

Dr Mullan: I fully support the hon. Member's efforts to raise this issue. She will know from the local projects in her constituency that we are making a start, but it is not enough, and this needs to be part of the broader plan in a comprehensive way.

When I first learned about deep geothermal technology, I thought it sounded too good to be true: an environmentally friendly, reliable and cost-effective source of heat and power right underneath our feet. But the more I explored it, the more I realised it truly lives up to its promise. Let me briefly explain the technology. Deep geothermal taps into naturally occurring hot water deep underground to produce significant amounts of usable heat and energy. Making use of that is no different from the way in which the Romans built their baths above hot springs; we just run a pipe down instead of relying on the water making its own way to the surface. People sometimes wonder whether the technology is fracking mark 2. Fracking involves the use of high pressure to crack the rocks to create artificial flows. Like Europe, we have access to resources of naturally flowing water that simply need to be tapped.

Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the United Nations all support deep geothermal in the light of its environmental benefits. A site is typically 1 to 2 acres. It does not take up huge swathes of farmland like solar panels can or involve erecting wind turbines, which some communities think detract from the local landscape.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving us the opportunity to discuss the potential of geothermal and the barriers when it comes to planning. In my constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, we have businesses that are at the forefront of both shallow geothermal energy, with ground source heat pumps developed by Kensa, and deep geothermal systems such as those being pioneered by the Geothermal Engineering Ltd deep geothermal power project, which is soon to become operational. Does he agree that industry needs Government support, including planning reform to reduce deployment timescales, and a UK geothermal licensing scheme to calculate the size of the geothermal asset and how that asset is protected in law?

Dr Mullan: I agree with the hon. Member. The Government need an entire strategy for deep geothermal that will hopefully draw attention to those different pieces of the puzzle, including planning and licensing, which are so important. Not too far away from his constituency is the Eden Project, which people see as a byword for environmental credentials in this country. It is pioneering this technology, which is a powerful testimony to its environmental benefits.

Since the closure of the non-domestic renewable heat incentive in 2021—unfortunately just as interest was peaking from industry—deep geothermal, unlike solar and wind in their early beginnings, has been without comprehensive Government support to develop the market. There have been encouraging breakthroughs, as was mentioned, and in 2023 the UK's first operational deep geothermal plant to open in 37 years went online at the Eden Project. Deep geothermal also made its historic debut in allocation round 5 of contracts for difference, with three projects from Geothermal Engineering Ltd securing approval, totalling 12 MW of capacity. At Langarth garden village, green heat network funding is now

supporting the development of a geothermal-powered heat network to turn that resource into local supply. Those successes show that, with the right backing, geothermal can become a key player in our transition to clean, sustainable energy.

However, those ad hoc wins are not providing the sort of comprehensive dedicated approach that we need. As it stands, the UK has fallen far behind other countries that have for some time harnessed the potential of deep geothermal. If we look across Europe, as of 2022 there were 74 projects in France, 31 in the Netherlands, and 190 in Germany. Deep geothermal energy heats more than a quarter of a million homes in Paris, and the French Government aim to increase the number of schemes by 40% by 2030. Munich is pouring in €1 billion through to 2035 to develop deep geothermal and make the city's heating carbon neutral. In fact, Germany is already producing more than 350 MW annually, and the Government are targeting at least 100 new geothermal projects. Across Europe alone, hot sedimentary aquifers have the potential to provide eight terawatts of heat at 90° C—30 times more than the district heating systems that currently serve 70 million people across the region. The potential is enormous.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I would be looked on badly if I did not briefly mention the British Geological Survey, which is based in my constituency. The hon. Member talks about what is happening in Europe, but does he agree that in the British Geological Survey in this country we have one of the world's experts in studying geology and geothermal technology, which could help unlock what we are doing in this country with deep geothermal?

Dr Mullan: The hon. Member is right, and I join him in paying tribute to the BGS, an organisation I have had the pleasure of working with over recent years. It has done fantastic work in mapping and identifying the potential, and with funding it will have the appetite to go even further, reducing uncertainty by helping developers and investors to understand the resources underneath our feet.

The UK is already a world leader in tackling climate change and clean energy, having been the first major economy to halve our emissions, and renewables now account for more than 50% of our electricity, up from just 7% in 2010. With deep sedimentary basins in east Yorkshire and Cheshire, granites in Cornwall and Scotland, hot sedimentary aquifers in Surrey, Dorset, and Sussex—in my constituency—the UK's unique geography puts us in an ideal position to exploit the benefits of geothermal energy.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the work that the hon. Member has done in this area. York has rich sources of deep geothermal. The York Central site could heat 30,000 homes in my constituency, yet the local authority and other bodies do not have the confidence to bring those projects on board. Does he agree that the Government could provide tools and support to enable such projects to come to fruition, as well as just improve basic understanding?

Dr Mullan: The hon. Member is completely right—forgive me, she is also a member of the APPG although I did not recognise that at the start of my remarks. One thing we can do through the APPG—we started to do

this in the last Parliament, and I am trying to reconstitute it—is to help interested local authorities form a group and support them. This technology is new to them, and they do not necessarily have the expertise and understanding. Again, the hon. Member is right: these are the sorts of things that a comprehensive Government-led strategy could help to address close the gaps.

As I said, the resource in Europe, and the rocks that are being exploited, are essentially exactly the same veins of rock that cross the channel. There is no geological difference and no less potential than with the rocks that are being exploited in Europe.

It is true that the heat and rocks necessary for deep geothermal electricity are rarer here in the UK, with Cornwall leading the field, which is where the projects I mentioned are getting off the ground, but historically the focus on electricity has caused us to overlook the potential for heat.

The Association for Renewable Energy and Clean Technology—REA—worked with Arup to assess the UK's potential. They estimated that the UK could support 360 geothermal plants, producing 15,000 GW of heat each year, which could supply heating to over 2 million homes through heat networks. Additionally, some of those plants could generate around 400 GW of electricity annually, enough to power a further 150,000 homes.

The Minister will be looking closely at securing the best possible value for money from every penny invested in renewable technologies, but I want to make four points about the way in which this exercise should be undertaken, because too narrow a framework would underestimate the benefits of deep geothermal to our economy overall.

First, as I alluded to earlier, solar and wind are cheaper now, but they did not used to be and we need to think about the potential trend costs. Secondly, as mentioned, deep geothermal is baseload, unlike solar and wind, and that has to be given due consideration. Thirdly, there is the question of where the investment will end up. I had the opportunity to work with the Durham Energy Institute as part of a national review into deep geothermal for the previous Government. We identified that deep geothermal can play a key role in levelling up, with six of the 10 least economically resilient local authorities also having the highest geothermal potential. Some 44% of the list of high potential locations for deep geothermal fall within the top 100 UK local authorities in need of levelling up, three times the amount that we would expect as a result of chance. Investing in the sector would create thousands of well-paid jobs and drive green growth in areas that need it most. Fourthly, deep geothermal provides a natural transition for oil and gas workers, as many skills, such as drilling, are directly transferable. Oil and gas companies—sometimes UK companies—are delivering these projects across Europe. Surely this is the obvious industry to invest in to protect those jobs and businesses as we transition.

How might we go further in the short term? I have worked with the industry to develop a ready-made plan. I ask the Minister to look closely at the proposals that the APPG have produced to create a carve-out in the public sector decarbonisation scheme to unlock this opportunity. The PSD scheme has already played a crucial role in helping public sector buildings transition to low carbon heating solutions. However, a specific

programme could be carved out to support an initial cohort of deep geothermal projects, ensuring that schools, hospitals and other public buildings can benefit from this reliable, renewable heat source. By doing so, the Government would not only accelerate the decarbonisation of public infrastructure, but provide a strong foundation for the wider geothermal industry to scale up and attract investment.

I have spoken in the Chamber before about how hospitals are fantastic anchor candidates for deep geothermal plants. Industry leaders have identified that, of the 210 NHS hospitals in England and Wales that have been prioritised for decarbonisation due to their high heat demand, 109 overlie potential geothermal aquifers. The advantage of working across the NHS is that we can bundle up opportunities to create a bigger investment opportunity. I know that hospitals across the country are already exploring this, including Eastbourne district general hospital, which services my constituents in Bexhill and Battle.

One of the challenges for deep geothermal is scale of cost and uncertainty. Solar and wind are cheaper and more certain investments. A single geothermal plant is expensive and cannot be guaranteed to tap into the reserves the analysis suggests will be found. By pooling together the investment opportunity of a number of sites, economies of scale are created, the risks of not all the sites delivering can be factored in and the numbers can still be made to add up.

The private sector is willing and able to invest in such an opportunity. I have personally met representatives from a number of capital funds and deep geothermal developers and they would leap at such a project. We estimate that a dedicated fund of just £15 million for 10 plants at 10 public sector sites could unlock £250 million of private sector investment and kick-start a wider industry in the UK. Will the Minister meet me and other members of the APPG to discuss that in the near future?

Alongside that, there is a powerful argument for a broader geothermal development incentive, modelled on the heat incentive, which will provide businesses with confidence that geothermal is part of the UK's energy future. It could be modelled on contracts for difference, ensuring a competitive process, but by offering scale we would again be reducing risk for developments.

I know there are concerns about open-ended support for any industry, but the aforementioned REA-Arup report modelled support for only an initial wave of 30 projects that would help establish a scaled industry in the UK, which could then stand on its own two feet.

Establishing a deep geothermal strategy is crucial to setting clear targets and providing a long-term road map for the sector. Will the Minister advise whether the Government will produce such a strategy? Government support is key to enabling a route to market for the sector. I know the Government are shortly due to publish a review of the comparative costs of deep geothermal. When does the Minister expect the review to be published? That would provide a welcome update. I know that industry stakeholders that work with the APPG and others would be happy to act as critical friends of that review ahead of publication. Would the Minister be happy to facilitate that? It is so important to ensure that this review has looked at all the evidence and can make full use of the experience of industry.

[Dr Mullan]

The APPG also considers and is trying to raise awareness of the benefits of shallow geothermal, as the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) mentioned. While it is very closely related to deep geothermal, as we might expect, that industry faces different challenges, but it could offer solutions even more widely. I know that significant private sector investment is available. Again, we are talking about a technology that could reduce the strain on electricity-driven grid connections. For both sectors, GB Energy might well be expected to play a vital role. Can the Minister confirm my expectation that its remit will extend to heat as much as to electricity, and can she confirm whether the mandate from Government will ask it to consider deep geothermal specifically?

James Naish: On that point, could the Government not help the industry by also ensuring that there is an overarching geothermal regulatory regime, which I think it is fair to say we do not really have yet in the UK? Would the hon. Gentleman support that being brought forward?

Dr Mullan: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; that is one of the pieces of the jigsaw that will further unlock private sector investment. In my engagement with industry, that is slightly further along the chain of things that it is looking for—the numbers do not add up at all at the minute, let alone a proper regulatory regime being in place. As soon as we unlock the numbers, the demand for all the other areas will really ramp up, which is why we need this thought-through strategy from Government so that they can anticipate and prepare to bring in the other elements when they become particularly important.

I hope that I have done an adequate job of showcasing the industry and its potential. Everything we have learned in recent years shows that we need to take advantage of every opportunity. We need to build the biggest coalition, deploy the largest possible workforce and spread the benefits of decarbonising as widely as possible if we are to succeed and bring the country with us in the challenge. I cannot think of a better way of doing that than putting dedicated resources into deep geothermal. I know that it could bring benefits to my constituents and to the constituents of many other Members and unlock hundreds of millions, if not billions of pounds of investment into our economy. I look forward to hearing about the Minister's plans and ambitions, which I hope will get us there.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) for bringing this important issue to the attention of the House. I also thank my hon. Friends for their contributions and for the valuable way in which they have engaged in this debate. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle has been a great champion of deep geothermal energy in recent years, and the role he has played in the formation of the all-party parliamentary group on deep geothermal is commendable. I was very pleased to attend its meeting in December, and I am grateful for the engaged and constructive discussion that we had.

I agree with the hon. Member that there is a huge opportunity here, and I echo his desire for action and pace; I will briefly say why I share that desire. He will know, as I do, that we are coming out of the worst cost

of living crisis that we have seen in a generation, and energy has been at the very heart of that crisis. The reality is that energy is unaffordable for too many people and increasingly out of reach for people who absolutely rely on it as an essential good, and we as a Government are determined to fix that. That means that we need to take action to lower energy bills by breaking our reliance on international fossil fuel markets and sprinting towards clean, home-grown power. That is why the Government are so committed and why we are running at our clean power by 2030 mission, but it is also why our warm home plan is absolutely critical. I reassure the hon. Member that we see that geothermal power has a critical role to play in our energy mix, following its success in the fifth auction round of contracts for difference.

I agree that geothermal energy represents an important opportunity—if the hon. Member hears nothing else I say today, I ask him to hear that. It has the potential to deliver clean and secure energy and heat, reducing our reliance on fossil fuel markets. As he mentioned, we are acutely aware that geothermal energy could also support a just transition by creating thousands of jobs that use skills from our oil, gas and coalmining sectors. The Government provide financial support for geothermal projects today, and we will continue to do so. The critical thing is ensuring that this is done at an acceptable cost to consumers and in an environmentally friendly way.

As the hon. Member mentioned, the most widespread potential for deep geothermal in the UK is as a low-carbon heat source for heat networks. I am convinced that heat networks have a really important role to play as we roll out clean heat and upgrade millions of homes across the country. We have the opportunity to grow their market share from 3% today to 20% by 2050. One of my first visits as the Minister for energy consumers was to the Mersey heat network, where heat from the Leeds and Liverpool canal is being used to provide hot water and low-carbon power for thousands of people, thanks to a water source heat pump. That is a great example of how communities can benefit from local energy sources, which is what the hon. Member and my hon. Friends are advocating for in this debate. I completely commend that and support it.

There are significant geothermal success stories, such as in Gateshead, where the first mine water heat network to become operational in the UK received £5.9 million from our heat networks investment project. That money enabled the council and Gateshead Energy Company to install 5 km of new heat network pipes and a 6 MW water source heat pump. Today, that network heats 350 council homes and the Baltic arts centre, with 270 more homes to be added.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle referred to the public sector scheme. Geothermal heat projects supplying public sector sites are eligible to apply for support provided that they meet that scheme's eligibility criteria, and again, I agree with him that there is a big opportunity here. I would add, however, that any changes to the scheme would need to be considered once the current spending round is completed. That is what he would expect me to say, but I reassure him that I am very happy to meet him and members of the APPG to discuss their proposals.

Dr Mullan: The point to emphasise is that the current scheme is based on going project by project, which undermines our ability to bundle up the risk, which is so

vital to deep geothermal. That is the key change we are looking for: the opportunity for a number of sites to be pulled together, which is what will be most attractive to investors.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We want to think about creative ways in which we can unlock the potential for investment, so I am very keen to meet the hon. Member and members of the APPG so we can hear those proposals. I give him that reassurance.

Not just today but over recent years, the hon. Member has made a convincing case for the merits of pursuing deep geothermal. The Government remain committed to exploring the renewable energy opportunities afforded by our geography and geology. However, I hope the hon. Member will understand that the priority now—and the thing my boss has tasked me with—is developing the warm homes plan. It would be premature for the Government to set a geothermal strategy with detailed targets in advance of that plan. For us, it is a question of sequencing; for instance, if we are to make the most of geothermal's potential, we need to start by creating an environment that enables the growth of heat networks and, crucially, protects consumers along the way.

To that end, the Department will bring forward a market regulatory framework in January 2026 to improve consumer protection. We are also consulting on heat network zoning, which is an essential part of our plan to establish and accelerate heat networks. We think that will significantly increase private sector investment and remove some of the barriers. We are committed to taking a long-term, strategic view, and we are trying to sequence this work so that we develop the warm homes plan and build the enabling environment. However, I absolutely recognise the need for us to set a policy framework in which geothermal energy can thrive.

James Naish: The Minister knows that I really admire the work she is doing in this space, and my intervention is more of a query than anything else. She has mentioned the warm homes plan; is a sense emerging of how many of the 5 million properties we are targeting through that plan might be fed by district heating and associated technologies? Is there a crystallisation of what that construct might be, to get us to the 5 million homes that we are targeting?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We know that there is a big opportunity for district heating, particularly in some of our urban centres. In the work that we are trying to do through the warm homes plan, we are thinking about where those opportunities are and making sure that we work with regional and local government to do some of the planning and the identification of those opportunities. That means that we can take a strategic approach, area by area and place by place.

Rachael Maskell: I am really grateful for all that the Minister is doing in this area. However, some of this work is quite time-sensitive; for instance, we have a major development in York, the first phase of which goes into planning in September. We very much want to work with Government to see what we can deliver in York Central. Would the Minister be prepared to work with us to see whether we can get this model working on some of those micro sites?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are keen to work with Members across the House, and with local and regional government. We have set ourselves a challenging set of ambitions, so we are clear that we need to work with anyone that can unlock and bring forward investment opportunities, so as to realise those over the course of the Parliament.

It would be remiss of me if I did not say that we recognise that for all the opportunities, there are still challenges faced by industry to secure the necessary investment. As a result, as the hon. Member said, few deep geothermal projects in the UK are financially viable without Government support, unlike what we see on the continent and in other countries.

The hon. Member mentioned the role of Great British Energy. We are clear that it will provide further opportunities for investment in clean energy. The Great British Energy Bill sets out that

“‘clean energy’ means energy produced from sources other than fossil fuels”,

including geothermal, so let me reassure him that it is within scope. Great British Energy is an independent organisation, but we will give it clear direction that it should be looking at all the opportunities that could be exploited across the country and at different technologies, such as geothermal.

Deployment at scale is also unlikely unless there is a demonstrable pathway to bringing down the cost of geothermal heat to make it comparable to other renewable technologies. We know that. It is why we have been working with stakeholders to improve our knowledge and understanding in this area. In 2024, we commissioned a costs research project, to which the hon. Member referred. We intend to publish that this year. I am asking my officials to work at pace to do that, but I reassure him that we will be engaging with industry prior to publication, and he has my assurance that I will facilitate that to ensure that it happens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) commended the British Geological Survey, and I share his enthusiasm for it. We have commissioned work from it on open access tools that show the technically viable opportunities for geothermal projects in the UK, and we will continue to work with it. The UK is also an active member of the International Energy Agency technology collaboration programme on geothermal energy—that was a mouthful—which has enabled us to gather further learning and to learn from other international examples.

All that is to say that we see the opportunity and we are trying to build the evidence base. We want to work with industry to think about how we unlock geothermal, because we see it as a viable route to the expansion of heat networks and to delivering the objective of warmer homes and cheaper bills.

In conclusion, we are absolutely committed to the project and to delivering warm homes. We know that we need a range of technologies to do that. We cannot do this sprint on our own, so we will always want to work with industry to enable us to get there. I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle again for securing this debate, and I thank my hon. Friends who are here for being such avid champions of geothermal. My Department is keen to work with them, and I look forward to meeting in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 6 March 2025

[KARL TURNER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

English Football: Financial Sustainability and Governance

1.30 pm

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the financial sustainability and governance of English football.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. Clubs across the country face unsustainable finances and poor governance, which is why so many MPs have gathered here to represent their local clubs. We have a range of clubs from up and down the football pyramid and up and down the country: from Brighton to Basingstoke, from Bolton to Luton, from Wolves to Aylesbury. We have MPs from various parties, and we even have Reading fans in the same room as Oxford United fans, showing the unity and strength of feeling across Parliament that football must have a sustainable future.

Before I go into the concerns that we all share, and the remedies we would like to see, I will give a brief history of how we got here. Since the premier league was formed over three decades ago, over 50 clubs in the top six tiers of the English men's football pyramid have gone into administration. One of those clubs is Bury. After being sold for £1 in 2019, Bury went out of business and was expelled from the league. The following year, 2020, saw the demise of Macclesfield Town and Wigan Athletic going into administration. In the following year, 2021, while England's top six clubs briefly broke away to try to form a European league, Derby County slipped into administration.

These clubs and this chaos is just the tip of the iceberg. According to research by the non-governmental organisation Fair Game, the majority of the top 92 clubs in the game are technically insolvent, meaning their liabilities exceed their assets. That is a precarious situation for any business to be in, but football clubs are not just any business; they are the foundation of many of our communities, and they bring many of us pride in the areas that we live in.

One of the clubs that might be technically insolvent is Reading football club, which has its home stadium in my constituency of Earley and Woodley. Reading is one of the oldest clubs in England, and had previously been known for its good management. Now, after four winding-up petitions, five points deductions and persistent late tax payments, Reading sits on the brink. I started getting involved with the campaign to rescue Reading football club when I bumped into some fans at a local fair in Woodley a few years ago, who had read my reporting in the *Financial Times*. They knew I had an interest in scrutinising companies with complex structures

and distant owners, and they asked whether I had an interest in scrutinising a local company with a complex structure and distant owners. But fans should not have to do that kind of scrutiny. Life needs to be a lot simpler for fans just to be able to follow the game, and not worry about whether the game is up for their local club. So many fans have experienced what Reading has gone through, and we owe it to them to voice the problems that we see across the football pyramid.

I will pick out three particular problems, which I am sure will feel familiar for many of those listening: first, how clubs receive income; secondly, how they spend their money; and thirdly, irresponsible ownership.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Chesterfield football club wanted me to put on the record its support for the work of football governance. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is extraordinary that, on the one hand, we have a monstrous success story in the level of money in football, but on the other, we have almost the entire English football league running effectively bankrupt and relying on the owners for bail-outs year after year? That simply cannot make sense as a model, can it?

Yuan Yang: I agree with my hon. Friend, who is an advocate for his local club, that too many clubs across the country are suffering from the unfair distribution through the football pyramid. In fact, that is the first issue I will describe: the problem with the money going in. The last four decades have seen a complete transformation in English football, which has been characterised by a widening gap between the clubs at the very top and the rest of the football pyramid. Ticket sales over that time have become less important as a source of revenue. Instead, the biggest source has become the multibillion-pound broadcast deals agreed by the Premier League.

We all celebrate the success of the Premier League's dealmaking, generating the most revenue out of the big five European leagues. That dealmaking is notable for many reasons, not just the large amount of money involved. The 20 premier league clubs get together to sell a deal collectively. However, economists and competition lawyers have raised concerns about the impact that collective selling has on fans and smaller clubs, and they have argued that collective selling is justified only when there is a public benefit. However, most clubs do not currently benefit from these broadcast revenues. The vast majority stay in the premier league and, as a result, the gap between the top and the rest grows wider every season.

This season, premier league clubs and the four recently relegated clubs held on to 94% of the league's broadcast revenues. That means that the remainder of the 68 clubs in the EFL received just 6%. In comparison, the German Bundesliga ensures an 80:20 split between the top two divisions. Meanwhile, the Union of European Football Associations—better known as UEFA—allocates 75% to the champions league and 25% to the two competitions below it. Those leagues have chosen those ratios because they find that it creates a sustainable pyramid for them. The EFL has long sought a similar distribution ratio with the premier league.

We want all clubs to work together to protect the pyramid as a whole because, without its base, the top of the game would crumble. As we all know, the pyramid serves as a platform for player development and talent

[Yuan Yang]

spotting. Reading's Michael Olise broke through locally and moved on to Crystal Palace, and I am sure that we can think of many such examples.

The national popularity of the premier league rests on our strong local football cultures, which are spread by clubs in their communities and the sports charities attached to them, working with people aged six to 60-plus. However, last year, the premier league and the EFL failed to agree a deal for a more equitable distribution of funding between clubs, underscoring just how sticky the first problem of income is.

The second problem is the money going out—the expenditure. Costs have been driven up to unsustainable levels. The concentration of riches in the premier league creates an overwhelming incentive to spend big and chase the dream. According to football finance expert Kieran Maguire, on average, for every £100 a championship club brings in through revenue, it spends £101 in wages. That is clearly unsustainable. Reading's current owners, Dai Yongge and Dai Xiu Li, took over in 2017 when Reading was near the top of the championship. They also chased the dream. By 2021, Reading football club was spending over 200% of its annual revenue on player wages. Overall, Reading's owners have invested over £200 million in the club. It is no surprise that they would spend at that level.

The NGO Fair Game has shown a clear correlation between how high a club is in the league and how high its spending is on wages. This competition is made more intense because of parachute payments, which I will not go into at length. However, overall, the pressure to compete means that clubs often spend beyond their means. This is unsustainable. We have spending rules such as financial fair play, but breaches continue to happen.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point about costs. One of the brilliant football clubs in my constituency, the Aylesbury Vale Dynamos, really struggles with the cost of keeping its ground maintained. It is at real risk of flooding, and the cost of dealing with that is huge. The other club in my constituency, Aylesbury United, has not had a ground in Aylesbury since 2006. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the costs that they incur, having access to a secure and financially sustainable ground to play on is an essential part of the sustainability of vital grassroots football clubs?

Yuan Yang: I agree with my hon. Friend, who has a deep interest in her local clubs. Fans need to be able to see their clubs perform in their local area. Many MPs who are in this debate have concerns about the relocation of their grounds or lack of appropriate grounds.

The final problem is ownership. The first two problems have shown how little incentive there is to be a well-run club that spends responsibly. Most clubs rely on a generous owner to stay afloat. When the good will or cash flow of that owner starts to run dry, clubs often have nowhere else to turn. Reading fans know the perils of this dependence. The current owners, the Dai siblings, put the club up for sale almost two years ago, but they have not been seen at the club in well over a year. Fans have mostly been kept in the dark. Credible bidders for the club—some of whom I have had the fortune to

speak to—have made offers, and they have been turned down and dragged through lengthy negotiations. Bidders have faced difficulties in navigating the ownership structure of the club in which the stadium, the training grounds and the club itself have been separated into different corporate entities, and in which club assets have been used as collateral for other loans.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I can forgive her for being from Reading—at least she is not from Swindon. Oxford United, which I was grateful that she mentioned, must be able to move out of the Kassam stadium for which it is charged unviable rent, despite lacking a fourth stand and many other problems. Does she agree that the club's exciting proposals for a new stadium in Kidlington must go forward, but that future governance models need to stop previous owners from entrapping clubs in unviable and unsustainable stadiums?

Yuan Yang: I very much agree. Stadiums are also vital community assets. I look forward to one day seeing Reading beat Oxford at the new Kidlington stadium.

What the EFL has at present is the use of fines. The owners of Reading have been fined on numerous occasions for failing to fund their monthly wage bill, but that has not changed behaviour. The most frustrating thing for Reading fans, as I am sure it has been for Portsmouth, Leeds, Bury and Charlton fans before them, is a feeling that the whole chaos could have been avoided if the EFL had had sufficient powers to implement a more robust owners test when the current owners, the Dai siblings, first took over.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): I never thought I would say this, but I have a lot of sympathy with Reading fans at the moment. When I was a kid growing up, my team, Brighton and Hove Albion, experienced a lot of what my hon. Friend's team is experiencing now. When Reading was well run by the Madejski family, Brighton were at the bottom of the league in very much the opposite scenario, and Brighton are now enjoying the other side of the pendulum. We have probably the best type of ownership. It is a fantastic model that everyone should try to emulate. Does my hon. Friend not agree that the lottery of ownership—the pendulum that went from, when I was young, Brighton having to sell their ground and play in Gillingham, to Reading now experiencing the problems that they are experiencing—is what we need to change with the regulator?

Yuan Yang: That is absolutely the case. My hon. Friend highlights the history of his club in Brighton. In the '80s and '90s when the future was unclear, it was down to the owners. Too much, unfortunately, is down to, as he mentioned, the lottery of ownership. Brighton and Hove is now a well-managed club. I think we can have many such positive stories across the country, including a positive story, and a positive outcome, for Reading, but the question about football governance and sustainability affects all of us in this room today.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a passionate speech and has done a great job of bringing us all to this Chamber. I lived through Reading's trials through my stepson who is a season ticket holder—

obviously, my first love is for the Whites in Salisbury. Does she not recognise the fundamental challenges of disturbing a market that contains one of our greatest national assets, which is the premier league? I feel quite torn and anxious about the scope creep of any regulatory intervention, although I accept that the core of what she says has a lot of merit.

Yuan Yang: I always appreciate my fellow Treasury Committee member's comments on the correct regulation of markets, but I would argue that football clubs are not simply a commodity and football competition is not simply a market. If we were to accept that view and for the sake of argument say, "Let's treat the competitions as a market", I would argue that we have severe market failure when over 50 clubs have gone into administration in the last four decades. The externalities of that market failure are borne too much by the fans sitting in the room with us today.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. We do not have competition right now. In the premier league, the three promoted clubs are almost certainly likely to go back down to the championship. The disparity of money and funding means we are losing what is the best part of English football: competition. If we really want competition, we have to make the money go down the pyramid more fairly.

Yuan Yang: I agree with my hon. Friend. Parachute payments skew the financial incentives in the game. I also agree that we do not have the full competition that would allow clubs to play their best game, which is what we fans want to see.

Why does all of this matter? It is about the community at the end of the day. Some might say it is only a game, but for many of my constituents the importance of our football club stretches beyond the game and into the community. Reading football club's community trust is run by volunteers. It supports young people and promotes social inclusion and participation in sport. In many of our most deprived communities across the country, it is the local club that sets a model for aspiration.

Constituents always tell me how important Reading FC is to them and how important it has been to their families going back generations. Just the other day I received an email from a fifth generation Reading fan. One constituent wrote to me:

"Reading was and is a family club"—

a club in previous years awarded family excellence status. Yet it is at risk of not being around for the families of tomorrow. Working with fan groups—some are here with us today—since my election last year, I have seen at first hand how motivated those volunteers are by this common cause. Fans want to see a competition for points; they do not want a competition to the death.

While Reading is in exclusive talks with a new potential buyer, we need to ensure that the same story is not repeated anywhere else, so I am delighted that the Government are bringing the Football Governance Bill through Parliament to create an independent football regulator. I will be meeting the shadow regulator in a few weeks to ensure that they have a full picture of what has happened at Reading, and what can happen when absent owners neglect their clubs. I encourage all Members

to do the same. We need a right-touch regulator that helps us to build a football pyramid with strong foundations, and we need a football regulator that can pass the Reading test, so that fans elsewhere do not have to go through the problems that Reading went through.

Football has a problem around governance and financial sustainability, but fans and Parliament working together can fix it. I am glad the House is considering this motion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak. There are 29 Back Benchers wishing to catch my eye, so the speech limit will be a minute and a half. If you have to make an intervention, I respectfully request that it be very short. Remember that making an intervention may mean that you are not called in the debate, so please be considerate to colleagues. I will call the first Front Bencher at 2.28 pm.

1.46 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for securing this important debate and for eloquently setting out many of the governance and sustainability issues in English football.

English football is central to the social fabric of Britain and is one of our greatest exports. It is more than a sport; it is the beating heart of our local communities. I agree with Bill Shankly: some people think football is a matter of life and death, but I assure you it's much more serious than that. Each week, fans come together to back their club and create a shared sense of identity. The social impact of local clubs goes far beyond the pitch. In my totally unbiased opinion, there is no better proof of that than Luton.

Luton Town FC is at the heart of our town and has worked for years in partnership with local charities. The Luton Town Community Trust, which was founded in 2008, is a charity dedicated to delivering community service to people across Luton and Bedfordshire, using the power of football to make a positive impact in sports, education, health and social cohesion.

The club is at the heart of the town, and the fans are the heart of the club. Throughout the ups and downs of Luton Town FC's journey, it has been the fans who stepped up to fight fiercely to protect our proud Hatters heritage when reckless ownership threatened to tear it down. The fan-led 2020 consortium bought out the club from further mismanagement after it went into administration in 2007.

We all know that Luton's promotion in 2023 was historic, but that promotion was a springboard for further exciting prospects for our town. There are detailed plans for the Power Court site, which will be the new home of Luton Town FC. It will transform Luton's economy by directly contributing between £100 million and £250 million per year and supporting between 900 and more than 1,100 jobs.

Despite the consensus that there is much to celebrate about the success of English football, the underlying governance structure and its financial sustainability are

[Rachel Hopkins]

highly fragile. I am therefore delighted that our Labour Government have reintroduced a strengthened Football Governance Bill, delivering on our manifesto commitment to establish the independent football regulator and a new set of rules to protect clubs, empower fans and keep clubs at the heart of our communities. Crucially, the Bill will ensure that fans are prioritised at the heart of the game, which is what our football clubs should be about. I am proud that Luton is already a great example of putting fans first.

1.48 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) on securing this important and timely debate.

For places like Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, football is more than a game; it is the beating heart of our town, a source of identity, pride and belonging. Grimsby Town FC is an institution. It was formed in 1878 in the Wellington Arms on Freeman Street, and Blundell Park was built in 1899; one of the original stands is still in operation. Through the Grimsby Town Foundation, the club has generated more than £4 million in social value, supporting education, mental health and opportunities for young people.

For too long, the football pyramid has meant that clubs up and down the country have faced uncertainty through bad ownership, financial mismanagement and an unfair distribution of wealth. It has left many on the brink. I welcome the Football Governance Bill's intent to address those long-standing issues. Introducing an independent regulator to protect clubs ensures financial sustainability and puts the focus back on the heart of decision making.

I commend David Artell and his team for their fantastic recent form—they have had seven games unbeaten and are pushing for the play-offs. We must ensure that our clubs and community assets are protected for future generations. I will end by saying: up the Mariners!

1.50 pm

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) on securing this important debate. I echo her remarks about the betrayal of Reading FC by its owners and the importance of the club to families across Reading and Berkshire.

Although the home of the Royals now sits in my hon. Friend's constituency, for more than 100 years of Reading FC's long and proud history it was at Elm Park, just outside the boundary of Reading West and Mid Berkshire. It had a large open terrace at the western edge of the ground called the Tilehurst end, named after Tilehurst in my constituency. The passion and loyalty that supporters of the club show in my constituency are illustrated by the long queues of fans waiting to catch a bus to the stadium on a match day.

The only rivals Reading FC players and fans should be battling against are our friends in Oxford and Swindon. Unfortunately, the club has had to battle against the very person who should be its greatest supporter: its

owner. I will not repeat what my hon. Friend said, as she explained the situation clearly, but I will say that she is a wonderful champion of Reading FC, along with other colleagues. I thank the supporters' groups, STAR—Supporters Trust at Reading—and Sell Before We Dai, who have been tireless campaigners, alongside all other loyal fans who have stood alongside their club.

None of that had to happen. It could have been prevented if Dai Yongge had acted in the interests of his club and if we had had proper regulation of the football industry and proper protection for clubs such as Reading. That is why I echo my hon. Friend's call for a comprehensive inquiry and why I am so supportive of the Government's Football Governance Bill, which will establish an independent football regulator.

1.51 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) on securing the debate. I declare an interest: I am a Norwich City fan and a King's Lynn Town supporter.

The premier league is the most viewed league in the world and supports 90,000 jobs across the country, and league one is also very popular, so football is a success. I want to focus on the governance proposals, particularly in the Football Governance Bill. All fans would sign up to the key objectives of ensuring financial sustainability, preventing breakaway competitions and protecting heritage, but my concerns are about possible over-regulation and overreach. I welcome the amendments that have been tabled in the other place to introduce a growth duty into the Bill, which the Government previously resisted.

Of course, the provisions on revenues attract the most attention. Let us be clear that the proposal is for the Government to take the power to mandate how to divide the proceeds of football. Currently, there is a voluntary distribution of the revenues through the football pyramid, and that is essential to the health of the game. We are seeing the impact of the proposals: the EFL is refusing to negotiate with the Premier League and has said that it is waiting for the backstop powers to come into force.

The Government have made the proposals even worse by including parachute payments in the backstop. That is a complete mistake, because clubs such as Norwich need the certainty of parachute payments to invest so that they can compete in the league. That would ensure we have a competitive league that generates income. The EFL will not engage with the 3UP national league campaign, because it is waiting for the backstop before making a view on whether to get one more promotion from the national league.

1.53 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): As I said in my brief intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), I have been contacted by Chesterfield football club, which is very keen that its support for the Football Governance Bill be known.

I would like to start by expressing the sadness that everyone in Chesterfield feels at the news that the club's owner, Phil Kirk, has inoperable cancer and is receiving end-of-life care. He is the absolute epitome of a great owner and has absolutely transformed Chesterfield's fortunes. Chesterfield has also had the opposite: Darren

Brown almost took the club into insolvency at the same time that he was going to jail, so we know that there have been many owners who have let clubs down.

There have also been lots of owners who did everything they could, but were simply not wealthy enough to operate within a business model according to which the better a club does, and the further along the way it gets towards the premier league, the greater its losses are on every step of the way. It loses money by being promoted from league one to the championship. There is a perverse incentive where the financial success of the company gets worse the better it does, until it reaches the promised land of the premier league. That all needs changing. It is madness.

We have a very wealthy game. A slightly better distribution would still allow the premier league to be the golden goose, but it would also support the pyramid.

1.55 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Wherever people go in the world, whichever bar they walk into, the one thing we can guarantee is that they will see a premier league game being played. That is the strength of the United Kingdom's export and the stranglehold that we have on football across the world. Any other country would want to topple us from that position, so we must be very careful when we look to regulate in this space. That does not mean that I do not have sympathy; just down the road from me is Coventry City, which to say the least has had a turbulent time in its dealings with the premier league and now with its rebuild.

I want to concentrate on one area that I think is really important. When sentence is passed on a criminal, there is a mechanism through which the Government can ask the Parole Board to have another look. That would work really well in this situation. We need an independent regulator to satisfy FIFA and UEFA, but Parliament also needs to be able to hold people to account. To find an example, we need only look at when FA cup replays were taken away last year. The public were upset, the clubs were upset, but the decision was taken. I argue that a parole board mechanism would allow the Government to say to the regulator, "Have another look." If it still decides to do it, fantastic, but at least we will have had our say.

1.56 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Turner. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) on securing this debate. I will focus on one area of the proposed legislation: the distribution of wealth around the game.

It is not true that anyone wants to destroy the premier league or kill the golden goose. What people want is a fair distribution of resources. Over the past seven years, two of the clubs that have been promoted have been in receipt of parachute payments. It is small wonder that that happens when the average club in receipt of parachute payments receives £49 million, while a non-parachute-payment club gets £5.4 million. That promotes risk-taking and distortion. No other organisation would accept, as the English Football League does, an outside organisation like the Premier League providing resources that distort the competition. That is why we need a regulator. We have to stop that risk-taking.

Another point that our legislation must address is the separation of clubs from their assets. The previous owner of Charlton Athletic, my local side, now owns the ground and the training ground. We have to find a mechanism that could bring them back to the clubs.

1.58 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): As is seemingly my usual opening line in many of these debates, I am one of very few people elected in this place who has any actual experience of the industry that we are discussing. As a former premier league football chairman, I can honestly say that the premier league works. Britain does not have many success stories left, but our domestic football is one of them. My message to all of you is "Leave it alone."

I mean this as a genuine question: do any of you understand the consequences of what you are looking to do? Regulating these industries does not work. London as a financial centre has withered and died on the vine since the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. Why would football be any different? The premier league projects unrivalled soft power, rakes in a fortune for HM Revenue and Customs and is actually good fun, usually offering competitive football, despite Southampton's woeful record this season.

What is the Government's plan? It was first proposed by the Conservatives, of course: regulate, strangulate, suffocate. Who wants that to happen the most? La Liga, Serie A, the Bundesliga and even the Saudis. A regulator would deter foreign investment and add bureaucracy to an already heavily governed industry. It is ludicrous and does nothing to protect clubs in the lower leagues. It should be revoked. Let us encourage and campaign, not regulate. The private sector built this success without regulation. My overriding message to all of you is "Leave football alone."

1.59 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Turner. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) on securing the debate. Football is more than just a sport in this country; it is a cornerstone of local pride and community identity. I say that as a proud Boro fan, and now as a fan of Thornaby FC. Since the premier league's formation in 1992, its revenue gap with the EFL has grown from 33% to a simply staggering 1,600%. Two seasons ago, just 25 clubs received 92% of English football's distributable revenues—around £3.3 billion—leaving the remaining 67 clubs to share only 8%, or £245 million. Parachute payments originally designed to assist relegated clubs now act as trampoline payments, giving some clubs an unfair financial advantage and limiting promotion opportunities.

There is enough money in English football for sustainability throughout the pyramid to be a realistic aspiration. That can be achieved without harming the premier league's status as the primary league in the world. I welcome the Football Governance Bill and the establishment of an independent football regulator with enforcement powers to ensure financial security. Football is often called the beautiful game—we must ensure that it also remains the people's game.

2.1 pm

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for securing this important debate. I am so lucky to have Port Vale Football Club, based in the mother town of Burslem in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove. A day out watching footy brings communities together, whether it is a home game at Vale Park with our team mascot, Boomer, or a community-run lads and dads club.

I pay tribute to Carol and Kevin Shanahan for all the work they do at Port Vale both on and off the pitch. Last season, the Port Vale Foundation supported more than 5,000 people in my constituency. The Shanahans have surrounded themselves with people who truly care for our community. From Matt Hancock to Darren Moore, and from the staff to the players, they make a real contribution to the lives of people in Burslem and beyond. As Darren Moore said only two weeks ago,

“The club is right at the heart of the community”.

I could not agree more.

In 2021, Port Vale was named the EFL community club of the year, and for good reason: it has upskilled our young people, it provides community meals at Vale Park, it delivered over 2,000 presents last Christmas, its Golden Valiants group tackles social isolation among our older community and its community cupboard at Tommy Cheadle’s keeps our local families fed.

Communities such as ours need additional support. Our EFL clubs, positioned in the heart of our communities, are perfectly located to offer that. Securing a sustainable football pyramid is key to cementing the future of our valued clubs and the communities they empower.

2.2 pm

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for securing this important and timely debate. So many things make me proud to be an MP from Derby, and Derby County football club is one of them. We have some of the most dedicated and passionate fans in the country.

However, as anyone who has followed the fortunes of Derby County will know, we have had our fair share of financial difficulty. In 2021, our beloved club entered administration. I know at first hand how the lack of transparency made the subsequent negotiations and the administrators’ job difficult, and I was involved in a number of those discussions. We were thankfully saved by a local man and fan, David Clowes, who stepped up to preserve Derby County for generations of fans to come, but the dire financial situation he faced in 2021 showed just how important securing financial stability is for clubs in the EFL.

EFL clubs will lose around £450 million this season. The financial instability jeopardises the clubs that sit at the heart of our communities. That is why I welcome the Government’s plans to introduce an independent football regulator through the strengthened Football Governance Bill. It is right that clubs are required to stick to stringent financial regulations.

2.4 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang). It was John Madejski who said that the best way to be a millionaire is to be a billionaire and buy a football club.

As well as being a supporter of Harlow Town football club who saw the effect on the mental health of fans when we had to withdraw from the league due to ongoing pitch issues, because they were not able to go and see their wonderful football team, I support another football team who, not too long ago, would have put fear in the hearts of the opposition players. They say that every team has one hard man, but Leeds United had 11. Unfortunately, due to financial mismanagement, I saw Leeds on the edge of self-destruction. As we are celebrating International Women’s Day at the weekend, we should be aware that when a club suffers the financial issues that Leeds United did, the women’s and youth teams and the community aspect of the club are cut to finance the first team.

I am running out of time but let me say that, sadly, the days of Bremner, Lorimer and Jack Charlton seem a long way away, even with the offer of Bielsa-ball. To those who think that we should not intervene in football governance I say that, as elected representatives, it is our job to represent the community.

2.6 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. Football is the UK’s most watched and played sport. Some 35 million fans have been watching the top four leagues this season, and there are 40,000 football clubs in this country—more than in any other country. As a season ticket holder of Wolverhampton Wanderers, I hope that our club will stay in the premier league.

The Premier League has a lot to offer. It contributes £8 billion to the UK economy and makes a direct tax contribution of £4.2 billion to the Exchequer—and, out of that contribution, £5 billion comes from outside London. In my constituency I also have a lower league football club, AFC Wulfrunians, soon to become Wolverhampton City football club. I know the contribution that the club makes to the community, just as my club Wolverhampton Wanderers does through its foundation.

I very much support the Football Governance Bill because an independent football regulator will make improvements. I hope that the Bill will create a proper process for distributing revenue throughout the football pyramid, with proper deals between the Premier League and the English Football League.

2.7 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for securing this excellent debate.

Last year I met representatives of Hampden bowling club and Football’s Square Mile who are working to preserve football heritage in my seat, which includes the birthplace of Alexander Watson Hutton, the founder of Argentinian football. Glasgow East is the start of the story that leads to Messi, Maradona and River Plate and Boca Juniors, which are the Oxford United and Reading of Buenos Aires. Their project points to something

profound. Football is our history and culture. It is part of our families' history, and is a tie that brings us together.

All that draws us to football and more, in particular the emotion of hope. We all feel that hope at the beginning of a season that we might win something: the hope in the bleak midwinter that a team can win a derby—not my team Newcastle—or win a cup game. We lose this at our peril. I wonder whether football has lost sight of it. For example, in my lifetime, Rangers, Aberdeen and Celtic have won the European cup winners' cup and the European cup. Dundee United remains unbeaten against Barcelona. We heard mention of Leeds; we could also mention Forest and so on. Could that happen now? Not at all. The chance of success is concentrated on a small number of clubs. Many fans say that they have less interest in football as a result. This poses a profound challenge to our game. As Sir Bobby Robson said, football is about "the noise, the passion, the feeling of belonging, the pride in your city."

2.9 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. In Morecambe, the Shrimps are an integral part of our community. They bring together people from all backgrounds who share in our love of the Shrimps. The Morecambe FC Community Foundation runs a range of programmes that support education, health, social inclusion and sports participation. I am not the only parent from Morecambe who has had a child come back chattering about the professional footballers who came to help out that day.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, not least because our respective teams are currently propping up the bottom of league two. She mentions the important community work that the Shrimps do, and that is vital. We are fortunate at Carlisle United to have very generous owners who have invested huge amounts of money over the last 18 months, but even I can see that community work can best be guaranteed by having a fairer distribution of revenues.

Lizzi Collinge: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. In Morecambe, the football club is a community hub that we cannot afford to lose. We have the Shrimps Trust, which is a democratic and representative voice for the fans. The board of Morecambe really want us to survive and thrive and is doing everything it can to make that happen. It is passionate about our success.

The Shrimps have been under a lot of pressure in recent years due to a combination of ownership issues, financial instability and the threat of relegation. My hon. Friends have laid out coherently the challenges with financial flow, ownership and governance, so I will not go through them again. In my first speech in Parliament, I reiterated my promise to the Shrimps to deliver an independent football regulator, a stronger owners and directors test, better fan representation and much better measures on financial sustainability. I only hope that it does not come too late for Morecambe FC.

2.11 pm

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): For too long, the governance and financial model of our game has left clubs vulnerable to mismanagement, unscrupulous

ownership and, ultimately, financial ruin. I am fantastically proud of my local club Basingstoke Town FC, with its much-loved Camrose ground, but it is one such example. For over 70 years, the Camrose was the heart of our town's club. It was a vital community hub where generations of fans came together to support their team, but the covenant on the ground that should have guaranteed a sports facility for the town for another three decades at least was, and continues to be, blatantly and disgracefully disregarded.

In 2016 the then chairman of the club sold the freehold of the Camrose to a company he owned, following years of underinvestment in the stadium. He eventually evicted the newly formed community club from the Camrose in April 2019. That stadium now stands in ruins. A once iconic stadium that brought pride and opportunities to our town has been reduced to a distant memory. In that time, it is the fans of the club, including those in the Gallery today, who have fought the injustice that went on and continue to power the club now. One such example is Jack Miller, the chairman, as well as all the volunteers who keep the club going.

Basingstoke Town is a non-league club. Those clubs also need protection. Could I ask the Minister to put on record what the Government plan to do about that?

2.12 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I commend and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for bringing forward this very important debate. I thank other colleagues for taking part today, including even my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). Most of all, I thank the fans of Reading and other clubs who have come here today for their incredible patience and tolerance at this very difficult time.

I wholeheartedly support the Football Governance Bill. I want to reiterate in the brief time available the importance of the Bill based on what has happened to Reading. Put simply, Reading is in a terrible position because of poor ownership. As we heard eloquently from my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley and other colleagues, this is due to mismanagement by owners.

Reading faced relegation from the championship, which it had been in for a number of years—previously it was in the premiership. That was because of its owner, and not because of anything that happened on the pitch. The owner did not pay wages on time and the club was taken to court by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs a number of times, which led to points deductions and relegation. That is an outrageous position for any club to be in; it simply should not happen. There needs to be a much better test of what makes for a fit and proper owner. I look forward to that coming forward in the Bill. I wholeheartedly support the Bill. I finish by urging Mr Dai Yongge to speed up the sale of Reading to a new owner who will invest in our wonderful club and take it forward.

2.14 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. Bolton Wanderers has been based in my constituency for over 25 years. It is no exaggeration to say that the stadium in Horwich, once known as the Reebok, now the Toughsheet community

[Phil Brickell]

stadium, is the most important building in our borough. Bolton has long been a community club with international recognition. That is why it is not uncommon to see former Olympic sprinter Usain Bolt enjoying dinner in Westhoughton with one-time Wanderers player and long-time friend Ricardo Gardner.

In 2018, our historic club nearly went out of business. Bolton Wanderers entered 2019 subject to winding-up petitions from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs; players were not paid and the club could not fulfil fixtures. I am pleased to say that the club has since recovered, thanks to the work of the new owners, Football Ventures, which is led by the formidable Sharon Brittan. Bolton now has a successful local business as its sponsor, with the incomparable Doug Mercer of Westhoughton firm Toughsheet stepping up to help the club. I pay tribute to Sharon, Doug, Phil Mason and Michael James, all of whom have done remarkable work to restore fans' trust and put the club back at the heart of the community.

In Bolton's darkest time, it was the fans who rallied together; the supporters' trust was set up to give fans an organised voice through which to vent their anger and frustration. As MPs, we all know how important it is to recognise the fundamental role that our clubs play in our communities. Their traditions, their history, their failures and their triumphs are all sown into the social fabric.

2.15 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Reading football club is a community club. I have fond memories of going to Madejski stadium as a kid as part of a project with local schools—just one example of the fantastic work that clubs across this country do in their communities.

Unfortunately, Reading also offers a stark warning of what the bad management of football clubs can do to communities, and the effect it can have on the beautiful game, as was so eloquently touched on by my hon. Friends the Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) and for Reading Central (Matt Rodda). I thank the Sell Before We Dai campaign and the Supporters Trust at Reading, whose chair is my constituent.

The Football Governance Bill will come too late for Reading, but I am determined that it will be there to protect clubs that find themselves in that invidious position in future. It is a good Bill. It was supported by the Tories in the previous Parliament, and that is why we have picked it up now, yet the Leader of the Opposition insists on opposing it. In her opinion, giving fans a say on how their own clubs are run would be a "waste of money". Well, in the Tory game of political point scoring, it is fans who stand to lose out.

I ask the Minister to speak a little about support for clubs below the national league. Bracknell Town football club has been moved out of Bracknell by its owners, and it would be great to see—

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. I call Steve Yemm.

2.17 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): In my constituency we are lucky enough to have Mansfield Town, founded in 1897, as our local club. We are currently in English football league one. The Stags, as they are known, have

had their ups and downs, but I am pleased to say that the current owners have clearly indicated to me their commitment to our approach to financial sustainability and good governance. The chairman and members of the board have done a great deal of work to secure the future of the club, but I want to take this opportunity, just a few days prior to International Women's Day, to recognise the work of Carolyn Radford, who has been the chief executive officer since 2011.

I am sure that hon. Members will agree that football clubs are often a focal point for communities, and that it is important that we nurture and support grassroots football in our constituencies. I am pleased to say that Mansfield Town does just that through the Radford and Hymas Academy and the Mansfield Town community trust. As the local MP, I wholeheartedly support that work, and I will do whatever I can to support those civic-minded aspirations; I hope they go from strength to strength in the coming years.

2.18 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) on securing the debate. Of course, this is a debate on English football governance, but for the benefit of *Hansard* I put on record the undebatable fact that Scottish football is the best in the world, because it has the highest per capita live attendance at matches and because of the existence of Falkirk FC.

The Football Governance Bill goes a long way to redressing the competition issues that have stained the beautiful game down south. The independent review and the licensing powers to prevent corporate mismanagement will hopefully prevent situations like the one currently facing Reading from happening again, and resolve the runaway inequality in the game.

That runaway inequality is something that the Scottish game is definitely not immune to. Failures in corporate governance and financial mismanagement stem from that inequality, as well as from an over-reliance on single owners and, uniquely, the lack of diversification in sources of income in Scotland.

More recently, we have seen anti-competitive decisions, such as the Scottish professional football league banning artificial surfaces from only the top flight in Scotland in 2024. Artificial surfaces are far more common in Scotland. The ban will force clubs such as Falkirk, Hamilton or Livi, which is currently in the championship, to fork out £1.5 million extra simply for getting promoted. It will prevent community use and provide barriers for women's teams and shared ground arrangements. On artificial surfaces, the SPFL must think again.

2.20 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. Football in England is not just a sport; it is a way of life. It binds communities together, gives local communities pride and provides opportunities both on and off the pitch, not least to my amazing nephews and my niece.

In my constituency, Weston-super-Mare AFC—the Seagulls to its fans—is more than just a football club. It is a social hub, a youth development centre and a lifeline for many. The club charity, Seagulls in the Community,

led by trustees Andrew Kynaston, Bridget Bolland and Oli Bliss, leads a wide range of projects that have a direct impact on the lives of people in the town, including a youth club, a disability football team, a dementia café, and a veterans breakfast to name a few. It also opened the doors to the FUCHSIA cancer support group after its previous venue closed. Julie Crowther has been running this group for over 14 years, but without the football club's willingness to offer up its facilities free of charge, that much-needed community resource might have been forced to close.

Football is for everyone, not just the elite. If we want our communities to thrive, we must act now to safeguard the entire football pyramid, so that clubs such as Weston-super-Mare AFC and thousands of others can continue to serve their communities for generations to come.

2.21 pm

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. No one in Ipswich is yet tired of reminding the world that we are now a premier league town. As I like to remind my colleagues in Essex and Norfolk in particular, we are the only premier league town in the east of England too.

One of the biggest issues that gets raised with me on the doorstep is the regeneration of our town. Having a financially secure and sustainable football club goes a long way to advancing that agenda. The economic benefits to our town include thousands of people travelling into our town centre and filling up the pubs, restaurants and shops. It has been estimated that premier league status has brought a huge £200 million to our town this season alone. More than that, it speaks to our civic pride and the sense of community that has been brought to our town under the leadership of Mark Ashton off the field and Kieran McKenna on it.

That has not always been the case. We, too, have seen our fair share of dark days and what poor leadership does when it rips out the sense of community and the links to businesses, academy players and so on. We have heard many examples today from Coventry, Portsmouth, Derby, Wigan, Reading—the list goes on and on. It is no exaggeration to say that when football clubs run into financial or other off-the-field issues, that impact is not just felt on the economy of the town; it has the potential to rip the heart and soul out of a place too. These clubs are not just commodities; they are our community's crown jewels.

Labour's Football Governance Bill is a landmark moment for safeguarding a financially sustainable and well-governed football pyramid. If we get it right, the prizes on offer for Ipswich and towns across the country are immense.

2.22 pm

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): I want to briefly tell the story of my local club, Brighton and Hove Albion, which is very much the story of the recent highs and lows of English football. In summary, I have been a Brighton fan for 30 years. The first 15 of those were pretty terrible, but the second 15 have been fantastic. In that time we have played in all four leagues. We were one game away from going out of the football league; now we have spent nearly a decade in the premier league, and we have enjoyed European nights against teams such as Marseille and Ajax.

In the dark days we experienced the very worst of ownership: our ground was sold and we ended up playing in Gillingham or in a rented athletics stadium. Despite the gloom, we always had two things on our side. First, we had the strength of our fans who stuck together through thick and thin, raised money, went on marches and did everything we could to keep the club going. Secondly, we found a saviour in new ownership—a Brighton fan and a genius; everything you would want in an owner—in the shape of Tony Bloom.

Because of those two things, we have gone through the lottery from the worst to the best of ownership. We heard in the opening speech about the test of the Football Governance Bill being the Reading test, but I want to impose a Brighton test. Could the Bill have stopped the first 15 years of my life, where we experienced the worst of ownership? A second test: will it encourage more owners to come forward who, in the shape of Tony Bloom, are rooted in the community, serve the community and deliver a fantastic football team? I hope very much that the Bill can do both.

Karl Turner (in the Chair): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.24 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. I thank the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for securing this debate and for her diligence in campaigning, along with many others, as she highlighted in her speech, for the future of Reading football club. In the Reading area, including Wokingham, Bracknell and Newbury, the cross-party approach that has united fans and politicians of all political persuasions is to be applauded. I look forward to continuing to work with the hon. Member and others and Reading FC fans on this important issue.

Reading football club is a recent story of tragedy for its fans, for its community and for English football. Gone are the glory days of Sir John Madejski, former chairman, who embodied the very definition of what ownership of a football club should look like. I am young enough to remember seeing Roger Smee and Frank Waller in the stands at Elm Park as chairmen of the club.

Back then, Reading football club was an institution driven by its owners for the good of the club and for the fans. It promoted close links to the community and with its fans, built a great relationship with schools and was able to deliver premier football quality as well. That makes it more frustrating that it is now a stark contrast to what it was a decade ago and synonymous with the very worst of football club ownership.

Dai Yongge is not accessible to fans; nobody knows where he is. He has attempted to asset strip the club and is one of the clearest reasons why Reading football club is being held back from greater success. For example, alleged cash-flow issues under his ownership have caused the late payment of wages, resulting in points deductions.

People are just fed up with the way that the club is being run. Take, for example, the saga over Bearwood Park, Reading football club's training ground in my constituency of Wokingham. This is a state-of-the-art facility that Dai Yongge attempted to sell in early 2024,

[Clive Jones]

with no consultation with fans on the decision. All he wanted to do was to get some cash for his business—for himself.

Sue Symes of Sell Before We Dai contacted me on a Thursday evening to ask what a clause in the training ground's planning permission meant. At the time, I was a local councillor for Wokingham borough council. By lunch time the following day, I had a clear answer from council planners: the training ground development had been approved several years before, provided it belonged to Reading football club. Dai Yongge wanted to sell the training ground to Wycombe and further devalue the club. If the training ground was lost, the club was at a significant risk of having no alternative sites to train its squad.

I arranged for Reading FC and Wycombe to be reminded of the existence of that all-important clause, and within hours Wycombe had pulled out of the deal. That is just one battle that was won in a war that is hopefully close to concluding. I am pleased to acknowledge Sue Symes's role in that.

Sue can rightly be proud of making sure that the sale of the club's training ground did not happen, so that the club, the training ground and the stadium could all be sold as a viable concern. The club has been up for sale for more than 500 days, and it may have been close to selling several times. It will hopefully not be long before a sale actually happens, because Dai Yongge has bled the club dry and no one will deny that he must go.

The issue does not, unfortunately, end with Reading. Football clubs are not just luxury goods for millionaires to buy and sell like yachts; they are important to fans and are part of the DNA of their local communities. It is therefore good to see successive Governments bringing forward important legislation to establish an independent football regulator, which will provide a vital bulwark to protect our national game. I seriously hope that the new regulator will consider the case of Reading FC and other teams, such as Bury and Macclesfield Town, and take the time to speak to fans and learn the lived lessons of fans faced with an agonising process to retain their club's assets and identity.

The Football Governance Bill is currently making its way through the other place. I want to record my support for the rules in the Bill requiring an assessment of the honesty and integrity of owners and officers. Importantly, the Bill also includes provisions to monitor owners and hold them accountable during their time in office, rather than just before they make their purchase. That will hopefully prevent any future Dai Yongge from taking root in a football club. I do, however, hope that the Bill will go further to protect assets beyond just stadiums. Protections should be extended to other club-owned assets, particularly training grounds but also car parks, hotels and other land owned by the club.

I would greatly appreciate it if the Minister answered a few questions. Will the independent football regulator, once set up, have any formal duty to engage with clubs that have faced hardships? What steps are the Government taking to strengthen the protection of club assets? Will the Minister reflect on whether the new Football Governance Bill, in its current form, would have prevented the takeover of Reading by Dai Yongge?

In conclusion, football is not just any other sport; it is an integral part of the fabric of our cities, towns and villages in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That is what drives passion and desire among so many people. Quite simply, they want the five tiers of professional football to function because, from their perspective, if football cannot function, then how can society? Finally, I pay tribute to all those fans who have tirelessly campaigned on this issue, including the groups Sell Before We Dai and Supporters Trust at Reading, and people such as Sue Symes, Adam Jones and Ian Morton. They have all taken time from their personal lives to save a team about which they care deeply, and they are a wonderful example to our community.

Karl Turner (in the Chair): I call the Opposition spokesperson.

2.32 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I thank the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for securing this important debate. As we all know, football is more than just a game. It is a passion that unites millions across the country, from all backgrounds and communities. It is woven into the fabric of many communities, from grassroots clubs such as Foots Cray Lions and Welling United in my constituency of Old Bexley and Sidcup, to the premier league giants and those seeking to rival them.

Football and rugby were key to my own development as a teenager and although I do not get to play as often as I would like any more, sport taught me key life skills such as communication, teamwork and leadership, and taught me the positivity that comes from healthy competition. When I talk about football, it is personal to me. I want our beautiful game enjoyed for generations to come in the spirit of healthy competition. Football is nothing without its fans and the people who make football work throughout the year.

Although there are many debates to be had about the independent regulator in the months ahead, when the governance Bill finally returns to the Commons it is imperative that Members across the House do not lose sight of what a success story the evolution of English football is, in both the men's and the women's games. The premier league, for example, is the most watched competition in the world, attracting the best players and managers, and generating significant economic and cultural benefits to the United Kingdom. The EFL is also thriving, with attendances in the championship, league one and league two surpassing many European peers. But with the immense popularity and influence of this great British success story comes a responsibility for both the clubs and the governing bodies to ensure that the game remains viable, fair and open for future generations. In recent years, some clubs have suffered financial distress or, in the case of one of my local clubs, Charlton Athletic, they have been owned by someone who clearly did not have the club's interests at heart.

Although we must be realistic about the global economics of football and the fierce competition from rival leagues, including the Saudi league, we cannot ignore the consequences on fans, communities and the wider football pyramid when clubs are run badly. I have great sympathy for Reading football club and the fans in the Public

Gallery, because I see many similarities with the challenges that Charlton has faced in recent years. That is why the previous Government introduced a more measured, balanced and proportionate Football Governance Bill, which sought to ensure that English football was more financially sustainable for the future and more accountable to fans. It also sought to stop the breakaway European super league.

However, football clubs must live within their means. Clear and responsible financial frameworks are already in place within the premier league and the EFL, and are supposed to be overseen by the FA and the leagues. However, the FA is often overlooked in debates in this House—it has hardly been mentioned today—and in the other place, as many seem to forget that there are already many football regulations in place and that the FA and the leagues are the regulators. That is even before we consider the role of the likes of UEFA and FIFA, and we understand that UEFA has raised concerns with the Government about interference in our national sport.

Peter Swallow: The hon. Gentleman said that the previous Bill introduced by the Conservative Government was measured, and the Conservative party now opposes this version of the Bill. Could he state, really clearly for everyone here, what measures have changed that his party does not agree with?

Mr French: I am happy to answer that question. The Bill is still changing in the other place. The hon. Gentleman may not be aware, but amendments from the Conservative party have been accepted by the Government; I will come on to one of those amendments on growth of the game. I appreciate the enthusiasm of new Government Members as they try to please their Whips and the Government, but amendments are still being made to this Bill in the other place. I understand their eagerness, but we have not seen the final Bill.

There are challenges in football, but we must not lose sight of the importance of the independence of the sport. We must prevent Government interference, which will assuredly diminish the unique nature of the game and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances. A careful balance must be struck: regulation must not address just short-term issues; it should serve the sport's long-term interests and it should not deter vital investment.

We should also acknowledge the progress in football governance over recent years. The Football Association, the Premier League and other key stakeholders have worked tirelessly to address issues such as financial fair play and racism and to improve safety standards at grounds. If we as legislators impose a blanket, top-down regulatory framework, we risk stifling the innovation and flexibility that has helped football to evolve. It was this innovation that allowed the premier league to come into existence in 1992, and that has provided world-class football in United Kingdom for more than three decades. It begs the question: would the premier league now be banned by this new Bill coming from the Labour party?

We cannot risk a return to the football of the 1980s, when English clubs were banned from Europe. Members may not be familiar with a letter from 2 September 2024 from the UEFA general secretary to the new Secretary of State raising concerns about the Bill. When we have requested sight of these concerns, the Government have

denied us access. What are the Government hiding from football fans? Are there risks that our clubs, and even our national teams, may not be able to compete? Please can we have sight of this letter from UEFA raising these concerns? We have written to request it, and we have requested it in the other place. Members of Parliament must have complete transparency on what they are being asked to vote on and the risks of the Bill.

But it is not all own goals from the Labour party. It is welcome that this Government have now accepted some of the Conservative amendments in the other place. The hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) asked a question about that, and I have an example for him: the Government's regulator must now avoid any adverse effects on the financial growth of English football; we will closely monitor how it does that as the Bill develops. Equally, we have to be mindful of unintended consequences on clubs, fans and ticket prices. The Bill will increase the regulatory burden on all clubs. One football chief executive has already said:

“We've two choices with those costs. We either stop doing some of the things we're already doing, whether that's academy, women's, girls' football or whatever, or we pass those costs on to fans.”

Members must acknowledge that football is a delicate international ecosystem that is at huge risk if the Government get this wrong. As we look around at the various challenges facing football today, from financial stability to governance issues and from player welfare to fan engagement, one thing becomes clear: football is at a crossroads. The time has come for us to empower the sport's governing bodies to use their expertise to lead the way and chart a course that puts the game and fans first. As the official Opposition, we will continue to closely scrutinise what the Government's expanded new Bill does, and try to limit the number of own goals they score.

2.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) on securing this important debate. I begin by acknowledging that English football is world-leading. As well as sitting at the heart of communities up and down the country, English clubs have fans in every continent, and attract the best players from across the world. The premier league is one of our country's best exports. Along with the EFL and the national league, it contributes billions of pounds to our economy and supports thousands of jobs, as has been outlined across the House in this debate. Its success and infrastructure support and inspire the next generation of footballing talent in English towns, villages and cities. It is because of this success that the Government want the sport to thrive for generations to come, securing the financial sustainability of the football pyramid.

My hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley, who represents Reading football club, has been a vocal supporter and campaigner on the governance and sustainability of football. She is right to raise those concerns. Reading, like so many of the other clubs that have been spoken about today, is an example of why this debate and the legislation are so important. Calls for change to secure the sustainability of football in this place date back to the cross-party Select Committee

[Stephanie Peacock]

report of 2011. We then saw the ill fated super league attempt that resulted in the fan-led review. The review, led by former Conservative Sports Minister Dame Tracey Crouch, identified the need for an independent football regulator. I thank and pay tribute to her for her commitment and work. I have been pleased to be part of the women's parliamentary football team with her, alongside so many other amazing women.

The previous Conservative Government published their Football Governance Bill—their legislation on this matter—on 18 March 2024, just less than a year ago. How time flies! That continued the cross-party consensus that existed until very recently. Members on the Government Benches and Conservative Benches were elected on manifestos that committed to bringing forward an independent football regulator. We on the Government side of the House are following through on that commitment and are on the side of football fans.

I will take this opportunity to address some of the specific questions put to me in this debate; if I cannot go into much detail, I will be happy to meet hon. Members. The hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) has taken a great interest in this subject. He asked about a second look. A new Government Lords amendment would require the Secretary of State to review the whole regime after five years. More specifically, if an owner were found to be unsuitable by the regulator, they would have the right to request a review of that decision. That review would be taken by the board. There is also a right to appeal to the Competition Appeal Tribunal.

Dr Luke Evans: The decision to take FA cup replays away, for example, was taken by the FA itself without any consultation; that is the difficulty. That is a prime example of the heritage of the game being taken away, and that mechanism would not quite address that. I will be happy to meet the Minister to talk through an idea that may well fit.

Stephanie Peacock: Great; I will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and I am really sympathetic to his points, but the Government cannot and do not want to be involved in all issues, and the regulator will not be able to cover them all. However, let us meet after the debate to discuss his ideas.

My hon. Friends the Members for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) and Bracknell (Peter Swallow) mentioned non-league football. I visited Basingstoke during the general election. Non-league governance is for the FA, as I set out in the Adjournment debate secured last week by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore). I appreciate all the challenges that have been outlined as I have seen them first hand in my own constituency. The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), posed a number of specific questions. I will not comment on individual cases, but I was pleased to meet him before Christmas and will address some of his points later in my speech.

To answer the shadow Minister's specific question, I have met UEFA, we have a good relationship and it has not raised any issues. We do not publish private correspondence, just as his Government did not. Growth is central to this Government's aims.

James Wild: I have to say that it is very curious that we know that this letter exists—it has been confirmed in the other place that it exists—and yet the Government repeatedly refuse to publish it, despite the potential impact that political interference with the governance of sport could have. Why does the Minister not just ask UEFA for permission to publish the letter and give it to Members?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member of this House who I know spoke on Second Reading of the Bill. His Government, like this one, did not publish private correspondence, but I can absolutely assure the House that I have met UEFA and it does not have any issues.

As the Member of Parliament for Barnsley South, I know how important a club is to the community. Barnsley FC is a huge part of my town, and the community trust does amazing work, but Barnsley football club narrowly avoided administration 20 years ago. Football clubs mean everything to local people, with family, friends and neighbours coming together to watch games, win or lose. In turn, football would be nothing without its fans.

Hon. Members have spoken so well today about what clubs mean to their communities. We have heard from so many: Reading, Aylesbury United, Oxford United, Brighton and Hove, Luton Town, Grimsby Town, Norwich City, Chesterfield, Coventry City, Port Vale FC, Derby County FC, Morecambe FC, Carlisle United FC, Basingstoke Town, Bolton Wanderers, Bracknell Town, Mansfield Town and Weston-super-Mare. That really shows the strength of debate up and down this country and across this House. Despite bigger revenues than ever coming into the game, too many loyal fans have had their attention forced away from the pitch and into the troubles of malicious ownership, mishandled finances and ultimately the worry that their cherished clubs might be lost.

Dan Aldridge: While the Tories and Reform might be happy to see rogue owners running roughshod over fans and players across the country, does the Minister agree that this Labour Government will not allow fans to be taken for fools any longer?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is right: the Government are on the side of football fans. That is why we have introduced the Football Governance Bill: to put fans back at the heart of the game.

Mr French: Given the last intervention and the ongoing audits for Parliamentary Private Secretary roles among Labour Members, I must push the Minister: at what point will introducing a regulator and the measures that she is discussing lower ticket prices for football fans?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman should know that that is a commercial decision, but we have made a change so that fans will be consulted. We think that it is the right change. Our Football Governance Bill will put fans back at the heart of the game. It will protect club heritage, take on rogue owners and secure the financial sustainability of English football.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Stephanie Peacock: I have been very generous with my time and have already taken one intervention from the hon. Gentleman, so I will make progress.

Too many clubs have faced the precipice. There have been more than 60 instances of administration since 1992. That is simply unacceptable, so in the short time that I have left today I will turn to the detail of our legislation.

The Bill will introduce a new regulator for the game. It is intended to cover the top five levels of the men's game. There will be strengthened tests for owners and directors. It will make clubs more financially resilient and will put fans back at the heart of their clubs. This is designed to be a light-touch regulator. At a very basic level, owners need to do three things: be an appropriate owner, have a sensible business plan and have proper engagement with fans on key issues. I will take each in turn.

Being an appropriate owner means that club custodians must be suitable; we are protecting fans from irresponsible owners. Having a sensible business plan means that clubs will need clear financial plans, with detail on risk management and resource plans for owners. Having proper engagement with fans on key issues means setting a minimum standard for fan engagement. We are ensuring protections on changes to club crests, home kit and club names and giving fans a voice in the day-to-day running of their club.

Clubs will need a licence to play. They will not be able to join closed-shop breakaway leagues or move around without proper consultation. A football-led solution is always the preferred outcome to financial distribution. In the Bill Committee on the previous Bill, Dame Tracey Crouch rightly said that

“distributions are an issue for football”

but that if no solution is found, it is

“important for backstop powers to be there to intervene”—[*Official Report, Football Governance Public Bill Committee*, 21 May 2024; c. 234.]

If a football-led solution is not reached, the regulator will be ready to step up, if asked, to facilitate a solution as a last resort. The state of the game report will underpin that, informing the regulator's work through a broad review of the financial health and economic issues in football at any given time.

As I have stated more than once, the Bill is very similar to its previous iteration, but we have made some moderate changes. Fans will have a greater voice and will be consulted on changes to ticket prices. We have brought more clarity and certainty to the backstop, so all issues relevant to redistribution can be considered. By removing the provision on following Government foreign policy, we are making the regime more independent.

The Bill is a historic piece of legislation that has been developed over several years, including by the previous Government, who recognised the need to regulate. Indeed, the Conservative manifesto said:

“We will introduce laws to ensure our fans never again face the threat of clubs in England joining breakaway closed-shop competitions and giving them more of a voice through the Independent Football Regulator.”

Lizzi Collinge *rose*—

James Wild *rose*—

Stephanie Peacock: I am about to conclude, so I will not give way.

I believe that the Bill will protect and promote the sustainability of English football in the interests of fans and the local communities it serves. Given the urgent issues that I and other hon. Members have highlighted today, we are determined to make sure that the regulator is up and running as soon as possible. I thank hon. Members for contributing to this huge debate, which has shown how much the House wants to see the regulator introduced.

2.51 pm

Yuan Yang: I thank all hon. Members who have made speeches or interventions today. I also thank the Minister for her response and reassurance that she and this Government will continue to take seriously the real and pressing need for better football governance in this country. I am glad that she mentioned this Government's amendments and additions to the Bill, particularly concerning fan consultation. I think we can all agree that we are here today in this Chamber because of the fans we represent.

Many hon. Members have brought up the social value of clubs and the community value that they bring to us. As my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) pointed out, it is rare in any other walk of life to find a club that spans youth clubs and elderly people's clubs and does work across the spectrum of ages and backgrounds. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) described how much of a presence her local club has in her town. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) spoke about how his local club, Port Vale, received an award for its community value, and he described the value of the cohesion that a football club can bring as a focal point for the community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), who has worked at length with her local club the Shrimps, described how clubs can bring people together. I recognise that Morecambe football club faces a severely urgent need for an independent regulator. Because of that urgency, I was actually quite disappointed to hear the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), describe the history of the Bill, but then sidestep that history and seem to oppose the current Bill. I also note that he did not respond to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) about why he had changed his mind.

For many clubs across the country, we need regulation sooner rather than later, as my hon. Friends the Members for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) and for Harlow (Chris Vince) pointed out. Every day we wait means another day that the staff of Reading football club forgo their wages and fans forgo certainty. My neighbour the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), who described this as a cross-party issue. I urge Opposition Members to maintain the cross-party consensus that was built over the last Parliament, when we all identified the need for independent football regulation.

I recognise the concerns voiced by the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Luke Evans) about the effects of a new regulator. I see where they are coming

[Yuan Yang]

from, but I would argue that regulation can only increase international business confidence in the integrity of our football pyramid. There have been legal challenges already in the past few decades about the collective selling in the premier league, and I believe that better governance would reassure all those looking on that the public benefit argument has been sufficiently thought through.

More regulation would mean more stability across the pyramid and would prevent the situation we are in today, under which so many Members in this room have seen their local clubs go into administration, and which the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) experienced when he was the chair of Southampton and it went into administration. For those clubs that have experienced administration, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) described, the impact on fans and on staff is immense. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) described how fans can rescue a club from administration, but so few manage to go down that route and emerge successfully.

My 90 minutes is drawing to a close, and there is no extra time for us in this match.

James Wild: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. Interventions are not taken in wind-ups.

Yuan Yang: The referee is very clear that I cannot give way.

I pay tribute to those hon. Members who mentioned the importance of non-league clubs and of Scottish clubs, which are not covered by English football regulation. However, given that this is a Backbench Business debate, as I remind the shadow Minister, we can cover all topics that we deem fit.

Football is not just a business, yet it has to endure as a business. Clubs are not just commodities; they are central to our community. I thank all fans watching this debate, in Parliament and beyond, and our local fan groups in Reading, Sell Before We Dai and the Supporters Trust at Reading.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the financial sustainability and governance of English football.

2.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Ambulance Response Times

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered ambulance service response times.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling this important debate.

Unacceptable ambulance response times have become endemic in the UK, leaving people in pain and distress and costing lives. An estimated 50,000 people died last year after long A&E waits, according to Office for National Statistics data. One of those was Jim's wife in Street. She was suffering from aggressive liver and bowel cancer and had to wait seven hours in agony for an ambulance in February last year. When the ambulance arrived, Jim and his wife were told that the crew were not trained to take her downstairs, so they were left to wait for another crew. When they arrived, several hours later, Jim's wife was too ill to be moved and was told that the journey would kill her. She died shortly after.

Jim told me again today how that experience still makes him angry, yet he recognises the perilous state that the NHS is in, caused largely by the last Conservative Government. Like Jim, many people have lost faith in health services after the NHS was stretched and left grossly underfunded as a result of the last Conservative Government's neglect.

We know that this is having a devastating impact on patients, but it is also impacting the incredibly hard-working medical staff. The 2023 NHS staff survey showed that 39% of ambulance staff respondents often or always felt burnt out. The number is higher for control room staff, at 44%, and higher still for ambulance technicians and paramedics, at 45%. I am sure that Members across the House will join me in thanking and paying tribute to everyone working in the ambulance service whose hard work, dedication and commitment to patient safety is second to none.

Most people in Somerset will sadly know of someone who has faced a heartbreakingly long wait for an ambulance. The family of an 89-year-old Somerton resident told me how they faced a 10-hour wait, stuck in agony on the floor, as no ambulances could come to help them. Another resident told me about their ordeal of having to prop their mother up on the toilet after she had had a fall. They then had to spend 13 long hours waiting for an ambulance to arrive. I am sure other Members will have similar heartbreaking examples.

It is important to understand the context of these examples, so I will briefly outline the NHS targets: seven minutes for category 1 calls, for which 90% of ambulances should arrive within 15 minutes; 18 minutes for category 2 calls, for which 90% of ambulances should arrive within 40 minutes; while 90% of ambulances for category 3 and 4 calls should arrive within two and three hours respectively.

Those targets remain unmet in the south-west, where we have the worst-performing ambulance service in the country. In January 2025, South Western Ambulance

Service failed to meet the targets for category 1 and 2 calls. The average time it took to respond to a category 2 call was 51 minutes and 45 seconds—nearly three times slower than the NHS target. This has serious repercussions for people's health. In every minute that a stroke is left untreated, nearly 2 million brain cells die, and lifesaving treatments such as clot-busting drugs need to be delivered quickly, often within four and a half hours.

I have heard from many constituents across Glastonbury and Somerton who are deeply concerned by the delays in stroke treatment due to ambulance waiting times. These fears are compounded by the planned closure of Yeovil district hospital's hyper-acute services. The reconfiguration of services will mean that all patients who have suffered a serious life-threatening stroke will be taken to hyper-acute stroke units in Dorchester or Taunton to receive care.

As much as these new cutting-edge services and facilities are welcome in the south-west, the fact remains that if stroke patients or any patient needing emergency treatment gets to hospital too late, the results will be catastrophic without improvements to the ambulance service, and all the best equipment, drugs and treatment by clinicians will have minimal impact on patient outcomes. I have spoken about the impact of these changes on stroke care in this place before. I do not feel it necessary to go into detail again today, suffice to say that ambulance delays only increase the pressure on stroke services. The Liberal Democrats have demanded that localised data on ambulance delays is published, so rural areas like Somerset that are underperforming can receive focused and appropriate support. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that.

Lengthy delays are made all the worse when we consider the impact of drawn-out handover times, meaning ambulance crews are unable to head back out on to the road to pick up more patients. The Darzi review laid bare just how dire the situation has become. In 2024, around 800 working days each day were lost due to handover delays. Incredibly, that is the full-time equivalent of nearly 14,000 paramedics over a year. In addition, ambulances across England collectively spent 112 years waiting outside hospitals to hand over patients in 2023-24.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I was in my local hospital, Queen's medical centre in Nottingham, where they are currently trialling 45-minute handovers, to make sure that paramedics get back on the road as quickly as possible, while also making sure that patients are safely handed over into the target speciality care they need. Does the hon. Member welcome that sort of trial, given the challenges she describes?

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will come to that point a little later.

With the stark realities facing people in an emergency and the distressing sight of ambulances backed up at hospitals now commonplace, leaving my constituents in Glastonbury and Somerton in despair, it is time to properly address these failures. The NHS standard contract states that handovers between ambulance and emergency departments should be 100% within 60 minutes, 95% within 30 minutes and 65% within 15 minutes, but these targets are left unmet. Between October 2023 and June 2024, 3.7 million handovers took an average of 35 minutes and one second, resulting in over 900,000 hours lost.

It is even worse in the south-west. In January 2025, over half the handovers took over 30 minutes, which is nearly 30% higher than the England average.

We in the south-west face specific issues due to our rurality. Analysis by the Liberal Democrats revealed that waits for life-threatening calls were 45% longer in rural areas than in urban areas. The South Western Ambulance Service has responsibility for the provision of ambulance services across 10,000 square miles, covering an incredible 20% of mainland England. Rural regions have a lower capacity to divert ambulances to other hospitals during periods of significant pressure, largely due to the vast distances between emergency departments.

We may now see ambulance teams in Somerset adopt a "drop and go" policy, which involves leaving patients in certain areas in a hospital without an official handover to A&E staff. The nationally defined target for hospitals included in the NHS standard contract states that after 15 minutes of waiting, the patient in the ambulance becomes the responsibility of the hospital. If no formal handover to A&E happens within 45 minutes, the ambulance crews can just leave the patient within the department and get back on the road.

The South West Ambulance Service is moving towards this approach with hospitals from Swindon and Bristol to Cornwall and Plymouth. Although this policy might alleviate some of the pressure on ambulance crews, it would fail to ease the struggles that underfunded and overstretched A&E departments in Somerset are facing. Somerset has an ageing population: within the next decade, one in three people in Glastonbury and Somerton will be 65 or older. That may make it harder to quickly discharge patients, as some may also require onward social care provision. It is inevitable, therefore, that delayed discharge due to internal processes such as waiting for pharmacy diagnostics and therapy assessments, and a lack of capacity in adult social care, will lead to poorer ambulance service performance. The social care crisis has a devastating effect on the healthcare system.

Last year, Care England said that

"over 45% of hospital discharge delays are linked to social care".

One in seven hospital beds are taken up by people who are medically fit to be discharged. For patients, delayed discharge can lead to an increased risk of hospital infections and the loss of mobility or cognitive function, and can make it harder for them to regain their independence. The problems in the healthcare system will never be fixed unless we urgently address the social care crisis. Only last week, social care providers felt the need to protest against Government inaction for the first time ever.

The Liberal Democrats have been campaigning to fix social care by introducing free personal care based on the model introduced in Scotland, so that provision is based on need, not ability to pay. We also welcome the cross-party commission to forge a long-term agreement on social care, but we believe it can be completed within a year, not three. We cannot afford to kick this can any further down the road, and I urge the Government to listen to the Liberal Democrats' calls.

We also need to solve the hospital bed shortage in the UK. The lack of available beds negatively impacts hospital flow. As a comparison, the OECD EU nations have about five beds per 1,000 people, whereas the UK has only 2.4. The Royal College of Physicians revealed

[Sarah Dyke]

that four out of five doctors were forced to provide corridor care in the past month due to a lack of hospital beds. According to the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, bed occupancy is at a staggering 93%. The Liberal Democrats want to bring that down to a safe 85% by increasing the number of staffed hospital beds.

We are waiting for the Government to publish the urgent and emergency care improvement plan soon, along with the 10-year health plan. It is vital that we urgently wrestle with the problems that the Conservatives left behind to ensure the safety of patients. Over the past seven years, the previous Conservative Government were forced to find an average of £376 million of emergency funding each year to tackle the NHS winter crises. Under the Liberal Democrat proposals, a new winter taskforce would instead manage a ringfenced fund of £1.5 billion over the next four years to build resilience in hospital wards, accident and emergency departments, ambulance services and patient discharging. That would allow integrated care boards and NHS trusts to plan their budgets more effectively to prevent winter crises, instead of just receiving emergency funding from the Government at the last minute.

We urgently need to give our healthcare services the ability to forward plan. They must not be forced to deal with crises on the fly as situations unfold. Somerset's ambulance services, like all services across the country, desperately need and deserve support. Localised data must be published to help pinpoint specific improvements that can be made in rural areas. The Government have outlined their desire to improve urgent and emergency care—they accept that ambulance waiting times are unacceptable—but now is the time to act to achieve those objectives; otherwise, more people will suffer and sadly some lives will be lost. That must be part of a serious rethink about the way we fund social care; otherwise, we will never move towards a solution that works.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I remind Members they should bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate.

3.15 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this much-needed debate.

It is incumbent on us to get the waiting times down to the level that we all expect because in a medical emergency every second counts. Every minute without the right care could mean the difference between life or death, independence or disability, full recovery or a lifetime of complications. Yet, across nearly all categories, ambulances are failing to meet their target response times. They are often stuck waiting instead of saving lives, held up by staff shortages or gridlocked outside hospitals with no beds to offload patients. I know this from personal experience because my health trust suffers from it more than most in London. We all have a stake in improving our NHS. We all want to see more beds, more timely treatment and a healthcare system that keeps our friends, neighbours and families healthier for longer.

Last year, Labour's Budget unlocked £22.6 billion in funding for the NHS over the next two years to pay our doctors fairly, to provide critical hospital beds, and to end the backlog, but for emergency services there remains a critical issue that pumping money into the NHS alone will not fix: staff shortages. Paramedics have one of the highest turnover rates of any profession. Although the number of paramedics has increased since March 2018, absence caused by poor mental health has also increased and so has the number of staff leaving the field all together. Between 2022 and 2023, nearly 7,000 paramedics left their jobs—a 51% increase in leavers from 2019-2020. Without enough staff, ambulances cannot operate at full capacity and response times suffer.

In the current state of the NHS, paramedics are overworked, stretched to the limit and living with the consequences of underfunding and lack of support. Burnout is not just a risk; it is their reality. Who can blame paramedics for wanting to leave? Let us be clear: we have reached this point not because paramedics are not working hard enough, because they are, but because the emergency services have become a safety net. Without preventive measures such as screening, GP appointments or adequate social care, patients get treated only when their condition has escalated to a true emergency, putting undue stress on services. When patients can be treated only once their condition has become an emergency, it is a failure of the system and it increases pressure on our emergency services. It is a bad deal for patients and for those working tirelessly in our emergency services—a deal made possible by 14 years of Tory mismanagement, underfunding and neglect.

If we want better health outcomes and to meet our response time targets, we must make bold structural changes. We need to ensure that paramedics are not carrying the burden of overstretched services in every corner of the NHS. We must ensure that all parts of the NHS function well, from community screenings to adequate support for paramedics, who should be able to continue in their roles and not be driven out because the system has made it unbearable to stay. Every minute counts for overworked paramedics at breaking point and the patients who desperately need their care. I look to the Minister to do the heavy lifting and fix the broken system, which will be the difference between life and death.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I call Nicholas Timothy.

3.19 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Thank you, Ms Jardine, for calling me to speak and also for giving me my full name, Nicholas—I think the last time that was done was when I was six years old and in trouble with my mother.

I applaud the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this very important debate. I think we can all agree that this is an important issue not only for our constituents, but for every community across the country. As we have just heard, the time it takes for an ambulance to reach people in need of urgent medical care can make all the difference in saving lives. We have a responsibility to engage constructively across party lines to find solutions that work.

Since the pandemic hit, we have all seen the challenges faced by our local health services, and ambulances are no exception. In January, average response times for the

two highest priority incidents missed NHS targets. Official data shows average response times for category 1 incidents of eight minutes and 16 seconds, instead of the seven-minute target, and average response times for category 2 incidents of 35 minutes and 40 seconds, instead of the 18-minute target.

Even those statistics obscure dramatic variation across the country. This is particularly concerning in my constituency of West Suffolk. Haverhill, our biggest town, has a population of 30,000 people, but the response times for the highest priority incidents in Haverhill are twice as long as they are in Cambridge. Figures from the NHS England weekly ambulance scorecard show that in the 12-month period to the end of September, Cambridge's average response time for category 1 incidents was 7.3 minutes, just missing the national target, but Haverhill's was 14.7 minutes. Ambulances starting their shifts in Haverhill are often dispatched towards Cambridge, which is 15 miles away at its nearest point. This is an inequality that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

The problem arises in part from the fact that Haverhill ambulance station is located right on the county boundary, at the edge of south Cambridgeshire. The ambulance station is used for maintenance, but it does not have its own ambulances on standby. This appears to have a negative effect on how ambulances are assigned for the local area, with resources sucked into Cambridgeshire and staying there. Addenbrooke's hospital has become a hotspot for this problem: ambulances with patients waiting to be treated wait outside for long periods, instead of responding to more incidents in and around Haverhill.

I have spoken to the East of England Ambulance Service several times over the past few months to learn more about the situation. It believes that the system status plan, which decides where to send ambulances, should be changed so that Haverhill becomes a priority and more ambulances can be sent there.

Since my election, I have also been making the case for a co-located and purpose-built blue light facility in the town. This would allow the local police, fire and rescue service, and ambulance service to better serve local residents and save taxpayers' money. The plan has the support of local councillors and several interested parties, and the Government have also made positive comments about adopting this approach nationally. I look forward to the publication of the Government's urgent and emergency care improvement plan, as well as the 10-year health plan.

I remind the Minister of the Health Secretary's commitment, which he made on the Floor of the House, to follow up with me regarding this proposal. Since the Health Secretary made that commitment, I have not received a response to my letter. I hope that a Minister or appropriate official from the Department will come to visit us in West Suffolk. It would be an excellent opportunity for them to meet representatives of the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust, officers from Suffolk police, the Suffolk police and crime commissioner, and the fire and rescue service to discuss the next steps.

I hope that today's debate will provide us all with an opportunity to work together to improve ambulance services. I know that the problems that I have described in West Suffolk exist in other parts of the country, and we have much to learn from one another. There are solutions that can be implemented to deliver faster

response times and improve outcomes for our constituents. I look forward to supporting any practical measures to help achieve exactly that.

3.24 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing today's important debate.

I welcome the news that ambulance waiting times are slowly improving in my area of the west midlands, but I would like to raise an issue that has been brought to me by several of my constituents in very distressing circumstances: how long those ambulances are having to wait outside A&E departments.

An ambulance service needs hospital services that can support it, and my constituents deserve to know that if they need urgent healthcare, an ambulance will turn up quickly and be able to deliver them to the appropriate care as soon as possible. At the moment, that is simply not happening: 66.6% of ambulances at Worcestershire Royal hospital, which serves many of my constituents, were left waiting longer than 30 minutes in the first week of January 2025. Prior to that, in October, only 50% of people attending any of the trust's A&E departments, including mine in Redditch, were treated, admitted, or discharged within four hours. That same month, 1,300 ambulance patients waited more than an hour outside. I would like to share what that means in reality for some of my constituents.

My constituent Connie's mother was sat in the back of an ambulance for hours outside the Royal, waiting for space to go in. Once she was finally admitted, she was left in a chair in a corridor for even longer. Not only is that a distressing situation for the patient, but while she was unable to be admitted, that ambulance was forced to stay outside and not be redeployed to help others. I heard from another constituent, Elaine, who had to call an ambulance for her 80-year-old mother-in-law due to a serious hypoglycaemic event, and although the ambulance crew were prompt in their arrival, she spent seven hours in the back of an ambulance as the A&E was not in a position to take her. She then spent 48 hours in A&E and a further three weeks in hospital before she was discharged, having received excellent care, but it is those seven hours that still stay with her now.

At the Alexandra hospital in my constituency, there are no in-patient children's beds, so very sick children have to be taken to Worcestershire by ambulance if they need to be admitted. The Minister knows all too well that I have raised this issue with her before. If these services were provided more locally, over more than one site, ambulances would be freed up to deal with truly urgent cases across Worcestershire. Our ambulance and hospital staff work tirelessly to help us stay safe and well, but they are being let down by a system that has been neglected for too long.

I will not make a party political point, but—let's be honest—we pay for the service we get. As the son of someone who worked in the NHS for 40 years, I would say that for too long we have not been investing in our health and social care systems in this country. We must take action now to ensure that our hospitals are given the resources they need so that handovers from ambulances can take place quickly and safely, and patients can truly receive the care that they deserve.

3.27 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing this important debate.

From the January 2024 figures, we can see that the South Western Ambulance Service consistently ranked near the bottom across all categories of ambulance response times. The mean response times were nearly all below NHS targets, and the longest category 4 response was over nine hours against a target of three. The geography of rural Devon, and particularly of my constituency of South Devon, is not conducive to speedy ambulance response times—I would challenge anyone to drive along our hedge-lined rural lanes at speed, even with a blue light flashing—so it is no wonder that figures might be lower than national NHS targets dictate, but while ambulances spend hours waiting at clogged A&E departments, they are not out on the road responding to patients.

I will focus particularly on two areas. The first is the very worrying issue of the proposed relocation of out-of-hours emergency cardiac services from Torbay Hospital to Exeter, which is being proposed by Getting It Right First Time—a programme that claims to present

“a data-driven evidence base to support change.”

Patients in Torbay and South Devon currently face significant delays with ambulances already struggling to meet response time targets, but with the relocation of cardiology services, ambulances will have to travel an extra 20 miles to Exeter after collecting and stabilising a patient, and for those who live in the furthest southern part of my constituency—Dartmouth, for example—this is a significant extra travel time to add to what is already quite a long and slow journey. That extra travel time will delay critical interventions for heart attack patients. For every 30-minute delay to treatment, there is a 7.5% increase in mortality. In other words, that is 15 people out of every 200 who could lose their life because of an extra half-hour delay.

Last week, a dozen cardiologists at Torbay hospital met me and other local MPs. They told us that they have been calling on the local ICB for a year not to go through with the change and that, crucially, no evidence has been presented in a case that would justify the move. They said that even 10 to 15 minutes can literally save a life. We know that quicker response times also mean a better chance of full recovery for patients who get to hospital in time to survive. Most worryingly, South Western Ambulance Service did not know anything about the proposed move. It feels appropriate, while we are discussing ambulance services, to say that that strikes me as wholly unacceptable for a body that wants to “get it right”.

There is growing support for treating strokes as category 1 emergencies, on a par with conditions such as cardiac arrest, due to their time-sensitive nature, which my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton described. Quicker responses could significantly improve long-term outcomes, reducing the risk of permanent disability or death. The first three hours are critical for intervention as brain tissue continues to deteriorate after that. Faster treatment helps to prevent that damage. Although strokes are in category 2, evidence shows that

response times often exceed the ideal timeframe. The average time it takes for an ambulance to arrive and provide care for category 2 calls is often well beyond the optimal window for effective stroke treatment.

In the south-west, the mean time for an ambulance to respond to a cat 2 call was nearly 52 minutes, against an NHS target of just 18 minutes. The longest time was one hour and 53 minutes. Changing the categorisation of stroke could ensure that ambulances prioritise stroke victims as they would a cardiac arrest or a trauma case, which could improve response times and overall care. That would put yet more pressure on ambulance services but, after all the public education campaigns about recognising stroke symptoms—which are very welcome—ambulances are simply not arriving in time to provide the necessary treatment.

Our paramedics and ambulance services have so much to offer, from providing lifesaving urgent medical care to delivering care in the community and driving welcome innovation for the NHS. Yet according to official NHS figures, in the winter of 2023-24 ambulances across England collectively spent a staggering total of 112 years waiting outside hospitals to hand patients over. It is an astonishing and dangerous waste of resources for ambulances to be stuck for hours waiting outside crammed A&Es. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton said, the crisis in our social care system goes a long way to exacerbating bed blocking in hospitals, which is having a direct impact on ambulance services.

The Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to publish accessible, localised reports of ambulance response times and create an emergency fund to reverse closures of community ambulance stations—which are particularly vital in rural areas—and cancel planned closures where needed. We need a proper plan to fund this crucial part of our NHS, rather than last-minute emergency funding each year during repeated winter crises, which does not enable local trusts and ICBs to plan effectively and efficiently.

3.33 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine.

NHS England has set ambulance response time targets since 2018. As the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) indicated, there are four categories of severity for ambulance calls, each with a different response-time standard. In my Wolverhampton West constituency, ambulance response times are managed by the West Midlands Ambulance Service. The Care Quality Commission's 2023 inspection of the West Midlands Ambulance Service resulted in a regulation 12 notice for response times.

I pay tribute to ambulance workers, who work very hard. When the ambulance was called for my parents, before they passed away, the ambulance workers were very diligent. They worked very hard and did their best for my parents.

I wish to address an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal): mental health among ambulance workers. Sadly, it has come to my attention as the MP in Wolverhampton West that there have been cases of bullying and harassment among ambulance workers, with whistleblowers then being targeted by management. Although I appreciate that this is probably a discussion for another time, I want to emphasise

that we need to protect whistleblowers in our health service. The wellbeing of ambulance workers will have an impact on ambulance response times.

The Black Country integrated care system covers my constituency of Wolverhampton West. On the four categories for ambulance response times, although the ICS's response time for category 1 was found to be within target, the response times for categories 2, 3 and 4 were under target.

In January this year, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care acknowledged that patients have been let down by ambulances that do not arrive on time, and that there is variation in performance across different parts of the country. He also mentioned the urgent and emergency care improvement plan, which is currently in production and will be published before spring 2025. I look forward to seeing the results.

The Government's mandate to NHS England this year includes an objective to reform and improve urgent and emergency care. The mandate describes ambulance response times and A&E waiting times as unacceptable. NHS England's priorities and operational planning guidance includes a national priority to improve A&E waiting and ambulance response times.

As a Government we have made excellent strides in reducing hospital waiting lists and making more hospital appointments available, and we have improved accessibility to GP appointments. In the same way as we have made strides in reducing hospital waiting lists and increasing hospital appointments, we must now make similar strides in improving ambulance response times.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.37 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this important debate and for opening it with, as usual, a thoughtful and well-researched contribution.

It is no surprise that Members have largely been in agreement in this debate, and they have made useful contributions, so I will quickly run through them. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) importantly highlighted the issue of burnout and the impact of the current situation on hard-working staff in the ambulance service, and the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) highlighted the huge regional variations and the inequality of service for people who live in very rural areas.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) told a story—which would be familiar to people in Shropshire—of long handover delays; my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) mentioned the importance of dealing with stroke patients and seeing them quickly; and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), with whom my constituents and I share the West Midlands Ambulance Service, highlighted some of our concerns with that service as a whole.

I was first elected in the North Shropshire by-election back in December 2021. All that time ago, when my colleagues and I were out canvassing, it was extremely apparent that ambulance service delays were the No. 1

issue for my constituents. Every canvassing session we did, somebody heard an absolutely heartbreaking story of an ambulance delay that had led to a much worse outcome for a loved one, or possibly even a death. In all honesty, it was a shocking campaigning issue to have to focus on.

Almost a year later, after being elected, I completed a shift with West Midlands Ambulance Service in Shropshire, and I was blown away by the professionalism, dedication and hard work of the ambulance crew. But suffice it to say, the delays were still as appalling as they had been a year before.

Since then, there has been huge political turmoil, and that has not helped the situation. There have been four Prime Ministers, six Secretaries of State for Health and Social Care, and two Governments, and I am afraid to say we are still not seeing the improvement that we need. This winter, handover and waiting times reached the point where in some ambulance services people suffering heart attacks were at times advised to drive themselves to hospital. That is an unacceptable situation.

The most recent available data for my local ambulance service in Shropshire—the rural element of the West Midlands Ambulance Service—goes up to December 2024, and it still paints a stark picture of the distressing reality facing my constituents and people across Shropshire. The mean waiting time for category 1 callouts was 12 minutes 19 seconds, while the target is seven minutes. For category 2 callouts, the mean waiting time was 50 minutes and 36 seconds, while the target is 18 minutes. Those categories include callouts to people suffering from heart attacks and suspected strokes. For category 3 callouts, the mean waiting time was well over 200 minutes, and the target is an hour. After a long campaign, £21 million was secured to boost emergency care, and there has been improvement, but response times are still totally unacceptable.

At times, as many as 16 ambulances have been queuing outside the Shrewsbury and Telford emergency departments that serve my constituents. More than one in three ambulances have to wait for more than an hour to hand over a patient, and the longest wait was an astonishing 17 hours. Even this week, as we approach the spring, a constituent told me they had stopped to help an elderly lady laying on a cold pavement with a suspected stroke and had had to wait nearly an hour and a half for an ambulance or first responder to arrive. All the while, the lady's breath become more and more shallow. This crisis is real, and it has not significantly improved.

Let us look at the national picture. The Darzi report found that each day in 2024 around 800 working days were lost to handover delays. However we cut that—14,000 paramedics a year; 112 years—it is just not acceptable. It is no surprise that people have lost faith in emergency health services as a result of the last Government's appalling neglect of the NHS. The paramedics, nurses and doctors in our emergency departments go above and beyond, but they are stretched to breaking point and are unfortunately starting to leave the service because of burnout. We are campaigning to end excessive handover delays by increasing the number of staffed hospital beds and by tackling the impact of degrading corridor care.

Let me focus for a moment on social care. Crucially, A&E delays are often caused by an inability to admit patients because thousands of people are stuck in hospital every day when they would be better cared for elsewhere.

[Helen Morgan]

Bed occupancy is well above safe levels in hospitals, and one in seven hospital beds are occupied by somebody who would be better cared for either in a care home or in their own home. Meanwhile, local authorities such as Shropshire are spending as much as 80% of their budget on social care. They are at risk of issuing section 114 notices as they are unable to cope any longer.

It is really important that we get on with the cross-party talks on social care and with the Casey review. We in the Liberal Democrat party absolutely welcome that, but we urge the Government to speed up the timetable and crack on with it as soon as possible, because 2028 is too late for a long-term solution for social care. The cross-party talks that fell through last week need to be reinstated. I urge the Minister to encourage the Secretary of State to do that as soon as possible.

Let us focus for a moment on the rural problem. Imagine an ideal scenario in which the issue of handover delays has been resolved, the urgent and emergency care plan has been successfully implemented and the 10-year plan has sorted out other issues across the NHS. For those who live near Oswestry, Whitchurch or Market Drayton in my constituency, the nearest community ambulance station has closed and the nearest station or hospital is well over 20 minutes away—that is, if the traffic is clear. Otherwise, if the response time targets for category 1 or 2 calls is to be met, they are reliant on a spare ambulance roaming free in the community, waiting for that call to come in. That is unrealistic. We would expect and hope that, in between calls, paramedics would go and have a cup of tea and a sit down, to decompress from some of the awful things they have seen that day, if they do not have a patient to go to immediately. Hopefully, they go back to the ambulance station in between call-outs.

The implementation of this centralised model across the country is detrimental to the people who live a long way from an ambulance station. It may well be efficient in urban areas, but it certainly is not working in rural ones. I hope the Minister will commit to reviewing the service that is received in rural places. There are thousands of people in large market towns. For example, Oswestry has nearly 18,000 residents, Market Drayton has more than 12,000 and Whitchurch has nearly 10,000. These people expect to receive an ambulance within the target time. I must urge the Minister to commit to looking at ambulance station provision in those areas. I also repeat my colleagues' calls for the Government to publish accessible, localised reports on response times and to create an emergency fund to reverse the closures of community ambulance stations that have already taken place.

The Midlands Air Ambulance Charity does fantastic work across the west midlands and is one of the busiest air ambulance charities in the country. It does not have an NHS contract; it is entirely reliant on the contributions of people living locally. I wonder whether the Minister might consider putting air ambulance services on a statutory footing, because we are so dependent on them, particularly when specialist hospitals might be a long way away and air ambulance crews supply specialist support to stabilise patients where they are found, at the roadside or in their home.

The situation is unacceptable, and I look forward to seeing the urgent and emergency care plan, which I hope it will consider the needs of rural areas. I must urge the Minister to look at social care, because that is one of the key things we need to do to fix the crisis in the NHS.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I call the Opposition spokesperson.

3.46 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing a debate on this important subject. I pay tribute to the ambulance services and to paramedics and their colleagues, who are on the frontline of our healthcare service, today and every day. Regardless of the weather, or whether it is a bank holiday, they are always there for all of us.

In my medical career, I have been required to deliver full intensive care to children, and particularly babies, who were being transferred across the county in East Midlands ambulances throughout the night and day. I have hurtled along in the back of an ambulance as it travelled down country roads, around corners and down the hard shoulder of motorways, so I understand some of what ambulance crews do. That has given me a deep appreciation of their work, and highlighted to me some of the unique challenges and pressures they face, particularly in our rural areas.

Before I was elected, I had two experiences of delayed ambulance services. On one occasion, I was driving up the A1 when the gentleman in the car in front of me skidded on some water and went into a tree. I am sorry to say that the ambulance took a very long time to arrive, and he died shortly afterwards. There was a fire truck, police officers and an incident manager, but there was no ambulance service. I do not think it would have made a difference to the outcome, but in other cases it might have.

On another occasion, I was sat in traffic when a police officer knocked on the window, which is always slightly worrying. They were looking for a doctor because they had been waiting so long for an ambulance for the people in the accident that was causing the traffic. It took a further 40 minutes from me arriving at the scene for the ambulance to arrive—I am not clear how long the people at the scene had been waiting before. So this issue was a great priority for me before I became a Member of Parliament.

In my first question at Prime Minister's Question Time, in January 2017, I thanked the East Midlands Ambulance Service for its brave and stellar work serving the people of Sleaford and North Hykeham, and asked for ambulance service response times to be a priority. I also raised the issue in my first meetings with the then Prime Minister and Health Secretary. I understand that response times have improved somewhat, at different periods with different initiatives but overall, as we have heard, they are not where we need them to be.

In January, a constituent wrote to my office detailing the difficult experience of waiting too long for an ambulance to arrive. This 85-year-old gentleman came downstairs at 10 am to find his 82-year-old wife, who

suffers from advanced dementia, lying on the hardwood floor, covered in blood, crying and confused. He managed to get her into a chair, calm her down and call 999. The operator could not hear him properly because the phone service was bad, his wife was crying and trying to get out of the chair, and he was struggling. Eventually, he was told the ambulance would be there in 12 hours. The ambulance did eventually arrive, and his wife is now in a stable condition, but that was a traumatising experience for her and the 85-year-old man. I was sorry to read that harrowing tale, and tales like it are too common across the country. I am interested in what the Minister will do to improve the situation; it is easy to say that things are not where they need to be, but it is important to consider how one can improve them, and that is what I hope to hear from her.

Of course, the pandemic threw everything off kilter, and demand for ambulance services rose significantly, with almost 3 million calls in March 2020. In 2022-23, an extra £150 million was allocated to improve ambulance response times through extra call handler recruitment and retention. In January 2023, to improve performance further, the last Government published an urgent and emergency care plan, which set out ambitions to improve average ambulance response times for category 2 incidents to 30 minutes over 2023-24, with further improvement in 2024-25 to get back towards pre-pandemic levels. The plan aimed to increase ambulance capacity by making over 800 new ambulances available during 2023-24, including 100 new specialist mental health vehicles for those who require different types of service. However, in December 2024, under this Government, ambulance response times rose to an average of three hours and two minutes for category 3 calls—category 3 covers elderly people who suffer falls but not a head injury. What steps will the Government take with NHS England to reduce those response times so that people are not waiting hours in pain and discomfort?

I have said to the Minister that it is important that we talk about how we can improve things, as well as about what the problems are. It is crucial that we all do that, and one suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) was co-located blue-light services—I am sure he is aware that the first such services were opened not long ago in Lincolnshire. The blue light hub tri-service centre, in the Lincoln constituency, is a co-located site, and co-location is leading to improvements in services. Although that is not my constituency, I am sure the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer) would be open to an approach if my hon. Friend wished to see the site.

It is important to look at risk all along the pathway. We have talked about handover delays, but there is a whole pathway from the moment someone calls 999 to the transfer journey, the wait to get into A&E and then the wait in A&E. The risk is clearly highest at the point where someone has called 999 but does not yet have access to on-site or in-person medical care. To improve that, we need more ambulances on the road and fewer sat outside A&E.

I have some questions for the Minister. Ambulances are double-crewed—there are two people in the ambulance—but do two staff need to stay with the patient? If two ambulances have arrived, each with two staff and one patient, could two of the four crew go off in one of the ambulances to see more patients? That would avoid a

situation where there are two staff per patient in the ambulance, when many patients are not that unwell medically. Nursing in intensive care is only one to one, but we are providing higher levels of care than that with these staffing ratios. Is that necessary?

We also have a delay in handover—in getting people out of the ambulances—because the A&E is said to be full. The front door is open, but the back door, for people coming in an ambulance, is in effect closed. If patients got out of the ambulance and walked round the building to the front door, they could go in and be triaged as normal. It does not make sense. Some of my medical colleagues have gone to see people in the ambulance and discharged them from there, without their needing to come into the hospital at all. So there are clearly people with a level of medical acuity that would potentially allow the crew, with guidance and training, to discharge them into the front door of the hospital instead.

On another question, if some people are well enough to be discharged from ambulances, are the public sufficiently aware of what constitutes a necessity when it comes to calling an ambulance? How many ambulances that are called are necessary? One would not wish to deter anyone who is frightened and concerned for their wellbeing from calling an ambulance if they feel they need one, but education on when one is needed might be useful.

As has been alluded to, staff retention is also important. One constituent—a single mum with children—left her role as a paramedic because she was struggling with working hours that overlapped with getting her children ready for school in the morning. She was able to cover most other aspects of childcare—such as picking them up from school—with after-school clubs and the like, but she struggled in a morning, and her flexible working request was refused. I recognise that there must be balance, and that all hours of the day must be covered by ambulances, but has the Minister thought about how working practices and hours could be changed?

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), mentioned resources in rural areas. That is important because response times will necessarily be increased by the geography, so greater levels of resource perhaps need to be provided to rural areas, in recognition of the fact that if we want response times in them to fall, we need a higher level of ambulance availability.

Another significant factor causing delayed ambulance response times is staff sickness, which is not necessarily an issue of NHS funding. Ambulance services in England report the highest level of sickness absence rates of any other profession across the NHS. Against a national average absence rate of 4.3% over an eight-year period, ambulance staff showed an average absence rate of 6.2%, with year-on-year increases. There are stark regional differences in sickness rates, with the West Midlands Ambulance Service consistently maintaining a lower absence rate—around 50% lower than its counterparts in London or the east midlands. The NHS would benefit from sharing best practices between trusts, which would make a real difference, ensuring a healthier workforce and, ultimately, better patient care. The issue is also costly financially, and an independent review published by Lord Carter in 2016 estimated even then that a mere 1% reduction in staff absences could save ambulance trusts up to £15 million a year. That figure would clearly be even higher now.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

I also want to raise the issue of air ambulance services. Air ambulance charities deliver lifesaving treatment every single day and complete more than 25,000 lifesaving missions across the country every year—an average of more than one every 10 minutes. I commend the work of all those involved, and particularly Lincs & Notts Air Ambulance, which operates in and around my constituency, the crew who airlifted my husband from Silverstone to Coventry last year and looked after him so well.

In the last Parliament, the previous Government gave significant support to air ambulances. The Department of Health and Social Care's three-year capital grant programme in 2019 allocated £10 million to nine charities across England. That funding supported air ambulance charities to move towards 24/7 operations and improved seven airbase facilities across England. However, services are now under threat from the Chancellor's rise in national insurance and taxes. Lincs & Notts Air Ambulance will need to find another £70,000 just to pay the national insurance rise—this is an entirely charitably funded organisation. Can the Minister justify that policy, given the vital work that air ambulance charities do across the country?

On 19 November, my right hon. Friends the Members for Newark (Robert Jenrick), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), my hon. Friends the Members for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) and for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies), the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) and I wrote to the Chancellor to ask about exemptions from the national insurance hike for air ambulances. Despite raising the issue at Treasury questions and in a point of order, and despite repeated chasing from my office, we have not had the courtesy of a proper response to our letter from the Government, although they have suggested that they are now asking the Department of Health and Social Care to respond to the letter. That is a huge discourtesy to the House, and I would be grateful for the Minister's assurance, because the letter is apparently with the Department of Health, that we will receive a response by the end of the week. That is quite a reasonable request.

Finally, it is fair to say that ambulance crews are doing a sterling job, but that response times are not where we need them to be. I look forward to hearing the Minister tell us how she will improve those services for our constituents.

3.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing the debate. I thank all the hon. Members who have taken part, including my hon. Friends the Members for Redditch (Chris Bloore), for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) and for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), and the hon. Members for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) and for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), as well as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), and the shadow Minister,

the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). I will endeavour to deal with as many issues and questions as I can. If I do miss any, will hon. Members please get in touch with me afterwards, and I will make sure they are picked up?

The hon. Member for West Suffolk mentioned the commitment made by the Secretary of State to meet him and visit his constituency, and I will ensure that that issue is raised. The parliamentary private secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan), is here, and I am sure she will be happy to pursue a response. We will also do what we can to get a response from the Treasury for the shadow Minister.

The hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton and other hon. Members rightly raised constituents' experiences of long waits for an ambulance response. I put on record my deepest sympathies for the hon. Lady's constituent Jim on the loss of his wife. As the Secretary of State has made clear, this is not the level of care that staff want for their patients, and it is not the level of care that this Government will ever accept for patients.

Lord Darzi investigated the issues facing the NHS, and his report was honest about the challenges facing the health service. Urgent and emergency care performance remains a long way from a resilient position and there is continued high demand for A&E and ambulance services, with ongoing seasonal winter pressures. For example, in December the London Ambulance Service recorded more than 121,000 incidents, the highest on record for the service. Improvement needs to happen across the urgent and emergency care pathway and through the expansion of neighbourhood health services.

Nationally, congested emergency departments reduce the productivity of ambulance services, a matter that I think almost all hon. Members raised. A huge amount of time is lost to ambulance handover delays because there is no space for patients. Having crews tied up waiting outside hospitals exacerbates poor ambulance response times. We have also seen the continued normalisation of corridor care. We will never accept patients being treated in corridors; it is unsafe and undignified. We are investing an extra £26 billion to begin turning around the NHS, and we will do all we can, as fast as we can, to consign corridor care to the history books.

Lord Darzi's investigation into NHS performance highlighted wide variation across different parts of the country. The situation is unfair to patients and goes against the principle of a universal service. I acknowledge that there can be challenges in rural areas, where longer distances often mean that patients wait much longer for ambulances than in urban areas. I often find myself in this place with the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton, and we both talk about the experience in our rural constituencies. I assure her that that is on my agenda. As she says, ambulance response times for the south-west and some other areas highlight the rurality differential.

In January, the South Western Ambulance Service's average response for category 2 emergency incidents, which include strokes and heart attacks, was 51 minutes and 45 seconds, which is 26 minutes longer than the best-performing ambulance trust in England. The NHS constitutional standard for category 2 average response times is 18 minutes, and no ambulance trust in England

has met that target since the pandemic. This cannot go on. Prioritising patient safety will always be the Government's and the NHS's main focus. We are committed to getting A&E waiting times and ambulance response times back to NHS constitutional standards.

The independent review of ambulance trust culture was published in February 2024. Its recommendations included addressing workforce pressures. NHS England is working closely with ambulance trusts to implement those recommendations. We have made some significant investments in the ambulance workforce, and the number of NHS ambulance staff has grown by 9% compared with last year, but we recognise that there is much more to do on retention and wellbeing for ambulance staff. That is something that we will continue to work on.

We cannot keep plugging the gaps. There is a need for more fundamental reform. We have been clear that there are no quick fixes and that to turn things around will take investment and reform. We have provided the highest real-terms capital budget for the NHS since before 2010. We announced an extra £22.6 billion in day-to-day health spending and an additional £3.1 billion further capital investment over two years. That extra investment will be accompanied by fundamental reform, of which ambulance services.

In January, the Government published "Road to recovery: the government's 2025 mandate to NHS England", which clearly sets out delivery instructions for the NHS through the prioritisation of the five key objectives aimed at driving reform in the NHS. Improving A&E and ambulance service performance was also one of a small number of prioritised objectives in the Government's mandate to NHS England to specifically start to address the current challenges facing urgent and emergency care.

In turn, NHS England's planning guidance for this year includes the target to improve average category 2 ambulance response times to no more than 30 minutes across 2025-26. The guidance also sets out a range of key actions for the NHS to deliver in the same timeframe, focused on reducing avoidable ambulance dispatches and conveyances and reducing hospital handover delays.

Helen Morgan: Will the Minister pick up on the point about social care? Inability to admit to hospital is a key point in the handover delay problem, and the social care talks are a key measure in solving it.

Ashley Dalton: The hon. Member will be delighted to know that I am coming to that point next.

We are working on reducing delays and getting hospital handovers back to within 15 minutes, ensuring that no handover between hospital and ambulance services takes longer than 45 minutes. We want to improve the range and co-ordination of services to avoid unnecessary ambulance conveyances, including through improving access to urgent community response and hospital at home services, and continuing to build on ambulance services and the great work that they do to increase the hear and treat rates so that people can be advised on what they can do and what services they can access that might mean they do not need that ambulance. We will also be driving consistency and commissioning practices across England for ambulance services. I will say a little more about the rurality element in a moment.

We are taking the first steps in the reform and improvements that we want to see in services, and we will shortly set out further plans in the urgent and emergency care services plan. We know that there is no solution for ambulances that does not include tackling the challenges facing adult social care. Health and care services need to be more joined up.

Today, there are approximately 12,000 patients in hospital beds who have no criteria to reside. They do not need to be there but cannot be discharged for reasons of capacity. Over the last month, on average, 276 of the patients with no criteria to reside were in the Somerset integrated board area. That is why the Government are making available up to £3.7 billion of additional funding for local authorities that provide social care. We are funding more home adaptations through the disabled facilities grant this year and next, so that people's homes can be safer, reducing the risk of their needing an ambulance. We are reforming the better care fund to ensure that the pooled NHS and local authority funding spent on social care contributes to wider efforts to reduce emergency admissions and delayed discharges.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Social care is clearly very important, but what assessment has the Department made of the effect of national insurance contributions on social care provision as a whole?

Ashley Dalton: The hon. Member will be aware, because we have discussed the matter many times in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber, that the funding has been made available to the statutory sector bodies for employer national insurance contributions for public sector pay, and the negotiations for the delivery of commissioned services locally and within the NHS will take place locally. I am sure that we will be able to point her to some more detail on that issue, which has been discussed at length by colleagues.

We have announced the largest ever increase in the carer's allowance earnings limit since the benefit was introduced in 1976. It is worth approximately £2,000 a year for unpaid carers. We are also introducing fair pay agreements to empower worker representatives, employers and others to negotiate pay and terms and conditions in a responsible manner. That will help to address the recruitment and retention crisis in the sector. It is not all about ENICs; it is about making sure that our social care service is resourced in order to make sure that social carers are recognised for the powerful and important work that they do. We have appointed Louise Casey to help to build a national consensus on the long-term solution for social care.

The social care cross-party talks, to which the Liberal Democrat spokesperson referred, have not been called off; they have been merely delayed. As I told her in the Chamber just yesterday, it is very much about making sure that we have the right people in the room and that they can attend. It is our intention for the talks to go ahead very soon. They have not been called off; they have been merely postponed.

Of course, we need further reform. We are bringing it forward through the 10-year plan this spring to accompany the additional investment in the NHS. The Government will publish that plan for radical reform in the NHS, with those three big reform shifts: from hospital to community, from analogue to digital and from sickness

[Ashley Dalton]

to prevention. The reforms will support putting the NHS on a sustainable footing so that it can tackle the problems of today and of the future.

The shadow Minister asked about the configuration of ambulance services. As I am sure she is aware, decisions on service configuration must be made by those who are experts in delivering it.

We have also talked about the key issues of rurality. A range of adjustments are made in the core ICB allocations formula to account for the fact that the costs of providing healthcare may vary between rural and urban areas. Some of the differences, such as the tendency for rural populations to be older, are naturally captured within the formula. We continue to review the formula for the impact of the characteristics of local areas, such as rural, urban and coastal, in the development programme.

I encourage all hon. Members to raise these matters with their local ICBs, which are responsible for commissioning the right configuration of local services. The NHS has increased the availability of local data on ambulance response times performance, with category 2 ambulance performance now published at ICB level, which has increased the transparency of the important data. I encourage hon. Members to use that data to direct conversations with their ICBs.

We have also talked about air ambulances. I am sure that all hon. Members recognise the contribution that they make, as the Government do. The Government support the long-standing independent air ambulance charities model for the successful operation of helicopter emergency medical services in England, which gives the sector the independence to raise funds through commercial activity and sponsorship from corporate partners. The

NHS continues to support air ambulance services, including through thorough training and the provision of NHS clinicians.

Communities right across the country, including the constituents of the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton, are struggling with poor services and crumbling NHS estates. We are putting record capital into the NHS. We will bring down ambulance response times. We will get waiting lists back down to what they were in 2010. It will take time, but we will deliver an NHS and a national care service that provide people with the care they need, when and where they need it.

4.14 pm

Sarah Dyke: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate. The examples that they raised highlight the urgent need to improve ambulance response times. It is just unacceptable that people cannot trust that when they need an ambulance, one will arrive. That is not fair on patients or on the incredible ambulance staff who dedicate themselves to saving lives.

I urge the Government to listen to the Liberal Democrats' calls to publish localised ambulance data, reduce hospital bed occupancy rates to 85% by increasing the number of staffed beds, and introduce a new winter taskforce that would manage a ringfenced fund of £1.5 billion to build resilience in the system. Those changes would lead to improvements that cannot come soon enough.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered ambulance service response times.

4.16 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 6 March 2025

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Vaccination

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): His Majesty's Government (HMG) is committed to protecting people most vulnerable to covid-19 through vaccination as guided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

On 13 November 2024, the JCVI published advice on the covid-19 vaccination programme for spring 2025, autumn 2025 and spring 2026. On 12 December 2024 the Government accepted their advice that a covid-19 vaccine should be offered in spring 2025 to those in the population most vulnerable to serious outcomes from covid-19 and who are therefore most likely to benefit from vaccination.

Vaccination will therefore be offered in England in spring 2025 to:

- adults aged 75 years and over;

- residents in a care home for older adults;

- individuals aged six months and over who are immunosuppressed, as defined in tables 3 and 4 of the covid-19 chapter of the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) green book on immunisation against infectious disease.

The Government are considering the JCVI's advice for autumn 2025 and spring 2026 programmes and will respond in due course.

The vaccines that will be supplied for the spring 2025 programme are the Moderna mRNA (Spikevax) vaccine and Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA (Comirnaty) vaccine.

Notification of liabilities

I am now updating the House on the liabilities HMG has taken on in relation to further vaccine deployment via this statement and accompanying departmental minute laid in Parliament containing a description of the liability undertaken.

The covid-19 vaccines to be used in spring 2025 were pre-procured as part of HMG's pandemic emergency response. As part of the contractual arrangements with covid-19 vaccine producers for these vaccines, provision of an indemnity was required in order to enter into supply agreements. This only applies to vaccines purchased as part of the pandemic emergency response.

The agreement to provide indemnity with deployment of further doses increases the contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

I will update the House in a similar manner as appropriate, as and when any future decisions impact the contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

[HCWS505]

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The Department of Health and Social Care's new cash requirement for the year exceeds that provided by the main estimate 2024-25. The supplementary estimate has not yet received Royal Assent.

The Contingencies Fund advance is required to meet commitments until the supplementary estimate receives Royal Assent, at which point the Department of Health and Social Care will be able to draw down the cash from the Consolidated Fund in the usual way, to repay the Contingencies Fund advance.

Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £1,400,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department of Health and Social Care. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £1,400,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS503]

Plasma for Medicines Programme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health (Baroness Merron) has made the following written statement:

I am pleased to inform the House that the first patients in England have now received life-saving plasma derived medicines made from UK donor plasma for the first time in over 25 years. This will boost self-sufficiency and reduce reliance on imports from abroad.

Blood plasma medicines are critical for approximately 17,000 NHS patients who rely on them to treat immune deficiencies and rare disorders. They are also essential in emergency medicine, particularly during childbirth and trauma care.

Using UK donor plasma was banned in 1998. This followed concerns about a potentially increased risk of plasma recipients acquiring the brain disease variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease due to UK plasma donors being exposed to bovine spongiform encephalopathy (sometimes referred to colloquially as mad cow disease) prions from infected cattle. The NHS has relied solely on imported plasma medicines since then.

The ban was lifted in 2021 following a review by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the Commission on Human Medicines. The plasma for medicines programme was set up in 2021 by the Department of Health and Social Care as a tripartite programme between the DHSC, NHS Blood and Transplant and NHS England. Since April 2021, NHSBT has re-established its plasma collection programme and collected 500,000 litres of plasma medicine. Following a successful procurement exercise by NHSE, Octapharma was appointed to fractionate the plasma into component parts (including albumin) and made into medicines. Shipments of UK donor plasma began in summer 2024.

This collaboration, along with the generosity of blood donors, means that the first patients in England are now benefiting from these medications. The devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are already actively engaged in the programme, with similar benefits expected in the near future.

This development is a milestone to deliver the Government's growth mission, and reflects excellent strategic collaboration between NHSBT and NHSE. This is a further step to establishing strategic self-sufficiency in critical medicines and reducing exposure to international markets, with the global plasma medicines industry expected to rise by \$15 billion (2023) to \$45 billion by 2027. In

England, we expect 25% self-sufficiency on immunoglobulin by the end of 2025, growing to 30-35% by 2031, and 80% self-sufficiency in albumin.

DHSC will continue to work with NHSBT, NHSE and the devolved Governments to consider the next steps for self-sufficiency in the supply of plasma medicines.

[HCWS506]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government: Best Value

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State, Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, has today made the following statement:

All hon. Members will recognise the importance of having well-functioning local councils which provide essential statutory services local residents rely upon. Local councils must be fit, legal and decent, and provide value for taxpayers' money. The Government will continue to work directly with a small number of councils in difficulty, and this should be done in a way that is not punitive and is based on genuine partnership to secure improvements. I would like to update the House on progress in two such cases: Thurrock council and Woking borough council.

Thurrock

Thurrock council has been under statutory intervention since September 2022. Today I am publishing the commissioners' fourth report which makes clear that the council continues to make tangible progress in its recovery and is working hard to meet its best value duty. The council has developed a corporate plan and concluded its governance review, both significant steps forward.

There is still much to do, and the changes made to date, although positive, remain fragile, and need to become embedded into the council's business as usual activity to provide assurances that these improvements will bring about the level of transformation required. I recognise there are difficult but essential decisions to be made by the council in the coming months, including delivering Thurrock's ambitious savings target of £18.2 million for 2025-26.

As we look ahead, and with six months before the current directions are due to end (1 September 2025), it is important to take stock of the improvement journey the council has been on and where further improvements may be required. I am asking commissioners to provide their next report in April, including their assessment of the council's progress to meeting the best value duty. I welcome the commissioners continuing to support Thurrock council in the development of proposals for unitary local government and in their devolution ambitions.

Finally, I am announcing that I am extending the appointment of Dr Dave Smith, managing director commissioner, to 1 September 2025, and as Nicole Wood has stepped down from her role as Thurrock commissioner to become the chief executive of Essex county council, I would like to express my gratitude for the support, challenge and guidance she has provided to the council since the start of the intervention. I am minded to appoint a new finance commissioner as soon as possible.

Woking

Woking borough council has been under statutory intervention since May 2023 and today I am publishing the commissioners' fourth report. I am reassured by commissioners' comments that the council is committed to achieving the objectives that the council have worked with commissioners to set, which will radically overhaul the operation of the council. I share commissioners' concerns as set out in their report regarding the capacity of the council to deliver this programme of change and encourage the council to continue to work with the commissioners and my Department to consider how we can best enable the council to improve, for the benefit of residents. I welcome the commissioners continuing to support Woking borough council in the development of proposals for unitary local government. As Carol Culley is stepping down from her role as Woking commissioner to become executive director of finance at Birmingham city council, I would like to thank her for her commitment to Woking and the considerable skills she has brought to bear as both a reviewer and a commissioner. I am minded to appoint a new finance commissioner as soon as possible.

Conclusion

I want to acknowledge the diligent and hard-working members and officers of both Thurrock and Working who have continued to do their utmost to provide essential frontline services for residents while driving forward the necessary improvements.

The Government will play their part by repairing the foundations of the sector overall. The final local government finance settlement 2025-26, alongside funding announced at the Budget, has delivered over £5 billion of new funding for local services over and above council tax. This includes an additional £2 billion of grant through the settlement in addition to a guarantee that local authorities in England will receive at least £1.1 billion in total in 2025-26 from the new extended producer responsibility for packaging scheme, and a further £233 million of additional funding for homelessness services. Moving forward we will hardwire stability and security into the system with multi-year settlements and fewer restrictive grants. This will allow councils to focus spending on local priorities, and we will set out and measure progress on the key services and outcomes we expect local government to deliver.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents I have referred to, which are also being published on gov.uk today.

[HCWS504]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 6 March 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	409	CABINET OFFICE—continued	
Cyber-security.....	411	Ministerial Appointments.....	421
Cyber-security: Local Government Resilience.....	410	National Resilience.....	421
Democratic Processes: Foreign Interference.....	422	Plan for Change.....	419
Devolved Administrations.....	417	Public Procurement: Support for SMEs.....	412
Emergency Alert System.....	409	Relations with the EU.....	417
Government Advertising: Social Media.....	422	Topical Questions.....	423
Infected Blood Compensation Scheme.....	416		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 6 March 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	31WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND	
Contingencies Fund Advance.....	32WS	LOCAL GOVERNMENT	33WS
Covid-19 Vaccination.....	31WS	Local Government: Best Value.....	33WS
Plasma for Medicines Programme.....	32WS		

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CONTENTS

Thursday 6 March 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 409] [see index inside back page]
Minister for the Cabinet Office

Speaker's Statement [Col. 429]

Business of the House [Col. 430]
Statement—(Lucy Powell)

North Sea Energy [Col. 458]
Statement—(Sarah Jones)

Supply and Appropriations (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill [Col. 473]
Read a Second time and Third time and passed

Backbench Business

International Women's Day [Col. 474]
Motion—(Dawn Butler)—agreed to

Political Finance Rules [Col. 522]
Motion—(Lloyd Hatton)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 541]

Geothermal Energy [Col. 542]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

English Football: Financial Sustainability and Governance [Col. 205WH]

Ambulance Response Times [Col. 232WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 31WS]
