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7 March 2025

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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Friday 7 March 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House divided: Ayes 1, Noes 75.

Division No. 113]

[9.35 am

AYES

Grady, John

Tellers for the Ayes:

Rachel Hopkins and

Katrina Murray

NOES

Anderson, Callum
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bowie, Andrew
Bryant, Chris
Burghart, Alex
Carling, Sam
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cocking, Lewis
Coleman, Ben
Conlon, Liam
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)

Cross, Harriet
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Davies, Mims
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dixon, Samantha
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fookes, Catherine
Fox, Sir Ashley
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francis, Daniel
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Griffith, Andrew
Harding, Monica
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Jones, Gerald
Jopp, Lincoln

Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Lightwood, Simon
MacAlister, Josh
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McEvoy, Lola
van Mierlo, Freddie
Morrissey, Joy
Murray, James
Naish, James
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Paffey, Darren
Paul, Rebecca
Pennycook, Matthew
Powell, Joe
Quigley, Mr Richard
Reeves, Ellie
Rhodes, Martin
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Roca, Tim
Simmonds, David
Smith, Jeff
Spencer, Dr Ben
Strathern, Alistair
Tomlinson, Dan
Turmaine, Matt
Vaughan, Tony
Voaden, Caroline
Ward, Melanie
Webb, Chris
West, Catherine
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Wild, James
Wood, Mike
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

Martin McCluskey and

Anna McMorris

Question accordingly negated.

Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill

Second Reading

9.47 am

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I began my career as a teacher. I first entered the classroom in 2009. At the time, we were just beginning to see the use of smartphones among teenagers—there was the odd phone in the classroom and the odd instance of a child being bullied through their device—but neither I nor any other teacher at the time could have imagined the impact these devices would come to play in childhood.

From speaking to children and parents today, it is clear that children's excessive screen time and unhealthy social media use are fuelling family disputes, childhood unhappiness and parental concern the length and breadth of our country. The problem is growing and voices of concern are getting louder. It is now time to act.

Today, the average 12-year-old spends 21 hours a week on their smartphone, which is the equivalent of four full days of school teaching a week; 93% of 12 to 15-year-olds are active social media users, and 76% of teenagers spend most of their free time on their screens. This is a fundamental rewiring of childhood itself, and it has happened in little over a decade.

Children are spending less time outside and less time reading, exercising, exploring, meeting people and communicating in person—all the things that make childhood special and are necessary for healthy childhood development. Instead, many of our children now spend their time captured by addictive social media and smartphone use—often sat alone, doomscrolling; being bombarded by unrealistic representations of life; communicating through asynchronous large group chats, rather than by looking at facial expressions, eye contact and body language, or learning to interact; moving less; smiling less; learning less; and growing increasingly anxious and depressed.

This rewiring of childhood has only one winner: the balance sheets of social media companies. Their business model, the very essence of their business, is built around monetising attention. As their understanding of our consumer habits and technology improves, the encroachment on childhood is set to get worse and worse.

What has been the impact of this transformation on childhood? The use of smartphones and social media has grown in parallel with a sharp increase in depression and anxiety among teenagers. The trend has been reflected around the world, and the trend lines everywhere have tightly followed one another. Greater time spent on social media and smartphones has run in parallel with higher rates of anxiety and depression. What are the credible explanations for this phenomenon—for the worldwide explosion in adolescent mental health problems—if not social media and smartphone use?

I am sure that nobody here needs me to highlight the crisis faced by child and adolescent mental health services. Our NHS is desperate for any action that might help to address this. The threat posed to our children by excessive screen time is not limited, though, to just their mental health. There is increasing evidence of a strong association between screen time and childhood obesity. Smartphone

[*Josh MacAlister*]

use also affects sleep. Children are 79% more likely to sleep less than the recommended eight hours if they use their phones. Some 45% of teenagers—nearly half—stay awake beyond midnight most weeks. This of course also has an effect on learning. Four in 10 teenagers admit that their smartphone is distracting them in school and from the grades that they could achieve.

For some children, the ubiquitous use of smartphones has forced them into a world of round-the-clock, inescapable bullying and abuse. Over 73% of girls and young women have experienced online harm in the last year. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has reported an 82% rise in childhood online grooming crimes in the last five years, and Ofsted found that 90% of girls and nearly half of all boys have been sent explicit pictures or videos.

This bombardment on childhood has not gone unnoticed outside of this building. Across the country, the number of incredible campaigners who have built huge communities calling for change has directly led to today's debate. That is why I need to take a moment to thank all those who have contributed in some way to the development of this Bill and this debate, many of whom are in the Public Gallery. First, I must reserve my biggest thanks to Ben Kingsley of Safe Screens, and Joe and Daisy Ryrie and everyone else at Smartphone Free Childhood. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, to see the value of the contributions in kind that they have made to get us here today. I am extremely grateful for all their hard work and dedication to this cause. Their continued leadership on this issue gives me enormous confidence that laws will ultimately change to tackle these issues.

I also put on record my thanks to the tens of thousands of parents who wrote to their MPs via Smartphone Free Childhood—and I apologise to the 630 Members of this House who got extra emails to respond to in the process.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I would like to associate myself with my hon. Friend's warm words about Daisy and Joe, who are both constituents of mine. Does he also recognise the impact that their ambition has had, and will continue to have, long after this debate? Their dedicated work has helped to start real and meaningful conversations about smartphone usage in schools across the UK.

Josh MacAlister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The campaign they have started will only grow over time.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments so far, but the emails I have received from constituents who support his campaign make reference to "raising the age of 'internet adulthood' from 13 to 16" and "to help support the ban on phones in school being brought by MP Josh MacAlister". He will forgive me for saying that nothing he has said so far requires legislation. The Bill he has brought could all be achieved by the Minister just deciding to ask the chief medical officer to produce a report, or the Minister producing a plan. What has happened to the legislative action that was clearly in earlier drafts of his legislation and which campaigners clearly want?

Josh MacAlister: I will get to that in my speech. I am keen to get on to those points, and I will address the questions the hon. Gentleman has asked.

The Smartphone Free Childhood campaign has grown from zero members to over 200,000 in less than a year, which shows the strength of feeling in the country on this issue.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): It would be remiss of me not to start by thanking my hon. Friend for the leadership he has shown on the issue. He has started a big conversation not just in this Chamber, but right across the country. That is certainly true in my constituency, where we have a fantastic local Smartphone Free Childhood campaign group, and lots of the young people I meet on my school visits and in campaigning conversations across the constituency have real concerns about this topic. As always, the views of parents and young people on these things tend to lead the way. Does he agree that, as well as being ambitious about gathering evidence, we will need to become more comfortable with the idea of legislating in this area with the same precautionary principle that we apply in every other aspect of children's lives, to ensure that we protect them from the harms they are expressing to us?

Josh MacAlister: I completely agree that progress is inevitable, given the strength of feeling in the country on the matter.

I was grateful for the substantive research document pulled together by Rachel, Tom and the team at Nesta, which clearly demonstrates why action is needed, and for the polling and focus group research done by the New Britain Project and More in Common, which shows how popular taking action is among children themselves, as well as parents. Thanks also go to Arabella Skinner and Dr Becky Foljambe at Health Professionals for Safer Screens and all the health professionals they mobilised to engage with the development of the Bill, who witness at first hand the impacts of excessive screen time on the physical and mental health of the nation's children.

Our teachers and school leaders are also on the frontline of seeing the impact on children in their care. I thank, in particular, the headteacher of the John Wallis academy, Damian McBeath, who organised hundreds of his colleagues in support of the Bill; Teach First; the Ambition Institute; all the school and academy trust leaders who backed the Bill; and the teaching unions the Association of School and College Leaders, the National Association of Head Teachers, NASUWT and, in particular, the National Education Union, which is leading a big campaign on social media and smartphone use, with a report out just this morning.

Children's charities are alive to the detrimental impact of smartphone and social media use on this generation, and I have been delighted to have the backing of the big five: Barnardo's, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Action For Children, the National Children's Bureau and the Children's Society. That is in addition to data and testimony provided by UK Youth, OnSide, the Scouts, Girlguiding, Coram and the King's Trust—they have made their mark on this debate. A special mention goes to the current and former Children's Commissioner for England for their backing.

Organisations representing parents have been vocal about the need for further action, and I record my thanks to Sue, Rhiannon and the wonderful team at Mumsnet for all their coverage and for the debate they have instigated on the topic. I also thank ParentZone and Parentkind for their contributions to the Bill hearings. I also thank all the other members of the public and professionals who came to the Bill hearing processes; there are too many to mention, but they certainly made an impact on the Members of Parliament who attended.

Finally, I thank the 5Rights Foundation and members of the Bereaved Families for Online Safety group, who I met alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy). They experienced the most devastating consequences of smartphone and social media use. They have done what many would find so difficult to do and have turned personal tragedy into a campaign for urgent change. I want to thank Ellen Roome, Mariano Janin, Lisa Kenevan, Ruth Moss, Lorin LaFave, Amanda and Stuart Stephens, and Esther Ghey for their bravery and for engaging with the development of the Bill.

With the problems so stark and the calls for change so loud, what is being done to respond to those issues around the world? Just this week, the Republican governor of the conservative state of Utah has passed America's first law mandating age verification for app stores, to ensure that children use only age-appropriate apps, when their parents are happy for them to do so. Australia has legislated for an outright ban on social media below the age of 16, which will come into force later this year, and last week Denmark moved to ban mobile phones in schools and after-school clubs. Last year, Norway increased the minimum age limit on social media to 15 by changing the age of consent for data sharing. France has done the same, and has pushed for measures to be taken across the EU. Will it be just British children who are left unprotected against addictive harms of smartphones and social media? We cannot let that happen; we must act.

It is time that we caught up. That is why I am so pleased to be debating this issue today, following months of engagement across Government and beyond, with hundreds of health and education professionals; children's, youth and online safety charities; parents, and young people themselves. I introduced the Bill because of the stark difference between conversations taking place out there in the country and the debates that we have here in the nation's Parliament. It is fair to say that the public are well ahead of politicians on this issue. Today marks progress towards Parliament finally catching up with the mood of the nation.

The Bill has been drafted to secure explicit Government backing. It has been written to achieve change rather than just to highlight the issue. That is why it is narrower than where I started when this campaign began six months ago. I hope that the Minister will confirm in his response that the Government will take forward the measures in the Bill. What does the Bill do? Most importantly, it commits the Government to coming back within a year with a decision on whether to raise the digital age of consent from 13 to 16. Under general data protection regulation, the standard age of consent was set at 16. However, countries can choose to vary it to as low as 13, which is what the UK chose to do at the time. The appropriateness of that decision must be

assessed, given the ways in which social media companies are now using teenagers' data to keep them hooked to their platforms.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that he has done on this issue. When decision makers chose to set the age at 13 rather than 16, what evidence did they use and what detailed work did they do to ensure that the decision was grounded in evidence and good for children?

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. Most countries landed on the age of 13 as a result of a protracted negotiation in the US Senate about data and online safety many years ago. That policy was not based on evidence; it was based on the compromise of a committee in another country. We must base such decisions on evidence, and there was no firm evidence for picking 13 over any other age.

Alarm bells on the question of data and consent are already ringing. Just this week, the Information Commissioner announced an investigation into how TikTok uses the personal information of 13 to 17-year-olds in order to make recommendations to them. Changing the digital age of consent would give parents more control over who accesses their children's data, and it would dumb down the powerful algorithms that feed children addictive content.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the Bill in the way he has and on becoming a Parliamentary Private Secretary. Does he support the Bill going into Committee? I think there is consensus across the House that it should be given its Second Reading. If it is not given its Second Reading, however, it will not go into Committee and we will not be able to discuss in further detail the points that he is making.

Josh MacAlister: The hon. Member is, of course, a connoisseur of private Members' Bills and has been known not to be keen to see many of them make it to Committee. I am sure he will not mind me gently making the point that I am here today, as so many Members are, to make a difference and ensure that the Government take action.

The Bill also commits the Government to instruct the UK chief medical officer to update and reissue guidance for parents and professionals about the impact of excessive screen time and social media use on children. It is nearly six years since that guidance was last issued, and we have seen the positive impact of recent guidance elsewhere, such as in America where the Surgeon General advice has stated more recently:

"social media has not been proved safe"
and that

"Children and adolescents who spend more than 3 hours a day on social media face double the risk of mental health problems including experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety."

That advice led to calls in the US for cigarette packet-style health warnings on social media websites.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for this important Bill and the way in which he is presenting it. This week, in the education centre at Michael Hall school, I met A-level

[Mims Davies]

students who were very concerned about the addictive nature of what they are seeing. They absolutely want to see action. I applaud him for listening to UK Youth, Girlguiding and others who feel exactly the same. They want action now. All power to him—we need to push the Government for change, because a year or three months in childhood is a long time for that addiction to grow and not be challenged.

Josh MacAlister: I completely agree that there is an urgency to this issue, and the strength of feeling out in the country among not just parents but children themselves shows that we should take action.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the national debate he has stimulated about this; we should all be grateful to him for that. I wondered what advice was already available to parents from the national health service, particularly in Scotland. I could find no guidance on screen time on the NHS Scotland website. On the website for my health board, NHS Lothian, I found guidance for parents with the very youngest children. In Glasgow—which is Scotland's second city, I have to stress; it does not even have a castle—the health board offers guidance that dates from 2016. Things have moved on since then, and surely parents deserve to have the very latest guidance when it comes to considering this matter.

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Updated advice from the nations' CMOs is so important because it can cascade through health systems to guide professionals and parents.

Finally, the Bill calls on Government to conduct more research and further develop the evidence and guidance that is so important for future action. Given how rapidly these devices and services are developing, it is vital that parents and carers are given up-to-date advice on the harm their children might be exposed to.

Why has this not been done before? The technology companies that are profiteering off this rewiring of childhood are incredibly effective at casting doubt over any evidence of a link between screen time and negative impacts on children. This is not the first time an industry has fought against a tide of evidence in order to keep peddling their product. In the 1960s, the tobacco industry was lobbying hard against the link between smoking and cancer. In the absence of evidence of a causal link, they cast doubt on the overwhelming correlational evidence available.

In the end, our Government acted on the basis of correlational studies using criteria set by the epidemiologist Sir Austin Bradford Hill. The criteria attempt to help policymakers to make decisions when causal studies do not exist. His criteria included that

“Consistent findings observed by different persons in different places with different samples strengthens the likelihood of an effect.”

For example, the fact that students across the western world began reporting feeling increasingly lonely in school from 2012 is important. Another criterion is that

“Greater exposure should generally lead to greater incidence of the effect”—essentially, the dose-response effect.

Studies of multiple large datasets, including the UK's own millennium cohort study, show that teenagers who are heavy users of social media are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, eating disorders, body dysmorphia and other mental health harms. It could take years for evidence of a causal link, through scientific studies, to be established. In the meantime, our children's mental and physical health degrades, their education continues to be affected, and evidence of a correlation gets stronger and stronger. As lawmakers, we must use tools such as the Bradford Hill tests to make the best possible decisions with what we know now. We must act on excessive screen time today, in the same way that we acted on smoking back then. Like debates that were had on smoking and car seatbelts, it took a process of legislation, rather than one big-bang event. That is why starting with these initial steps today, then following them through with major action soon, will be so important.

Let me address head-on the arguments made against taking action to curb social media and smartphone use by children. As I see it there are five common arguments against action. First is that there is not enough evidence to act. Over the past few months, I and others have had a number of evidence sessions and engagements with experts that have shown that that is plainly untrue. Even so, where should the burden of evidence sit? Should it sit with parents and campaigners who have noticed the damage being done to their children, with children themselves who are calling for more support, or with the companies who are selling them products and services that are designed to be addictive and have completely transformed the nature of their childhood?

When it comes to protecting children from harm, a precautionary approach is surely advised. For almost any other product, companies would have to prove that it was safe before selling it to children, rather than being free to sell that product as they wish, until the evidence of harm becomes so overwhelming that something needs to be done. It is instructive that the US Surgeon General advice states that social media has not yet “been proved safe.”

Second is the argument that this is simply the latest in a line of moral panics. People used to fear that watching too much television would turn their eyes square; in the Victorian era, that reading novels would degrade intellect; or in the 20th century, that playing violent videogames would turn all our children into thugs. But for every example of overblown moral panic, we have many more examples of genuine public health crises that we took too long to address, but eventually were forced to tackle. Research that has come out this morning from More in Common demonstrates that this is not an issue of luddite older generations bemoaning shifting social trends. Concerns about social media and smartphone use are dominant in every generation, and half of generation Z regret the amount of time that they are spending on social media.

The third argument I hear is that the genie is out of the bottle, and it is too late to do anything now. Phones and social media are undoubtedly here to stay, but their harms do not need to be. Regulation can find a way of allowing children to experience the benefits of this technology, without being exposed, relentlessly, to its harms. As introducing seatbelt laws saved thousands of lives from road traffic accidents without killing off the car industry, introducing a virtual seatbelt can protect

children from excessive screentime. Action in other countries, and our experience with the Online Safety Act 2023, early though it is, has shown that tech companies are not beyond the power of Governments.

The fourth argument, which tends to come from big tech, is that proper age verification is too difficult, and age restriction unproven—that the technology does not exist or is imperfect. As companies such as Yoti and many other age verification platforms show, that is no longer the case. I am also a technology optimist. The reason why this technology is not yet pervasive is insufficient demand. Introduce the regulation, and technology will have to catch up—we will see that in Australia later this year.

There are some suggestions that it is not the Government's job to get involved and that this is an issue of parental responsibility. That misses the point that this is a collective action problem. Parents and children alone are not able to establish new, shared rules for something that is addictive at a societal level. The reason why smartphones and social media are causing so much stress and conflict in families is that we are giving parents the unenviable choice of either removing devices and ostracising their children or giving into demands for access and living with the health, sleep and learning consequences.

Additionally, not only are parental controls at device, operating system and app level confusing and opaque, but our own existing data laws give children as young as 13 the power over their data that means that they can opt out of those parental controls in year 8 of secondary school. We disempower parents on a problem that is common across society, then when they ask for help, we say that it is a matter of personal responsibility. I hope that today's debate can bury the argument that responsibility for this problem lies with parents struggling with that impossible challenge.

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): I just thought my hon. Friend might like know that I will not be making any of the arguments that he is arguing I should not argue.

Josh MacAlister: I welcome the Minister's intervention, and I am glad to have boxed off those five.

There are moments when politics falls behind the public mood. The process and traditions of our democratic system make it difficult to keep up with the rapidly evolving world of tech and social media, but this Parliament works best when it is a reflection of the problems and concerns of the people and a Chamber for earnest problem solving and action. Over the last few months, I have been encouraged by the sheer volume of support for this Bill and this debate, which comes from across the country, across the ages and across the House. My firm belief is that unless we as politicians are able to be the disruptors on this issue and solve it, we will be left being disrupted by it. Acting assertively together and sooner will bring benefits for our tech industry and public services, the quality of family life in the UK and, most importantly, the opportunities for our children. For those reasons, I commend this Bill to the House.

10.17 am

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), from the far and beautiful north-west, has made an extremely strong case for the original Bill that

he envisaged bringing before this House. I am afraid that today I will speak not to celebrate progress, but to lament the gutting of what could have been a landmark Bill.

Sadly, this Government, like the last—notwithstanding the Online Safety Act 2023—have dithered, diluted and capitulated, and I am afraid that what remains is a hollowed-out gesture and an opportunity missed. As the hon. Gentleman said, the evidence is strong, the damage is profound and the public support is overwhelming. Documentary after documentary details the significant damage being done to our young people on a daily basis. Parent after parent in millions of homes across the land is screaming for help and assistance from the Government. As the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, we are allowing smoking for the brain in our youngest children, with the long-term impact that that will have. I am afraid to say that in the face of all that overwhelming evidence and momentum, the hon. Gentleman has been done over in bringing forward this Bill. When we look at what we are presented with, as I said, we have nothing more than a gesture.

The first point is that the CMO should bring forward guidance. As the hon. Gentleman surely knows, there is already plenty of guidance out there for parents—the NSPCC has online guidance, as does Internet Matters. Lots of organisations, including schools themselves, are issuing guidance for parents. In truth, the CMO producing guidance within 12 months will be no more effective than those organisations have been, and possibly less. As the hon. Gentleman himself pointed out, we are dealing with a collective action issue. An organisation can issue guidance, and a small percentage of parents may pick up that guidance and observe it, but if the percentage is below 20%, so strong is the peer pressure and so addictive is what we are dealing with that those parents end up in screaming matches with their teenage children on a daily basis.

Dr Arthur: By explaining that there are so many fragmented and—no doubt—contradictory sources of information, surely the right hon. Gentleman is making the argument for there to be a single source of advice to parents right across the United Kingdom? Surely this Bill will create an authoritative set of guidance for parents that they can share with their children.

Kit Malthouse: I am not convinced that the guidance created by this Bill will be any more authoritative than that created by the NSPCC or by Internet Matters. The point I was making was not necessarily that the guidance is going to be pivotal, but that we need to get to a critical mass of observance before guidance is likely to have any impact. The original Bill was likely to do that, not least through the ban in schools, which created a nucleus of clear space for children that could be translated into homes. Many Members may have heard on the BBC this morning a short piece on the Fulham boys school, which has an absolute ban on even bringing a smartphone to school. That ban during the school period has resulted in the periods before and after school also being phone-free, and therefore much more social and beneficial to those pupils.

Chris Bryant: I urge the right hon. Gentleman to be slightly less sceptical about the value of CMO advice. As he knows, I have campaigned for many years on

[Chris Bryant]

acquired brain injury, particularly in relation to concussion or sub-concussive events in sport. It was a very significant change when, under the previous Administration, the British Government brought forward specific advice in relation to concussion in sport. That has changed practices in lots of sports around the country, and I am hopeful that authoritative advice of this kind could make a significant difference.

Kit Malthouse: I would be willing to accept the hon. Gentleman's encouragement if this were advice to schools, but it is not; it is advice to parents and carers. If there were going to be authoritative advice for schools, as well as other organisations that have charge of children—scout troops, children's clubs, and other publicly funded organisations that look after children—I would have said, "Possibly," even though there is to be a 12-month delay before the CMO tells us stuff we already know, as the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington pointed out.

The second step is for the Government to publish a plan for research within 12 months. That is not the conclusion of research, and there is no time limit—just a plan, a vague aspiration that we should have a plan, with no commencement, no sense of budget and no idea of when it might come. I am sorry to say that the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington has been sold a cosmetic pup.

The third and final point is that the Government have to publish this "assessment"—whatever that may be—which, as far as I can see, is fundamentally to tell us something we already know, and which the hon. Gentleman has illustrated extremely vividly. We should all be furious about the delay and prevarication that is being injected into what could have been a huge step forward for parents and children.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am one of the people who is very angry about this, and my right hon. Friend is a co-sponsor of this Bill, so his disappointment must be even greater. However, does he agree that one way forward would be for this Bill, with its present inadequate drafting, to get its Second Reading and go into Committee? The people's representatives in Committee would then be able to restore the Bill into something closer to what they expected.

Kit Malthouse: I was going to come on to that later, but my hon. Friend is completely right.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I support very much what the right hon. Gentleman is saying about the need for urgent action. What conversations were had before 4 July last year about tightening up legislation around smartphones, because this problem did not start on the day of the general election, but was there when his party was in government?

Kit Malthouse: As I said at the start of my speech, I lament the dithering and delay by the previous Government, too. There were attempts by Back Benchers—and I was one for the last two years of the Government—to change the Online Safety Bill to take exactly these sort of measures. That was rebuffed by Ministers at that stage, and I regret that completely. To me, this is a national, if not international, emergency, about which we are being

far too passive and complacent. I am not necessarily making a political point about this; it is about the weight of Government and, frankly, the weight and influence of big tech against the health and welfare of our children. That applies to Governments of all stripes in all countries across the world.

It is not just we in this Chamber who should be furious. There are plenty of people out there in the country who should be furious, because two key things were promised in the original Bill. The first was an absolute school ban. All Members will know that when they go to visit schools, one of the features coming through strongly when we talk to headteachers is the increase in parental aggression towards schools. The source of conflict at the school gate is around all sorts of issues, not least the use of phones in schools. By advocating a complete blanket ban on phones in schools, we would be removing at one stroke a source of conflict between parent and teacher, as well as at the same time creating completely clear space for those kids to concentrate on their education. In school upon school across the country, they are bringing in their own policies, often in the teeth of opposition, whether parental or from children. Their life is made immeasurably more difficult by not having an absolute ban.

The second thing that was promised and the second reason why we should be furious was the raising of the digital age of consent. By not including that in the Bill, we are consenting to those tech companies—as they have admitted in meetings in the run-up to this Bill—using children's data to addict them to their services. We know that happens, and we see it happening. Anybody who has a teenage child and has tried desperately to move them off from cradling this precious phone at the dinner table or even from watching TV at the same time will see how they cannot get away from their phone and will realise the addictive nature. The fact that neither of those two steps is now in the Bill is, I am afraid, deeply lamentable.

It feels to me as though the Government have capitulated to big tech. I had a look online to see—I am not casting aspersions—but it would be helpful if the Minister could tell us in his remarks what meetings he had with big tech companies in the run-up to this Bill, and whether he has consulted or spoken to them. [Interruption.] The Minister is indicating zero, and that is useful to know, but I cannot then understand why the Government have pressured the new Member for Whitehaven and Workington to produce what is, frankly, a cosmetic pup, betraying our children and capitulating to big tech. I am afraid that this Bill is a shell of what it could have been, and as a result is yet another missed opportunity to improve the lives of our young people.

10.28 am

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for introducing this Bill and for his work to advance the debate on the need for action to halt the harms caused by mobile phones and screen time to our children and young people.

Less than a year ago, in the previous Parliament, the Education Committee published a report on the impact of screen time on education and wellbeing. Based on a careful examination of the evidence, the Committee concluded that

“the harms of screen time and social media use significantly outweigh the benefits for young children, whereas limited use of screens and genuinely educational uses of digital technology can have benefits for older children.”

It is worth restating the evidence that the Committee looked at. We saw a 52% increase in children’s screen time between 2020 and 2022, and it has continued to rise since that time. Twenty-five per cent of children and young people use their phones in a way that is consistent with behavioural addiction—a staggering statistic. One in five children aged between three and four has their own mobile phone. One in four children has their own phone by the age of eight, and almost all 12-year-olds have their own mobile phone. This is a very rapid change in behaviour, which has happened without any corresponding policy or regulatory framework.

There is substantial evidence of the negative effects of the rapid increase in the use of smartphones by children. Research by the Children’s Commissioner found that 79% of children had encountered violent pornography online by the age of 18. Girls and young women are particularly affected by the pressure to conform with the unrealistic body images that they see on social media. It is not only girls and young women; eating disorders and body dysmorphia are also rising rapidly in boys and young men.

Eighty-one per cent of girls aged seven to 21 have experienced some form of threatening or upsetting behaviour online. Mobile phone use is fuelling a rapid increase in sexual crimes committed against children online—up 400% since 2013. One in five children aged 10 to 15 has experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour online, and three quarters of them say that this has happened either at school or during school time.

There are impacts on learning at home and in the classroom, too. It can take up to 20 minutes for pupils to refocus on what they were learning after engaging in non-academic activity on their phone. Children have worse working memory, processing speeds, attention levels, language skills and executive function. The sheer amount of time spent looking at screens is also contributing to our children becoming more sedentary and less active.

As with all harms affecting children, it is those with the greatest vulnerability who suffer the most. Children in care, care leavers, young carers, children living in poverty and children with additional needs are the most susceptible to online harms. Vulnerable children are also at risk of criminal exploitation when using their screens. Social media and online gaming have been described by those leading the work to tackle county lines exploitation as the foundation of county lines recruitment.

The crisis in the mental health and wellbeing of our children and young people is well documented. We are raising a generation of children and young people who are struggling with anxiety, depression, body image issues and eating disorders.

Every generation of parents has to help their children navigate a set of challenges that they did not have to face themselves. Screen time and social media are surely the parenting challenges of our generation. We have ample evidence of the harms that are being done. We also understand much more than previous generations about children’s brain development and the way that

the vital building blocks of their brains develop rapidly during childhood, and we know that screen time is quite literally rewiring young brains.

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady’s speech is fascinating. What she is saying is reflected by correspondence in my inbox from parents saying, “We need help,” and from youngsters saying, “We know our concentration levels at school are affected. We know it’s an addiction.” This issue is uniting families in that way, and I hope that the hon. Lady, who chairs the Education Committee, can push the Government, on behalf of both parents and children, for a change in outcome.

Helen Hayes: The Education Committee will certainly continue to take this issue extremely seriously and to monitor what happens, and I will say a little about that in a moment.

We know that screen time is quite literally rewiring young brains, resulting in lower cognitive abilities and affecting language acquisition, critical thinking, social skills and attention span.

When the Government have evidence of harm, they have a duty to act. The point of legislation in this case is its power to change societal norms in a way that will make a difference to parents and professionals who are currently struggling to limit the harms of screen time, but lack the back-up to do so. There are many comparable examples, with smoking and seatbelts being the most obvious, in which the evidence of harm became clear but the debate raged for many years, with counter-arguments against legislation.

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Lady says, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) has done an enormous amount of work, and it is obviously desirable for the Government to act in the face of evidence. Does she think that the Bill, as negotiated with the Government, constitutes action?

Helen Hayes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for helping me out at a difficult moment. I have now found the correct place in my speech, and I will tell him what I believe should happen next.

The debate about both smoking and seatbelts raged for years, with much controversy at the time. Some were demanding higher and higher levels of proof, while others argued that the matter could be dealt with simply through guidance and through individuals’ choosing to change their behaviour.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady recognise that, unlike the indoor smoking ban in particular, the regulation of mobile technology and social media is very much not a one-off event? When the Bill that was to become the Online Safety Act was published, it was genuinely world-leading in many respects, but, as the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) pointed out, many countries have now introduced measures that go further. Should we not be taking action now and then continuing to develop it, rather than just introducing a series of reviews?

Helen Hayes: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me for a moment, I will come to some of the points that I think he wanted to emphasise. In the end, in both those cases—seatbelts and smoking—legislation had

[Helen Hayes]

the effect of changing behaviour and changing societal norms, and in both cases, decades on from the introduction of legislation, it is hard to imagine that the regulation was ever controversial.

Last year, the Select Committee recommended action across Departments to protect children from addiction, online harms and the mental health impacts of excessive use of smartphones. It supported a ban on mobile phones in schools and recommended a formal monitoring mechanism for a ban introduced through guidance, potentially leading to a ban in legislation. It recommended guidance for parents, whom it found to be lacking in confidence when it came to knowing exactly how to tackle this issue affecting children and young people, and recommended that the guidance should include—particularly for parents of babies and very young children—an emphasis on the importance of face-to-face interactions with their children, and guidance on the impact of screen use by parents while caring for very young children. That is an aspect that we do not debate enough in this place. The Select Committee supported an increase to 16 as the age of digital consent and recommended, among other developments, the promotion of a children's class of phone that can be used for parental contact and for GPS locations, but not for internet access.

I share the worry expressed by many Members that the Government are not acting with the urgency that is required in the face of the evidence they already have. The Bill will deliver, even in the form in which it has been presented today, some positive interventions that will make a difference, but I fear that the Government are doing too little too slowly. Parents want strong legislation, schools want strong legislation, and strong legislation will help to change societal norms in the way that is needed to protect children and young people and to stop the harms.

The Education Committee will take a close interest in what happens from now on—the impact of the measures that the Government are introducing—but I urge the Government to get on quickly with the review and the guidance to which they will commit themselves today, and to go further and establish, with urgency and speed, a framework in law that can help parents, schools and professionals working with children to deal with a challenge that we all need to get to grips with.

10.39 am

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I am pleased to speak in support of the Bill. I must start by declaring an interest: I am a mother of three children who enjoy nothing more than staring at their screens day in, day out—if they could, they would be on them 24/7. No longer are our children clamouring to go out and play or to see their friends; instead, they want to do everything through a screen. They want to watch endless YouTube videos. I never realised that the unpacking of a toy or slime making could hold such interest. It seems that they take their joy in watching others do things online—even, rather bizarrely, playing computer games—instead of actually doing them in the real world.

I would be a hypocrite if I did not call out my own behaviour on this front. I, too, am addicted to my phone. Yes, I need it for this job, so I can justify some of my

use, but I often find myself endlessly doomscrolling, and I am too embarrassed to tell the House how many hours I spend staring at it every week. At least my addiction started when I was a fully developed adult, after a childhood of play and socialisation when I learned much-needed life skills. This generation of children is not so lucky.

The huge amount of time spent online is incredibly damaging in so many ways. It is no coincidence that we see a mental health crisis in our young people at the same time as mass adoption of smartphones and access to social media. Some may underplay the importance of social media and screens in the challenges we face as a society, and indeed it can be difficult to conclusively prove the role of one particular factor in the effects we are seeing, but I suggest that when it comes to our children, we should always err on the side of caution and protect them from potentially harmful influences. In a recent survey, social media and excessive screen time was ranked as the top issue affecting children's mental wellbeing. To put that in context, it was ranked higher than alcohol and bullying.

Another significant risk to mental health is exposure to harmful online content. I am incredibly concerned about that, especially given the proliferation of extreme pornography, harmful content and unrealistic body images. If children spend all their time in this fantasy world that is completely disjointed from reality, of course it will change how they view people, relationships and the world in general. That is supported by Ofcom's 2024 research, which showed that older teens are finding it harder to distinguish the real from the fake online. The more mundane things in life that do not trigger a dopamine hit seem an even less appealing way to spend time to a child jacked up on likes and shares. Children's attention spans are getting shorter, and they have an ever-increasing need for higher levels of stimulation. Is it any wonder that our children seem less interested in reading a book or baking a cake nowadays?

The evidence from Health Professionals for Safer Screens shows that children who routinely spend extended periods on their smartphones have poorer eyesight, inhibited speech and language development, interrupted sleep, and rising rates of anxiety. We are allowing our children to become addicts. Social media is designed with exactly that in mind. It is meant to be addictive and compelling. It wants users to stay online for prolonged periods and to keep engaging with content. Those of us who use it ourselves know this all to be true, so how on earth do we expect our children to manage and moderate appropriately?

Ofcom's 2024 research showed that the overall use of social media sites or apps among five to seven-year-olds had increased year on year. Online gaming among that group had also increased significantly, as had the watching of livestreamed content. Under current data protection law, the age at which children can access information society services—ISS—is 13. ISS includes most social media platforms and content streaming services. It is important to acknowledge that the Online Safety Act 2023 introduced protections for children by ensuring that online platforms will have to remove illegal content such as child sexual abuse material, prevent children from accessing harmful content—for example, that encouraging suicide, self-harm or bullying—and introduce age-checking measures to

restrict access to pornographic material. Those are all very welcome improvements, but they need to be put in place at pace and be effectively enforced.

I commend the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for all his work on this important topic. I will do all I can to support him in making the online world safer for our children. The Bill is an important precursor to the myriad changes needed in this area, and I know that many parents will support him in calling for the digital age of consent to be looked at again. While the Bill does not call for the age limit to be raised to 16, it does call for the UK's chief medical officer to look at this important issue in detail and, ultimately, issue a statement on whether it should be raised.

Some 75% of Brits now back raising the minimum age from 13 to 16, as per a recent survey by More in Common, for all the reasons that have been raised today, and 129,000 people signed an e-petition calling for social media companies to be banned from letting children under 16 create social media accounts. It is past time for tech companies—and Members of this House—to take responsibility for keeping our children and young people safe.

I am not normally in favour of blanket bans, and I often talk about the importance of parents and carers taking responsibility for their children. However, in this instance, I deviate a little. As a parent who is wrangling with this exact issue myself, I know how difficult it is to tell a child that they cannot do something that every single other child in their class is doing. If their group of friends interacts only online, what are the consequences for my child if I prohibit them from joining in? Isolation? Loneliness? Loss of self-esteem? There are very real costs that should not be underestimated, which is why the state needs to step in. Members will not often hear me say this, but the state needs to step in and remove the option for all, helping parents across the country who want the best for their children without the downsides.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend vividly illustrates the problem with this kind of collective action and peer pressure. Has she reflected on the fact that it is not just the addictive nature of the application that is pulling in our kids, but the fact that they are free, and therefore everybody is encouraged to get them? We then get 100% coverage, and it is very hard to deny them to our child, if they will be the only child without.

Rebecca Paul: I concur with everything my right hon. Friend says. It is completely accessible to all our children, so it is very hard for one child to be kept separate from it. That is why it is important that we address it.

However, increasing the digital age of consent is just the first step—we have so much more to do. We also need to ban smartphones in schools for children under the age of 16. On a typical workday, 42% of older teenagers say their smartphone is distracting them from schoolwork, and half say that social media has distracted them enough to impact their grades. Notably, only 11% of schools are genuinely smartphone free, and children at these schools get GCSE results one to two grades higher, so there is clearly a big upside to banning smartphones in schools. I urge the Government to seriously consider implementing this much needed restriction, which would be a game changer, protecting children and improving

educational outcomes in one fell swoop. Our schools need this ban in statute, not just in guidance, in order to be able to effectively police and enforce it. I pay tribute to Smartphone Free Childhood for all its work to raise awareness on this important issue.

In closing, I hope that Members will support the Bill today, which would move us forward in our mission to protect our children from an increasingly insidious online realm that they are simply not equipped to navigate. I also hope that this is just the beginning, and that in moving forward we will see the digital age of consent raised to 16 and a ban on smartphones in school. The value of those two changes alone would be huge for our society, and would safeguard the wellbeing of this and future generations of children. I cannot think of anything more important.

10.48 am

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I come to this debate as somebody who bought their first mobile phone 30 years ago, at the age of 23—I was hoping Members would look more surprised at that. *[Laughter.]*

Chris Bryant: Division!

Mr Quigley: I thank the Minister for that. I remember clearly the joy of phoning the landline from bed and asking my housemates to bring me a cup of tea, the excitement of sending and receiving my first text message and the infantile joy of playing Snake while waiting for a train. No one could have predicted where we would be by this point.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for introducing the Bill, which is an essential step forward for online safety. It demonstrates his genuine commitment to addressing this critical issue and raises awareness in this place and across the country of the pressing need for a legally recognised age of internet adulthood to correspond with the very adult content available online. For too long, tech bosses have moved forward unchecked while our children have borne the consequences of algorithms that, at best, are designed to create a generation of screen addicts and, at worst, expose young people to harmful and disturbing content.

Fifteen years ago, many tech leaders claimed that the rising mental health crisis among children and young people was unrelated to screen use. However, emerging data refutes that. A study from King's College London revealed that nearly 25%—one in four, for those who still use old money—of children and young people engage with their smartphones in a manner consistent with behavioural addiction. Indeed, we are not dealing with the same passive tech bosses who were satisfied in just promoting that addictive quality to sell their platforms to children. Even in the past year, the digital landscape has shifted so much that some tech bosses are actively refusing to remove violent material and eating disorder content from their platforms, under the guise that doing so would infringe those individuals' free speech. As we all know, there is a considerable disparity between the two, which is why I strongly support raising the age of digital adulthood.

This issue is particularly urgent in my constituency of the Isle of Wight West, where young people face some of the highest rates of under-18 mental health and

[Mr Quigley]

self-harm-related hospital admissions in the south-east—they are also among the highest in the country. Accessing the necessary support is made even more difficult by the island's isolation. The high cost and limited availability of ferry travel—hon. Members were waiting for me to say that—creates significant barriers, leaving many young people struggling without the help they need. Already facing the pressures of an increasingly connected world, they are further disadvantaged by transport restrictions that make seeking specialist care on the mainland far more challenging.

Tech companies have proved time and again that they see kids as nothing more than pound signs. The more time that platforms can keep children glued to their screens, the more money they make, and they achieve that by maliciously harvesting their data and using it to push content designed to keep them hooked, prioritising what is most addictive over what is safest. By prohibiting tech companies from collecting data from under-16s, the Bill would aim at the heart of the exploitative algorithms designed to keep young users online for longer. It would ensure that children are no longer targeted with addictive content designed to prioritise profit over their wellbeing. I therefore support the Bill.

10.52 am

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) on bringing his private Member's Bill to the House. I am proud to be one of its sponsors. It has clearly been a complicated journey to get to this point, and the Bill may not resemble quite what he originally had in mind, but the sheer fact of introducing the Bill has lit up a national conversation about the impact of smartphone use and social media on our children. The conversation was growing ever louder, but it has now spilled over passionately into the inboxes of nearly every Member of the House.

The Bill may not be as ambitious as some would like, and the wheels may turn slowly in this place—far slower than the lightning pace of modern tech—but I assure every one of my constituents in South Devon who wrote to me about the Bill and who campaign loudly on this topic that their voices have been heard. Within the bounds of our political system, we as MPs, parents and grandparents not only have heard them, but share their concerns. I hope that this is just the first step on a journey that will be far-reaching and fairly swift.

I know that I am not alone in being somewhat disappointed that the Bill is but a shadow of its former self and that the Government are so timid in what they are willing to do to try to save our children and young people from something that is clearly causing them considerable harm. That is why the Liberal Democrats have decided to pick up the baton and table an amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill, calling on the Government to bring UK data law into line with many other European countries by raising to 16 the minimum age that a user must be before an internet company can collect, process and store their data without parental consent.

I look forward to seeing the guidance from the UK chief medical officer on the impact of smartphones and social media on children. Six years is a long time in the

tech world and we know that much has changed since the guidance was last written in 2019. I also welcome funding for more research into the impacts of social media and phone use. I expect the new research will not differ too much from what has already been written, following studies from various developed countries, including the UK, Japan, Canada and Australia: that over the past 10 years, a period in which smartphone usage has exploded, the number of mental health admissions to hospital in teenagers has risen by 65%; that admissions for eating disorders among girls aged 11 to 15 have gone up by a staggering 638%; that childhood myopia is up 50%; that attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnoses are up 56%; and that more and more children are struggling with difficult speech and language challenges. No, we cannot say for sure that there is a direct causal link, but we can see the trendlines in the graphs. We know they started rising before the pandemic was ever heard of, and we know it is not just the UK that is experiencing such troubling developments.

We do a lot to protect our children in this country, and that is down to a mixture of practice, custom and legislation. We generally do not let our children smoke or drink, and we certainly do not let them drive cars. We put babies in ever more sophisticated car seats, and we know that it is not a good idea to put fizzy drinks in babies' bottles. Yet a recent Ofcom report said: 100% of 17-years-olds have a mobile phone; 28% of five to seven-year-olds have one; and, most worrying still, 17% of three to four-year-olds have one. Yet medical professionals from all disciplines tell us of the harm children are experiencing from long hours spent glued to a screen.

As a proud co-sponsor of the Bill, I too have heard from health professionals who have given evidence to us on mental health, obesity, eyesight and more. We heard heart-rending stories from parents whose children had been subject to the most horrific online abuse and from some who have, unbearably, lost their precious children as a result of harms in the digital world. While their stories were extreme and deeply troubling, somehow, incredibly, it did not even seem that shocking that the online world had wrought such devastating harm to real lives.

What is happening online is clearly impacting the everyday lives of children and teenagers, and we, as responsible adults and legislators, have a duty to try and mitigate those harms. I am thinking particularly of the horrible, dangerous misogyny of the likes of Andrew Tate, which is being lapped up by boys who are under his influence—boys who then spread his misogynistic hate speech. I am thinking of the violent pornography which is being accessed and viewed by children as young as nine or 10; pornography that is not just naked pictures like you would find in an old-fashioned top-shelf magazine, I'm told—

Chris Bryant: You're not old enough.

Caroline Voaden: Thank you.

We know that violent pornography that celebrates assault and rape is leading to an increase in harmful practices, such as strangulation, that it warps the way young people view sexual relationships, and that it is directly impacting on health and wellbeing, particularly of young women, across the country.

Yesterday, this Chamber heard some brilliant and impassioned speeches from many women hon. Members, timed to coincide with International Women's Day tomorrow. And on a day that celebrates women, we think about girls too. I do not want our girls to think they have to share nude photos to be liked, or to worry themselves sick about the shape of their body to the point that they stop eating.

We have heard about the rise in the number of children who have speech and language challenges. It is known that sticking a baby in front of an iPad will not help it learn to communicate. Babies need interaction with human faces and voices to learn. We heard about how children's eyesight is worsening because they spend so many hours looking at a closely held screen. We all know about the incessant rise in poor mental health, anxiety and depression among teenagers. Parents across my constituency of South Devon are desperate to protect their children, but overwhelmed by the digital world and the power it has over young people. They want us to support them with legislation, so that they can push back against the might of the tech giants. We must not let the tech giants lobby us in the way that tobacco companies did so successfully for decades.

Children are addicted to screens because of wicked algorithms that lure them in and keep them hooked; struggling with their body image because they do not look like the influencers they are watching; depressed at their lives because they do not resemble the doctored, airbrushed, Instagram image of perfection they see on their screens; and brainwashed by influencers who spew toxic messages through their pages. They know this, but they find it hard to counteract it, and we know that the brightest brains in the tech world have designed social media apps to do exactly that. One former Facebook employee said:

"You have a business model designed to engage you and get you to basically suck as much time out of your life as possible and then selling that attention to advertisers."

We must unlock the potential of technology by designing it with children and young people in mind. Our amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill would not ban children under 16 from social media; instead, and more importantly, online services would need to change how they deal with children's data and create a less addictive, more child-friendly online environment. Our amendment calls on the Government to prioritise robust standards for digital technology, so that rights and privacy are upheld by design and default.

In Devon, 2,591 parents have signed the pact saying that they will not buy their child a smartphone, yet we know that tech use is one of the biggest causes of friction in families, and parents need our support to back that choice. It is a public health matter. The Liberal Democrats are open to the idea of a legal ban on smartphone use in schools, enshrining existing guidance into law. We hope the Government will look seriously at that. This measure should not be about restricting freedoms; it should be about creating an environment conducive to learning and free from distractions. We also understand the need for discretion, and exceptions must be made for young carers or children who use smartphones to monitor health conditions, ensuring fairness and practicality.

Parents must be empowered to protect their children online, including through digital literacy education, and advice and support for parents on best practice is key. I also want to see a public health programme similar to those we have seen on seatbelts and smoking over the years, so that no parent can be left unaware of the potential harms of letting small children become addicted to a device that will cause so much harm as they grow.

11.1 am

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for the huge amount of work that he has put into this legislation. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of the Bill, in support of his tireless efforts in this area, his leadership and his lifelong commitment to safeguarding children from harm.

Over the past six months, the Bill has been a lightning rod for the conversation about children's access to smartphones and social media. The Bill does not mark the end of that conversation; rather, it marks the start of a national debate on what childhood in the online age should look like. I am glad that the Government have positively engaged with the Bill and that, through this legislation, we can now see a path towards ensuring that we give children the best possible, and crucially the least harmful, start in life.

Between 2017 and 2021, there was a 60% increase in the number of children with a probable mental health condition, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders and body dysmorphia. The impact was particularly acute for young women, as many have mentioned. Screen time also has links to poor physical health outcomes, such as childhood obesity. I was particularly concerned to learn, in one of the hearings on my hon. Friend's Bill, about data linking screen use to shortsightedness and worse eye health. A report from the College of Optometrists in 2023 found that cases of myopia among children aged five to 16 have risen by 12% over the last five years in the UK.

Heavy smartphone use also impacts sleep patterns and the ability to fall and stay asleep—as many of us will know. One study found that children are 79% less likely to get the recommended eight hours of sleep if they use their phones. That clearly has an effect on their attainment and life outcomes. Indeed, four in 10 teenagers admit that their smartphone is distracting them from schoolwork.

Clause 1 requires the UK chief medical officer to publish advice for parents and carers on the use of smart phones and social media by children, which we welcome. This is particularly key because the issue of young people's smartphones and social media requires a public health focus, as has been argued. We know that almost all children have a smartphone by the age of 15 and that, as my hon. Friend said, it is vulnerable children who are spending significantly longer on their phones. It is our duty in this place to protect children, who are vulnerable, and the most vulnerable children.

For almost a quarter of children, smartphone use has become a behavioural addiction, and that is not accidental. Tech companies have created products without the input of child development experts, and we know this because they told us that they did not have any child development experts on their product boards when they came to a

[*Jess Asato*]

session organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington. These algorithms seek to get young people hooked before they can even properly comprehend it, and like a drug, they keep coming back for more.

Children have sadly lost a love of reading, with levels at their lowest in the UK among our children, and of the outdoors. As Jonathan Haidt argues in his book “The Anxious Generation”, childhood has ceased to be play-based and has become phone-based. This simultaneous over-protectiveness offline and under-protectiveness online has created a perfect storm for inhibiting children’s development. For example, we are witnessing a marked increase in referrals for delayed speech and language abilities. There are now pram adaptations for babies and toddlers to watch smartphones, rather than learning from the stimulus of the real world around them. I hope that the chief medical officer’s remit extends to working with early childhood and speech and language organisations to issue guidance for parents in the very early years.

The online world that we are sending our children out into is not a world we would send them out into in real life, and yet this is their real life. Children as young as seven are stumbling across and are currently freely able to access pornographic content online. The Children’s Commissioner found that one key area where children access pornography is, perhaps surprisingly, the social media platform X. Eight in 10 children have encountered violent pornography online by the age of 18, and that is having serious consequences, desensitising young boys and girls and warping their perceptions of healthy sex and relationships.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a very important point. In this debate, we are focusing a lot on children, but the reality is that these scars will endure for the rest of their lives. This access to pornography will scar their relationships and their ability to form relationships for the rest of their lives, which is another reason why the Bill is so very important.

Jess Asato: I am incredibly grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. That is very true. We have seen a huge 40% increase in the use of strangulation of women in sexual relationships, and there is much to suggest that this is related to more and more young people watching strangulation in pornography online. That is another subject, but I would definitely like to see that go as well.

It is really important that the commencement of age verification in the Online Safety Act, which was introduced by the previous Government and supported by those on the Labour Front Bench at the time, must be upheld and to the most robust standards. I look forward to the Minister saying that that is exactly what the Government will do.

Chris Bryant: That is exactly what the Government will do.

Jess Asato: I am grateful to the Minister.

Social media is fuelling the rise of extremist misogyny online and normalising harassment and violence against women and girls in real life. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting) so bravely

recounted in this place yesterday, we are not immune to that in this place. Some 90% of girls say they have been sent an explicit picture or video. The New Britain Project, More in Common and the National Education Union recently ran a focus group in my constituency with parents about their children’s access to smartphones. In the group, a mother spoke of how her daughter was so regularly sent dick pics that, by the age of 15, she was used to drawing a little sombrero on the picture, sending it back and blocking the sender. The mother said:

“No child that age should be seeing male penises. It is quite traumatic, isn’t it, for a kid to be witnessing that kind of thing? But it is everywhere.”

Children should not be forced to find a way to cope—with funny pictures—because something incessantly traumatises them. We would not accept our children being flashed in the streets, so why is it different online? Why do we not expect the tech companies to act? Their products allow this to happen to our children all day, every day, yet we still do not have any movement from them.

We know that the problem is only getting worse, particularly with the use of AI and the rise of nude deepfakes. Thankfully, the Government are now taking strong action on deepfakes, but I urge them to go further by considering age verification for app stores, so that our young people know that when they access app stores, the content is right for their age and level of development.

Online sexual crimes committed against children have risen by 400% since 2013. A generation is growing up chronically online, raised by the internet, and we cannot stand idly by in the name of freedom or freedom of speech. There is no freedom in addiction, in being harmed or in children being underdeveloped because they have not experienced socialisation, the great outdoors, the pleasure of books, or simply not being harmed by being sent horrible things that they should not have to see.

Children in the online world are taught to look up to role models with unhealthy opinions, unrealistic beauty standards and conspicuous wealth beyond their dreams. Children are being marketed to and sold to, all day, every day. When they cannot afford or look like what they see, they feel worthless. Children are cyber-bullied. They are exposed to content that encourages self-harm and competitive anorexia, and romanticises suicide. That has already caused untold harm for parents who have seen their children take their own lives after engaging with such material. Our children are becoming infected by an epidemic of loneliness.

At some point, we in this place have to say, “Enough is enough.” As a parent of young children, I know that parents cannot and should not be expected to do this alone; we need a decisive legal and cultural shift that reclaims childhood for the real world. Every month there is a “How to detox from social media” article about taking ourselves away from toxic social media—just like how to detox after Christmas. We read that content as adults, because we also struggle to stop looking at social media, so why do we expect our children to exercise self-control that we ourselves do not have?

The UK must follow countries such as Australia by raising the age of online consent from 13 to 16. Some 55% of Gen Z and 86% of parents in the UK support that idea, and 130,000 people recently signed a petition on the UK Parliament website to that effect. I also believe that we need to create a new watershed of social

norms by banning smartphones at school. Too many of the headteachers I speak to who are doing the right thing by banning smartphones in their schools tell me that they get complaints from students and parents who see that other schools do things differently. It makes it harder for parents to enforce rules and norms in their own homes when they cannot point to principles that the whole country adheres to.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Anas Sarwar, the leader of the Scottish Labour party, on announcing two weeks ago that he would ban mobile phones in schools across Scotland?

Jess Asato: Of course I join my hon. Friend in those remarks.

Parents and future generations will not forgive us if we do not act swiftly. In the Government's assessment under clause 3, I hope that we will finally see a recognition that the status quo is not working for children or parents and that radical action is needed. Only then can we work to ensure that children can grow up and develop without trauma, without harm and without being addicted to being harmed and traumatised. This Bill gets us closer to that, and I am happy to support it.

11.15 am

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Our children's use of phones and social media give us many things to worry about, but broadly speaking they are grouped into three categories.

The first is about content, going from pornography and violence and the insidious effects of curated lives, influencers and celebs on our children and their sense of self-worth, their body image and so on through to dodgy news and views propagated across the internet not by worth, let alone veracity, but by engagement and likes. All of those things have vortexes that children can get sucked deeper and deeper into.

The second is about contact. Contact includes, in the worst cases, child abuse and the generation of child sexual abuse material, and goes through to, at a lower level, contact that can be from other children, such as what we call in this House cyber-bullying, although no child ever uses that phrase; they just talk about people being very mean to each other online.

The third is about the sheer amount of children's time that gets sucked into these activities. It is the compounding factor, because it is the thing that makes the other two things, content and contact, worse and more risky. It also has an effect on children's sleep, on their concentration and even on their physical development, and it crowds out the other things that we want children to be doing and that children themselves want to be doing, when they do actually do them. If we ever do get a child away from their phone for a full weekend, they talk about how wonderful the experience was with their friends.

The Online Safety Act 2023 did some good things on content and on contact. There was more to do, but it made some good progress. We have a lot more to do, in particular on the topic of time and the addictiveness of social media, and that is where I think the work of the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) has been incredibly valuable. I commend

him on all his work in the lead up to this point and his use of convening power to bring together so many individuals and organisations. Those conversations, some of which I had the opportunity to attend, covered a huge range. Obviously the Bill we have in front of us today is, shall we say, somewhat thinner than the Bill envisaged.

Kit Malthouse: I also attended events that the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington pulled together. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the strong characteristic that came out of all of them was deep and profound anger among parents about what has been allowed to develop?

Damian Hinds: I think that is right. The other thing I was struck by in some of the sessions was the great unity of views. Whether it was trade unions, charities, parent groups, doctors or parents, there was a great commonality of view about what needed to be done.

I understand what happens sometimes with private Members' Bills and the need to make progress and to have Government support, but I say to the Government that this is a huge missed opportunity. If the Minister looks behind him, he will see all his colleagues who have rearranged their Fridays and rearranged their surgeries and all their appointments because they believe in this subject. He should heed the list that his hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington read out of all the organisations that came together in support of action in this area. It is so worth doing, and we have made good progress with the Online Safety Act, but there is further to go.

There are things we can do with a private Member's Bill that it is harder sometimes to do with Government legislation, because of the party political controversies that come in. This is a missed opportunity, because this may well be the only private Member's Bill with a good chance of success in this area, being at the top of the ballot, in this entire Parliament.

The Bill as drafted is unlikely to require this House to divide, because there is not much in it that anyone could disagree on. I will, if I may, focus my comments on the things that the Bill envisages, such as the CMO's advice for parents on the use of smartphones and social media, and the plan for research that the Secretary of State will prepare on the effect of the use of social media on children and the appropriateness and effectiveness of the so-called digital age of consent. I will say one very simple thing to the Minister about that research: the evidence is not perfect today; it will not be perfect in one year; it will never, ever be perfect. If we hang around waiting for perfect evidence, we will never act in the way that we should. Why is it not perfect? Because this is a phenomenon that has happened across the entire world at the same time. There is no control group.

Given that this is such a huge topic, the studies that there are, which try to narrow it down to something manageable, tend to end up looking at either Facebook or Twitter, neither of which is particularly relevant for teenagers. When we have proxy studies, they are generally inadequate. For phone use in schools, studies tend to look at a school that has a phone ban and a school that does not. That is a totally invalid scientific comparison, because there could be all sorts of other things going

[*Damian Hinds*]

on, and the sort of school that is likely to do well in GCSEs is also likely to bring in a phone ban, so we cannot prove the direction of causality.

People will also tell us that there has not been enough time, because the technology is constantly developing. It may have been around for 20 years or so, but the current version of it has only been around for 18 months, so there has not been time to say conclusively what the effects are. None of that is about to change. The evidence will continue to be imperfect.

However, the evidence that we do have is pretty clear. We know, as the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who chairs the Education Committee, mentioned, that there can be some benefit from relatively small amounts of screen time. The 2019 programme for international student assessment—PISA—study covered this in some detail, looking at multiple countries. It talked about a “Goldilocks” effect, whereby about an hour of screen time a day seemed to be correlated with increased wellbeing. But the same study found that in almost every country studied, with the fascinating exception of the Dominican Republic, high levels of internet usage were associated with lower levels of life satisfaction. There are lots of other studies, which colleagues have referred to, that look at happiness, quality of relationships, eyesight, sleep, concentration and so on.

Then there is the rising prevalence of mental ill health in young people. Often, when people look at the numbers on mental ill health, particularly in teenagers, they reach immediately for their preferred explanation for why teenagers are having these difficulties, and sometimes it gets quite political. It is important to note that the rise in teenage mental ill health is not a uniquely British phenomenon. On the two main measures of mental wellbeing used in the 2021 UNICEF-Gallup “Changing Childhood” study—“How often do you experience feeling worried, nervous or anxious?” and “How often do you experience feeling depressed or having little interest in doing things?”—the UK was broadly in line with the average of 21 countries, including France, Germany and the US. Actually, it was slightly better on most of the measures.

There are ample other studies from around the world, including the World Health Organisation’s multi-country “Health Behaviour in School-aged Children” study, France’s EDC—I will not attempt the language—study, which is quite a long time series, and the shorter time series in the United States, “Trends in Mental Wellbeing”. The best study of all is the NHS’s “Mental Health of Children and Young People in England”. I say in passing to the Minister that I do not think we have yet had a commitment from the Department of Health and Social Care to carry on with that time series. It is incredibly valuable, and that is a relatively simple thing that the Government could do.

I have said that the rise in teenage mental ill health is not a uniquely British phenomenon. It is also not only about covid. A lot of the studies in recent years have set out to answer the question, “What happened to children’s mental health during covid?” That is a perfectly legitimate question, but if we look at the shape of the curve, it looks very unlikely that it started in covid, and in the NHS study, it carries on growing long after covid, up until the most recent wave.

The Minister said this in a debate in Westminster Hall the other day, and he is right that it is entirely invalid to infer causality from correlation, but the Bradford Hill criteria, which his hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington mentioned, are relevant, particularly the criteria of consistency, strength, plausibility, coherence and analogy, as well as temporality. In any event, it seems odd that we allow something to happen to our children because we cannot 100% prove that it causes harm, rather than because we can prove that it is safe. That is not the way in which we deal with children’s toys, food or medicine.

I turn the question around and say to people who query the direction of causality: with something like self-harm, are you honestly trying to tell me that incidents of self-harm in our country are nothing to do with the prevalence and normalisation of imagery around self-harm on social media? As I say, I worry that if we continue to seek perfect information, we simply will not act as we should. I have pages more to say, but I will not say them, because I know that many colleagues wish to speak.

11.25 am

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who I have now started calling the patron saint of the smartphone-free childhood campaign. He often comes up on the doorsteps in Beckenham and Penge when I speak to parents.

This topic has prompted a huge response both in my own constituency and across the country. I welcome Elizabeth, Sarah and other constituents who are here to watch this debate. I also pay tribute to Crispin, Raj and all the brilliant local parents and campaigners I have been working with on this. I will spend some time exploring the wealth of feedback I have had from my constituents before talking about the type of change we need to see across the country. That change needs to be cultural, to put children and parents first and to place the onus on social media companies and manufacturers to prove that their products are safe while ensuring that we do not miss out on the many benefits of technology.

Ahead of this debate, I engaged extensively with three key groups in Beckenham and Penge: young people, parents and school leaders. Despite being the reason we are here today, young people are the group that we most risk excluding from the conversation, which is why I held a focus group at a local secondary school, Harris academy Beckenham, and spoke to students from a range of year groups about their views on how smartphones are changing childhood. In that focus group, half of the students said that smartphones and social media overall have a negative impact on their mental health. The majority of students told me that they would feel panicked without their mobile phone, and some spoke to me with quiet self-awareness about how they knew their mobile phone had acted as a barrier to interaction with their family. This is time that they are not spending building meaningful relationships through face-to-face conversation and developing the social and communication skills that they will need in life.

The second group, teachers, offered another perspective. On Monday, I was delighted to bring together a group of 12 primary and secondary school headteachers from right across my constituency. We discussed the impact

of their students' smartphone use in and out of schools. What stood out the most from that conversation was the sheer amount of time that they as school leaders have to spend week after week dealing with issues that have taken place on their students' phones—cyber-bullying, sexting, the sharing of graphic videos or explicit photos, often of the students themselves. All those and more are crossing our teachers' desks and demanding hours of their time every day, pulling them away from their core and crucial job of educating.

Finally, there are the parents. In Beckenham and Penge, concerns about smartphone and social media use easily fall into the top five issues that constituents have contacted me about since my election to this House last July. Last Friday, I put out a survey asking parents in my constituency for their views; within a week, I have received well over 500 responses. Some 89% of respondents agree that smartphones and social media have a negative impact on their children's mental health, but what makes that figure more shocking is that 70% of those who agreed with that statement are parents of primary-aged children—that is children under the age of 12.

More than three-quarters of parents agreed that the negatives of their child having a smartphone outweighed the positives. Digging into that, I asked parents if they would have any concerns were their child not to have a smartphone. Understandably, the ability for a child to call home in an emergency, or for parents to track them on their journey to and from school came up a fair amount, but we know that other phones and options on the market have those features.

The damage is undeniable and is reflected in statistics across the country. Since smartphones became prominent in 2012, we have seen a 27% increase in speech and language challenges, a 65% rise in mental health admissions to hospital, and a 640% increase in eating disorders. The average teenager today gets 337 notifications in a day, which averages out at one every six minutes. Once they receive a notification, it takes 23 minutes for them to refocus on what they are doing. Finally—I had not heard this until this week—one in three parents admit to crying over their child's smartphone use.

Those figures chime with what parents have fed back to me across the constituency. One constituent, Gemma, who has worked in the smartphone industry for 15 years, says:

“My child is seven, so is not yet exposed to smartphones in a significant way. But when he plays games on his phone his behaviour is noticeably different—he's hyperactive, gets emotional quickly and easily, and is devastated when we say that time to play is up.”

Another constituent, Megan, is a therapist by profession. She said:

“I regularly hear adult clients sharing how smartphones negatively impact their mental health, from raised anxiety to hours lost doom-scrolling, to more serious harms. If we as adults sometimes struggle to manage our own smartphone use, how are we expecting our children and teenagers to be able to moderate theirs?”

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government are committed to tackling the mental health epidemic among adults and children in this country, especially with the specialist mental health professionals that will be installed in every school—parents in my constituency of Amber Valley will welcome that. Does my hon. Friend agree that the provisions in the

Bill are a useful tool in preventing mental health issues in the first place, and in helping parents to safeguard their children's mental health?

Liam Conlon: Absolutely. A key provision of the Bill will provide the evidence base on which to take the best action moving forward.

Another parent, Georgia, simply said to me:

“My children are two and four, and smartphones are my greatest fear in raising them.”

Many other constituents have written in, and I thank everyone across the constituency who responded to my survey and shared their thoughts.

The case for change is undeniable and, to sum up, we need collective action and cultural change. Many contributions have been made across the House to that effect. We must put children and parents first by moving the onus from them on to social media companies and manufacturers to prove that their products are safe, as well as recognising the potential benefits of technology. Before I came to this place, I worked in tech for nearly a decade, including at Discovery Education UK, and I saw the many benefits of technology in unlocking the potential of our young people. I believe that balance is possible and must be found, and again I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington for bringing forward this Bill.

11.34 am

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for bringing forward this Bill. Indeed, I felt it was so important that I was up at 4 o'clock this morning to fly from Northern Ireland to get here to support it. Our most precious responsibility is the safeguarding of our children, who are the very foundation of our society. I stand here today to express my firm support for the Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill, which is driven by an unwavering commitment to our children's safety. Protecting our children in the digital age is a critical undertaking for this Parliament. Failure is simply not an option.

The internet presents an opportunity for immense growth and learning, yet it can also be a dangerous place, filled with real threats. The digital realm, with its vast platforms, poses numerous risks. At a recent event that I hosted in my constituency of North Down, we explored these issues, including cyber-bullying, exposure to inappropriate content and predatory behaviour. They are all clear and present dangers that our children face daily.

I would like to take a moment to recognise those who work tirelessly to protect children, including the dedicated individuals in North Down. Notably, I commend the parents and advocates promoting a smartphone-free childhood. The Bill champions a tripartite approach, involving Government, parents and educators working together to safeguard our youth. We face a stark reality, with Ofcom reporting that 21% of children aged five to seven use the internet in the UK, a figure that rises dramatically to 89% by the age of 12. I urge everyone to seriously consider the dangers and utilise the excellent resources available, such as smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk. Over 200 schools in Northern Ireland, many in my constituency of North Down, are already benefiting from these efforts.

[Alex Easton]

We must distinguish between the positive transformations that technology brings, such as enhancements in learning and communication, and the serious threats it poses. Parliament must ensure that technology companies are held accountable for child protection. Achieving the highest standards of safety, transparency, data privacy and timely content moderation is crucial to maintaining and securing online environments. The Bill supports a collaborative approach, fostering partnerships between Government, industry leaders, parents, carers and educators. Together, we can strive tirelessly to keep our children safe.

Let us be proactive, developing ever-evolving tools that protect our children in the digital age. We must support parental control and enhance education about the dangers of the digital world. Being forewarned is being forearmed. Let us aim for a future where a safe online experience is the norm for all our children. This is one of the most significant pieces of work that this Parliament will undertake, and future generations will thank us all for it. Let us join together in backing the Bill to ensure that we create a digital landscape that prioritises the safety and wellbeing of all our children.

Although I support the Bill, I am slightly disappointed that it has been watered down a bit—I had to get that out there. I believe that children in our primary schools should not have mobiles in the school environment. It leads to our children not learning social interaction skills, distractions with learning, and potential online abuse and bullying. Children get better academic results when they do not have access to phones in school.

I support the Bill and wish the proposer, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington, all the very best. He has my full support, wherever this goes.

11.38 am

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): May I start, like others, by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for bringing forward this private Member's Bill? There have been many plaudits for him, and I would like to add that it is my understanding that he is grounded in evidence-based policymaking. He has focused on issues that are perceived as being very tricky, but which will have an outsized impact.

I have been really warmed by this cross-party debate. We have heard from the hon. Members for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) and for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), my hon. Friends the Members for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), and the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds). Many of us have travelled to and from our constituencies, some making long journeys—I know that some have been on the sleeper train—to make this incredibly important debate.

I have received twice as much correspondence on this Bill as on any other issue this year. I want to thank the people of Leeds North West, including the schoolchildren, teachers and parents who have shared their experiences with me, and to make special mention of Bramhope primary school, Benton Park school, Ralph Thoresby school and Rawdon St Peter's primary school, which shared their stories and are showing leadership.

There are a few key issues, and I will try not to repeat them because I know many other Members want to get in. The key issue is the profound mental health crisis among our children, and we can see a clear correlation. NHS England found that 20.3% of eight to 16-year-olds had a probable mental disorder in 2023. Poor mental health among our older teenagers aged 16 and 17 has increased by more than a quarter since 2017. Research by University College London and the Sutton Trust found that almost half—44%—of young people were above the threshold for probable mental illness, so we need to look for solutions and fast.

Teachers and parents alike have shared their concerns, and wellbeing teachers that have been put in place spend much of their time adjudicating battles that are out of their control on WhatsApp. The other thing I found when I spoke to parents, teachers and pupils was the sense of overwhelm—all of them are overwhelmed. Parents and certainly teachers want to play their full role, but they are completely overwhelmed. Parents feel huge pressure from peers and networks to get it right, and many of us who watched the Channel 4 documentary with Emma Willis saw and felt that sense of overwhelm in trying to navigate this situation.

I agreed with much of what the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) said, but the lack of clear guidance is clear from the fact that people are navigating the issue in different ways, so I do think the recommendation in the Bill will be helpful.

Schools in my constituency have said that while they are willing to act, they are responsible for the children for only 20% of the time, so they cannot control everything. It needs to involve all of us; we all need to play our part.

What really hits me is the opportunity cost of what else those children could be doing. Screen time has rocketed. In 2009, five to 15-year-olds averaged nine hours on screens per week. That has jumped to between six and nine hours a day. Screen time has replaced critical childhood activities, as has been said, such as outdoor play, social interactions and hobbies, and learning those essential motor and social skills. Benton Park school in my constituency recently introduced a phone-free policy during the school day. When I asked the teachers what happened, they said that the view of the playground is completely different. Where it used to be all heads down, the pupils were now talking, laughing and playing.

The World Health Organisation recommends that children aged two to five should have no more than one hour of screen time a day. New research on excessive screen time looks at the impacts on the prefrontal cortex, the parietal lobe and the temporal lobe. Fundamental shifts are happening in the brain development of our children.

My constituent Stevie talked about children arriving at school with weaker motor and social skills, and struggling with basic physical and communication tasks, such as holding a pencil, using scissors and social negotiation. That is not to mention the exposure to harmful content that colleagues have referred to. Many of us were shocked by last week's Bertin review and the many dangers it noted, which we have also heard about in our constituencies. On a possibly less damaging level, I have seen the impact of the beauty industry targeting young girls on YouTube. Young girls now want these ridiculous skincare regimes. High-strength retinols and

hyaluronic acids are being marketed to them. I have not even started using those—perhaps I should—so why on earth are eight-year-olds using them?

The need for better regulation of online content aimed at children is absolutely clear. To echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington, I find the argument that the genie is out of the bottle infuriating. Many of us have noticed that a lot of the tech giants do not allow their children to access online media. When other addictive products were introduced to the market and we subsequently realised their harm, like my hon. Friend said about smoking, did we do nothing? No. We are here to solve problems, not to bury our head in the sand and accept the consequences.

We already have some of the answers. As my hon. Friend said, there is good, reliable age-verification technology—platforms like Yoti—that will make this work, and that is why other countries are introducing restrictions with confidence. In fact, we will implement that soon with the Online Safety Act.

Finally, to the Bill. I strongly welcome the role of the UK chief medical officers—who doesn't want more Chris Whitty in their life? Schools and parents are crying out for more top-down guidance, so I applaud this effort. We have to make sure that an evidence base is at the heart of what we do, and I applaud the Government for bringing this Bill forward, but I urge them to make it the first step in our actions. Would the Minister consider giving us some sort of interim update by the summer? This is a crucial moment, and while I appreciate that this process will take place over a 12-month period, an update by the summer would be very helpful. Taking any opportunity we can to increase the length of childhood for all our children would be beneficial to all of our constituents and to the country.

11.45 am

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The smartphone is one of the most remarkable pieces of technology ever invented. Smartphones keep us connected to the world and allow us to stay in touch with family, friends and colleagues no matter where we, or they, are. They give us access to the internet and the immeasurable amount of information that is available online. They give us access to our emails, allowing us to organise our schedules and do work on the train and even in this Chamber. They are also fantastic entertainment hubs, whether for music, movies, games or e-books.

Smartphones and the internet have transformed society, and while most of that technological progress is good, it has serious consequences for our children. In 2023, Ofcom reported that most children acquire their first smartphone between the ages of nine and 11. That is problematic, especially when it comes to social media. Social media on smartphones has become an integral part of our children's lives, and it poses several risks that can have a negative impact on their wellbeing. One of the biggest concerns is the effect it has on mental health. Constant exposure to curated, idealised versions of others' lives can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and depression. Teenagers may feel pressured to live up to unrealistic standards, affecting their self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

There is also the potential for addiction. With their constant notifications, likes and shares, social media apps are designed to capture attention and keep users engaged forever. That can lead to excessive screen time, reducing time spent on other important activities such as studying, physical exercise and face-to-face interactions, all of which are essential for healthy development.

Social media can also affect sleep patterns—having brought up two children, I know how difficult it can be to remove a phone at bedtime. Ultimately, parents are responsible for how they bring up their children. They are responsible for deciding whether and when to allow their child to have a smartphone, and how long they use it for. But parents need help, and tech companies have a responsibility to ensure that children are not exposed to harmful or addictive products.

Social media can also expose teenagers to cyber-bullying. Online platforms can be breeding grounds for harmful behaviour, as people feel anonymous and less accountable for their actions. Negative comments, trolling and harassment can take a toll on teenagers' emotional health, sometimes leading to tragic consequences.

I was pleased when the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), having been successful in the private Member's Bill ballot, announced that he would introduce a Bill to increase the digital age of consent from 13 to 16. As such, when the Bill was published—only yesterday—I was surprised to discover that the very measure he talked about has not been included. All the Bill requires is that the Secretary of State makes a statement about whether that age threshold should be raised. Why is that? I suspect that what may have happened is that the hon. Member received a visit from one of the Government Whips, who told him that he had a very promising career ahead of him, should he agree to do the right thing and water down the legislation to the point at which it does not actually do very much at all.

Josh MacAlister: The hon. Member will know, as many in this House do, that private Members' Bills are often a shot in the dark. From the beginning of this process, my aim has been to have a national debate, but also to put all of my energy into securing some action and progress. Regardless of party, this is an issue on which it has been difficult to make progress in the past; the previous Government made statements in 2019, 2021 and 2023 on introducing phone bans in schools, but those bans never fully materialised. I think the hon. Member would agree that we can work across the House to make progress on this issue at every available opportunity in the future.

Sir Ashley Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but having spent a great deal of time talking about raising the digital age of consent and having asked my constituents to email me if they wanted me to be present in this House today specifically to vote for that, rather than working in the constituency, I wish that he had presented a Bill that said that, because we could then have voted on it and it would have passed. Of course, the Government might have killed it off at a later stage, but I actually think they might have been too embarrassed to do that.

There is nothing in this Bill that requires legislation. The Secretary of State could ask the UK's chief medical officers to provide their advice, as clause 1 requires, and

[Sir Ashley Fox]

they would do so. The Secretary of State could publish a plan for research, as required by clause 2, and an assessment, as required by clause 3. The sad truth is that this Bill achieves precisely nothing, and the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington should be a little bit ashamed of having campaigned so vigorously and then presented this Bill.

Chris Bryant: I have seen an awful lot of Bills in my time, since 2001, and nearly every one has contained something that did not actually need to be in legislation but that, none the less, was put in as a declaratory statement by the House. When a Bill has big support, it tends to be something that effects change. That might very well be the same effect that we have today.

Sir Ashley Fox: I agree with the Minister that often a Bill will contain something that is merely declaratory. Has he ever seen a Bill that is wholly declaratory and contains nothing that actually requires legislation?

Kit Malthouse: As I think we all know, the Government are likely to adjourn the debate on the Bill. Will my hon. Friend's case be made if the case for adjournment is that the Minister commits that he will go and do these things anyway, and therefore the legislation is unnecessary?

Sir Ashley Fox: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point.

I maintain that this Bill is a waste of time. I will vote for it today, if we get the opportunity. Unfortunately, I understand that the debate is going to be adjourned, which suggests that the Government are not that serious about taking it forward. I will vote with a heavy heart, because I really think the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington could have achieved so much more if he had had the courage of his convictions.

11.52 am

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): I am extremely pleased to be able to take part in today's debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for bringing forward the Bill.

It is no exaggeration to say that we are facing a crisis. As has already been expertly outlined by Members across the House, there is a growing consensus that unregulated smartphone and social media use is harming our children's health, learning and wellbeing. Many of the long-term implications for those who have grown up with social media remain unknown, but we can already see the warning signs. The number of children aged eight to 16 facing a probable mental health disorder has already doubled since 2017. Some 445,000 people were in contact with children and young people's mental health services in November 2023—up from 362,000 two years earlier.

I recently met parents in my constituency who are rightly concerned by the impact that social media and phone use is having on their children's mental health, sleep and learning. The earlier that children have access to social media, the more pronounced the impacts are on their social development and wellbeing. Cyber-bullying, content designed to make young people feel insecure, and unwanted explicit content are just some of the issues that children now face. Children are losing out on

socialising and time spent outside to activities that isolate them and keep them inside. One third of mental health problems in adulthood are directly connected to childhood experiences. Between 2010 and 2018, the number of young people attending A&E with a psychiatric condition more than tripled.

The covid period exacerbated the social and mental health impacts of smartphone and social media use, but the issues we now face have been in the making for more than a decade, and failure to hold the tech companies accountable and provide the necessary mental health support for our young people has created a perfect storm for the crisis we are now facing. We must not treat smartphones and social media addiction as a natural phenomenon; tech companies have created systems that are intended precisely to be addictive and to maximise the time that users spend on their phones. Currently, more than one in four young adults show signs of behavioural addiction to smartphones. The algorithms and user interface of social media sites are designed to be addictive, targeting dopamine circuits in the brain. Research shows that some social media apps can trigger brain responses similar to those triggered by slot machine gambling.

Right now, many parents are forced into an impossible position, with a choice between allowing their child to access potentially harmful and addictive content and feeling that their child is left out and isolated from his or her peers. The impacts on mental health and learning are especially pronounced among vulnerable young people who may already lack the support that they need at school and in the community. We cannot ignore the political impacts of unregulated social media either. It is incredibly concerning to see extremist content being pushed to young people who are increasingly isolated. Many of them spend less time with friends and in physical community spaces.

Last year we saw Australia's Government move to take serious action on these issues, banning children under 16 from using social media and having the power to fine companies that fail to comply. It is clear that we have a very long way to go, but the Bill is a positive step and will help to build the national conversation that is needed to tackle the scale of these problems.

I want to end with a quotation from the parent of a child who took his own life. The parent, Chris, filed lawsuits against two tech giants. I found this quotation in an article in the magazine *The New Yorker*, published in September 2024. Chris said:

"I thought I was a good and responsible father. I checked around the house and locked the doors every night, making everything nice and safe. I didn't understand that the lion was already inside the house."

11.57 am

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I am very pleased to speak in support of the safer phones Bill. I speak as the mother of four teenagers who goes into battle nearly every day on screen time, as a governor for eight years at a local school who has seen the damage that screens can do to young people's mental health, and as a Member of Parliament who might be able to do something to turn the tide on the damage to our young people, who are being used as guinea pigs in the rapid advance of technology. We are well into the tech revolution, which will change everything. It is a force

for good but, as with previous industrial revolutions, there are victims. In the first industrial revolution the victims were the children in the factories, and today our children need protection against a tsunami of tech and its attendant harm.

The Bill, as originally intended, was a crucial step in safeguarding the wellbeing of children in our digital world, and I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for all his work to date in campaigning for safer smartphone use for children. As many Members have pointed out, the evidence before us is undeniable, and I will not rehearse what has already been said. However, I want to pull out a few facts.

A total of 2.5 million children in the UK are using social media under age, and, crucially, before they have developed the necessary skills to navigate complex and risky online environments. Extended screen time has also spiked rapidly and become the norm for most young people. I commend the report from the Education Committee, which revealed that nearly a quarter of children now use smartphones in a way that is consistent with a behavioural addiction, and in some cases screen use starts as early as six months. By the time children reach the age of 12, nearly all of them have smartphones.

Social media and mobile applications are not just tools for communication; many are inherently addictive by design, engineered to keep users engaged, whatever the cost, and I know this through my children. I echo the words of many Members today on the addictive nature and the battles that parents have. This is placing huge pressure on parents, who are in a battle with addictive algorithms that they cannot possibly win.

I wholeheartedly supported the initial provisions in the Bill, as did hundreds of my constituents in Esher and Walton who wrote to me in support of the campaign behind it. Although I continue to support the Bill, I must express disappointment that it has been significantly watered down. What could have been a bold step in child protection has been reduced to mere provisions for Government research commitments and guidance revisions—actions that do not require legislation. The Government already committed to commissioning academic research on smartphone use last autumn, partly in response to the very welcome campaigning by the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington, and we already have overwhelming evidence supporting stronger regulation. How much more evidence do the Government need?

Headteachers across my constituency and parent groups in Molesey, Esher, Walton, Thames Ditton and Hersham have convened local campaigns, with nearly 1,000 signatories to parliamentary petitions on this issue, expressing huge concerns about excessive smartphone use, unregulated social media and the inadequacy of current regulations. I know that schools in my constituency were particularly encouraged by initial indications that the Bill would require schools to be mobile-free and would ensure Government support for schools as they seek to enforce effective and safe learning spaces.

The headteacher of Esher high school, Andy King, illustrated to me just how much creative problem solving teachers are having to adopt in order to keep children focused on learning, when they are walking around with such an addictive invention right in their pockets. His school has been compelled to enforce a “closed backpacks only” rule, as opposed to open bags such as

handbags, so that children are not distracted by seeing a notification pop up in their open bags in class. All the headteachers I met in my constituency talked about the inattention caused by phones and the inability to focus on a whole book. Research shows that it can take up to 20 minutes for pupils to refocus after engaging in non-academic digital activity. The rise in screen time has also been linked to declining attention levels, language skills and sleep quality. It is both a learning distraction and a serious health concern.

As we celebrate International Women’s Day tomorrow, we should not ignore how children’s access to smartphones can undermine healthy relationships and the safety and wellbeing of women and girls. The Children’s Commissioner for England found that 79% of children had encountered violent pornography before the age of 18, with the average age of first exposure being just 13 years old. I know of a constituent whose child saw extreme pornography at 13 and was so traumatised that his efforts to clear his mind caused him to develop OCD. We also know that online sexual crimes against children have risen by 400% since 2013, and a staggering 81% of girls aged seven to 21 have experienced some form of threatening or upsetting behaviour online.

I appreciate what the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington has done to build the case for Government action, but it is a pity that we will not be able to test the will of Parliament for a much more ambitious approach to online safety from this Government. The Secretary of State has expressed frustration with gaps in the Online Safety Act and its implementation. This Bill could have been used to make urgent amendments to it. Why have the Government not used that opportunity, particularly when the Secretary of State indicated that there would be no new legislation any time soon?

I urge the Government to stop hiding behind endless reviews and take concrete steps—including two specific ones—to protect young people now. First, services must be required to ensure minimum age limits on their platforms. Unfathomably, Ofcom’s draft children’s codes do not impose an obligation on regulated services to enforce their own terms of service on the minimum age of users on their platforms. In consultation on the codes, children’s charities argued for that and have campaigned on it ever since. Ofcom is not listening, and the Government are doing nothing to address this. The Bill could and should have been used to plug that gap, regardless of any additional evidence the Government feel they need before making further policy or legislative commitments. Will the Government commit to doing that?

Secondly, with Meta’s announcement in the last couple of months that it is removing protections for vulnerable users from its content moderation policies, the Online Safety Act should be amended to introduce a mechanism preventing regulated services from rolling back protections in their terms of service, and setting minimum standards. Without a prohibition on reducing protections—even for children—under the Online Safety Act, platforms can keep rolling back on their user safety protections until they hit the level that is harmful for children. That cannot be right, but it can be fixed with an amendment to the Online Safety Act. Will the Government agree to use the Bill to do that?

The Bill could have been a vehicle for real policy action. Although its provisions are not as powerful as I initially hoped, some progress is better than none, so I

[Monica Harding]

will be supporting it. I urge colleagues across the House not only to support the Bill, but to push for the stronger, bolder reforms that our children desperately need. To say that it is inevitable is not enough. Every day that we wait is another day that a child spends 18 hours online, potentially at grave risk. I urge the Government and us all to act.

12.5 pm

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for bringing this Bill forward. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of the Bill and to have worked with him on it. I also thank him for giving us all a chance to speak in what could be the most engaged Chamber we have ever seen, as we all grapple with the hypocrisy mentioned by the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) and whether we can be on our smartphones. I am sure we will all be listening attentively in this debate.

What were Members, collectively, all doing when they were in school, back in the mists of time? Thinking back to the early 2000s when I was in school, I would go out afterwards, calling ahead on the home phone to see whether my friends were in—we did not have smartphones then. During the summer holidays, the rule was that I had to be at home before the streetlights came on. I remember playing out in front of the local shops day after day in the long summers.

If we think of children today and the childhood that they will have, we imagine them playing their favourite game, but with a device in their pocket, buzzing every minute, telling them that someone has responded to their latest Instagram post, or that all their friends are checking their phones, too. The game starts to feel a little bit different. Instead of enjoying independent play outside, today's children and young people are spending hour upon hour of their free time glued to their screens.

The average British 12-year-old is estimated to spend between 20 and 30 hours a week online, while the nation's green spaces sit increasingly empty. That is why I believe this is an issue where the wellbeing of a generation is at stake. As other Members have mentioned, the trends that have emerged since young children started to get their own smartphones just a decade ago are concerning. I am worried about the heartbreaking rise in suicide and self-harm, rising depression and anxiety, online bullying, the things that children get exposed to through the devices in their pockets and the 46% of teenagers who say that they are using their phone almost constantly. I am worried about the risk from traffic or muggers to kids who walk to and from school staring at their phones and the evidence showing a negative impact during the school day.

It is not just tired old dads like me who are concerned. Four in every five 16 to 24-year-olds say that social media has become addictive in the past five years. Most heartbreakingly of all, only 18% of girls in gen Z believe that life would be worse if social media was switched off entirely. The vast majority think that their lives would be better without it.

I was radicalised over the summer, after being first elected on 4 July, by reading Jonathan Haidt's book, "The Anxious Generation". I decided then to reach out

to Smartphone Free Childhood and my local campaign team, led by a fantastic resident called Nova Eden, to work to try to get every single school in my constituency and in my borough to go smartphone-free. I met primary school heads about that last year. Every one of them said that they were concerned—10 out of 10—about the issue. We have worked hard, and I am proud that the borough for which I have the honour of being one of the Members of Parliament will be going smartphone-free from September this year. Every single primary school—103—has signed up, and the secondary schools are following suit. I commend the work of teachers and parents—fantastic people who want to do the best by their children—in our borough. I hope that the measures in the Bill can be taken forward to help children have the best start they can in life and so that we can protect the wellbeing of future generations.

12.9 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I often say that I would not like to be a teenager growing up today in an environment dominated by social media. It was bad enough that by the time I got to secondary school everyone had a phone, and by the time I left everyone had a smartphone. There is no doubt that the threats to children have been utterly transformed in just the last decade, so we need to transform how we address those issues in this place.

I certainly support the thrust of the Bill. The Government must treat children's use of digital devices and social media as a health issue. Children are spending more and more of their lives on social media at younger and younger ages. Those aged 12 to 15 spend on average 35 hours a week on their smartphones, and we know that poor mental health has spiked among young people in the last 15 years.

I do, however, have some concerns about the proposals before us. While I fully respect the intentions of the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for the Bill, and his passion for the issue, I am frustrated that the Bill does not seek to make any changes to the current situation. It places a duty on the Secretary of State to publish a plan for research into the impact of the use of social media within 12 months. In general, the public get really frustrated with Parliament and politicians when we say, "We are going to do some research," or, "We are going to have a meeting." They want to see action in lots of the areas that we speak about in this place. There is massive consensus from all parts of the Chamber for the hon. Member's Bill and the work that he has done to introduce it. Among those who have spoken, there is also consensus about the need to go further and faster on the issue, which I would certainly support.

The Bill contains just a feeble instruction. Would parents and kids who are struggling now be comforted merely by the publication of a plan for research into the topic as far away as the middle of 2026? As we have heard, the Government have established a research project that is due to report its findings in May. Do we really need to add to the statute book to ask the Government to do that?

I also fear that the Bill will simply outsource decision making to others rather than allowing our elected Parliament, parents and children themselves to contribute

to a policy solution. Rather than publishing a plan for research in the next 12 months, would it not be better if the Government came forward with a proposal, for example, to increase the digital age of consent, so that Parliament could debate that?

The Bill mentions consultation with Ofcom and the Information Commissioner. It should be Members of Parliament representing families in our constituencies who ultimately make a decision on the right course of action. If the Bill does pass, I hope that Parliament will be consulted before any changes are made.

We can all agree that there is a serious problem affecting society and younger generations as a whole, but, because we can all agree on that, we need to see firm proposals from the Government coming forward, and not just more research. I completely concur with what my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) said. I will not often call for Government intervention, but this issue has become so great to lots of members of our society that we do need to legislate in this area. It is quite clear that, over the short to medium term, social media companies have failed to step up and do more. They could do so without legislation—they could be more proactive—but they have failed in that. The time is right for that.

I hope we can take away from today the fact that we have had a debate and aired some of the grievances around the harms that social media does to younger generations. By the time the proposal comes back within 12 months, I hope—I do live in hope—that social media companies might have solved some of the issues and worked harder and faster in the fear that legislation is coming, and I hope that legislation will come. I think we all have skin in the game. My sister has recently given birth and I am now an uncle, so I do have skin in the game. We have to act. If we do not, I fear not only that we will let down generations coming through the education system now, but future generations, including my niece, who have not even started in the education system.

I fully support a lot of the comments in the House today. I urge the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington to keep going and to help the Government to come forward with some stern proposals. I believe there is cross-party support among all who have spoken today that we need to go faster to solve the issue, and hopefully save future generations coming through the education system and wider society.

12.15 pm

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister). It has been an honour to work alongside him on this crucial issue.

Tackling children's online safety in our country is a diamond issue—it is rare, it is popular, it is tough—and getting it right will deliver on what is our most precious responsibility: the protection of our children. As a society, we have a duty to protect our children from predators, from each other, from themselves and from harm. The contrast between the reasons not to legislate further and the reasons to take action now could not be starker. The argument is won: we must go further than the current reading of the Online Safety Act to protect our children's right to a safe and healthy childhood. I am going to use my time on the Floor of the House in this

debate to talk a little bit about why I care about the issue, the work that has already been done, and then how we need to go further and act now.

A long, long, long time ago, I was 11-years-old and “Titanic” the movie was coming out. I am sure hon. Members all remember that it was a huge box office hit. I was desperate to see it, but it was rated 12 and, as an 11-year-old, my parents told me that I was not allowed. I loved drama, history and Leonardo DiCaprio, and I was incensed at the injustice that I was not allowed to watch it, because of all my friends were—outrageous! I gave my parents hell on the issue. I tried every persuasion technique available and I still was not allowed. Now, I still love history and drama—Leo less so—but the reason I am talking about this is because I was not really upset about not being able to see the film; I was scared of being left out from my peer group.

This is the key issue that parents bring up in Darlington. They say to me so frequently that the pressure to give their child a smartphone, when they are not sure if they are safe, is overwhelming. It is time for us to help them to answer some of their questions. They need stronger legislation and guidance from Government about what is safe for their children to do online. Should their children be allowed a phone? If so, when? Should they post pics of them online? Should they be allowed to use the chats on games? Should they be allowed social media profiles? Should they limit their screen time? Those are all questions that require answers and parents want them from us.

Parents, as we know, will always know what is best for their children, but children often disagree with parenting styles. That can be a cause of contention in peer groups in schools, and it can be a clash of values, among many other things. That is normal. The issue is not about parenting styles and choices, because, as we have heard today from everybody's contributions, parents are united across the country that they need more action and guidance from legislators.

Over the course of this campaign, I have become convinced, without any reasonable doubt, that more legislation is needed, that the public support that, that Ofcom's reading of the Online Safety Act is unnecessarily narrow, and that the first iterations of the children's codes that are coming out are not strong enough to protect our children. It is accepted that even the strongest legislation will take time to bed in and will be imperfect, so let us go further now.

I want to lay out the reasons why I still support the measures proposed in the original Bill from my dear and hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington. The first measure is should children have phones in schools? Teachers do not think so, children know they should not, and evidence from schools where phones are banned has seen sickness absence in teachers reduce, attendance in children go up and behaviour improve.

When I was elected, I started an online safety forum in Darlington with two children from year 10 in every school in the town. I brought them all together and asked them what the big issues were for them. They said that peer-to-peer bullying, exacerbated by the use of smartphones in and outside of school and their online activity, was far and away the biggest issue. They told me that people were using their phones to film each other and then sending the videos around, attacking

[Lola McEvoy]

and bullying each other, and it was causing a big mental health issue. It is hard to argue against the rationale that schools should be for learning.

Lewis Cocking: The hon. Lady is making an impassioned speech. Does she agree that in some cases social media has made bullying 24 hours a day, because it means that it can happen at any point, even when a child is no longer at school?

Lola McEvoy: That is exactly the case. Being 14 is hard. Being at school is tough. There has always been bullying, and it is unreasonable and unrealistic to say that we, as legislators, will completely eradicate it. But children used to be able to go home and be protected from what was going on at school, and that is no longer the case. We have to do everything we can to give them some time off their phones in school. I believe there is no case for children to have their smartphones in schools, and I think most teachers and headteachers agree.

The next point that the Bill addresses is increasing the age of digital consent from 13 to 16. That is absolutely necessary. Children deserve a right to anonymity throughout their childhood, and a right not to have a digital footprint when they come of age. I absolutely support the lifting of the age of digital consent from 13 to 16—the sooner we do that, the better.

I cannot fathom how there is any argument that children should be exposed to addictive-by-design algorithms and content on social media. I do not know who would possibly argue that that was a good idea. Our job is to protect children.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I share my hon. Friend's concern about the addictive nature of social media. Is she also concerned about the addictive nature of gambling-type games that we see young children use, with loot boxes and microtransactions? Young people are being encouraged to get into a gambling mindset through technology.

Lola McEvoy: The online world has lots of moving parts, and it is really hard for legislators to keep up. We are already lagging way behind where we need to be. What we need—I will address this later in my speech—is a dynamic risk assessment, so that when new innovations come online and we see children using them, they will be risk assessed in real time and children will be prevented from coming to harm.

On marketing to children, obviously that needs to be kept in line with new societal trends to protect children from being targeted for sales. That is quite clear. I stand by the measures in the Bill, and I am confident that this is not the end of this campaign.

My hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington and I first met when, as candidates for the Labour party, we were both shocked at how cross-cutting an issue children's safety online was for our constituents. When he asked me to be a co-sponsor of the Bill, I said, "Of course," but I asked him to engage with Bereaved Families for Online Safety, as I had heard about the group's work and had huge respect for them. He agreed and we invited them to Parliament. The argument that there is a moral panic over children's online safety is

utterly offensive. I cannot overstate how upsetting it is for people in that group and around the country who have serious concerns about their children's safety online. I want to put on the record in this Chamber my unequivocal support and respect for that group and for parents across the country who have lost their children. Their stories are all the evidence I need to know that we as a Government must go further.

Ellen Roome, Jools Sweeney's mother, has been campaigning for the right of bereaved parents to have access to their children's accounts in the event of their death, to search for answers. I strongly support a further amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill to make it automatic that, in the case of a sudden unexplained death of a child, Ofcom is notified immediately and a data notice is sent to regulated online platforms to freeze the child's accounts from deletion. That would prevent any other parents from having to go through the awful process that Ellen has had to endure to try to find answers. I urge the platforms that have been contacted by Ellen and other bereaved families: please engage and adhere to their requests for the children's data. These people have lost their children. Do the decent thing and help them find answers.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): My hon. Friend and I were both present at an event with bereaved parents that was organised by our hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), at which a number of social media companies were also present. The children who had taken their lives had been very active on the platforms provided by those companies. Does my hon. Friend share my dismay at the reaction of the social media companies in that room? They made it very clear that they did not understand the responsibility they held for the harm they were causing.

Lola McEvoy: It has been very interesting to be part of this campaign, and I think there is a lot more to do.

There are other areas that we must urgently take action on, from going forwards with the second iteration of the children's code to ensure that functionalities are included, to upgrading the requirement for risk assessments to make them more dynamic and supporting bereaved families.

To conclude, I am incredibly grateful to all those who have supported the Bill—to my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington for his incredible work, to Ben Kingsley for his excellent expertise, and to my wonderful constituents in Darlington, who have put me here to represent them, improve their lives and help them to protect their children. This Christmas just gone, I was at a carol concert at the Crown Street library in Darlington, and a man tapped me on the shoulder, pointed at his beautiful child, who was looking up at me and beaming, and said, "Keep going on the online safety. You're doing it for her." I am, and I will continue to do so. I urge our Government to get on with it and to take as much action as we reasonably can within the timeframe that we have.

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

12.26 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition on this important topic. Thank you for calling me now, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will not speak for too long, because there are so many Government Members who are keen to take part in this important debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) on bringing this private Member's Bill to the House and all the different people, companies, charities and organisations that he has worked with as part of the campaign to drive it forwards. I do feel for him, as I know what it is like for a Back Bencher in the party of Government to navigate the challenges of trying to use a private Member's Bill—I have had two ballot Bills myself—as a campaign vehicle to drive change. I therefore hope that he will forgive me for some of the comments I shall make about the content of this Bill.

We can only deal with the text of the Bill before us, which was only published in the past few days, so my comments will necessarily reflect the detail of the hon. Member's proposals. In a sense, this debate reminds me of Schrödinger's cat, in that Members have made equally reference to a former Bill and a current Bill in their speeches. It feels like we are having a debate on a Bill that could have been and a debate on the Bill in front of us. Indeed, the hon. Member's speech spoke to the lack of a need for further research, but equally the Bill calls for further research to take place.

We have heard some fantastic contributions from all parts of the House. I would like to note the contributions from my right hon. Friends the Members for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), and my hon. Friends the Members for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) and for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), who reiterated the importance of driving forward change. Many stories and personal declarations have been shared about the impact of social media and the difficulty of parenting at this time. I should declare that I am also a parent, although thankfully my children are not at the stage when they have started consuming social media in the way that I have heard others talk about today.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a powerful point about the debate and how it has dwelled in part on the importance of evidence and research. Does he agree that the reason we have so much evidence is that, as MPs, we speak with so many children? I have in my hand letters from children in years 5 and 6 at St James' Church of England primary academy, and if I may quote briefly from Eleanor and River, they say

"kids will also be exposed to inappropriate content such as unsuitable videos and pictures. They could feel unsafe, discouraged or exposed, and then they would not be able to unsee the images again."

Does the hon. Member agree that we should be shielding children from that sort of content?

Dr Spencer: I am going to resist the temptation to be drawn into a discussion about research methodology in this area, although I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that I am very tempted to talk about the importance of

case series data and qualitative data in terms of what people are telling us and what we are seeing ourselves, compared with cross-sectional or longitudinal studies or cluster studies looking at the impact of different schools. What I will say is that the stories of what children are being exposed to that we have heard in this debate and that we have all heard from our constituents are horrific—I do not think anyone would disagree with that. Clearly, we need to protect children from that.

At the heart of the Bill is the desire to drive forward our scientific understanding of the effects of smartphone and social media use on children's mental health, learning and social development. I hope we hear a commitment from the Minister that the Government will conduct a detailed review in this complex area where so much is at stake, but I would also expand it further. Any analysis must take a clear-eyed approach to both the advantages and disadvantages offered by technological developments such as smartphones and internet access, looking at both the benefits to young people of increased connectivity and access to information, and even apps that help to manage health conditions such as diabetes at school and away from home, which will transform the lives of children and young people, and the increasing body of research that demonstrates the damaging effects of excessive smartphone and social media use on children and adolescents.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me on the importance of moving towards smartphone-free schools? I welcome the work being done at Monmouth comprehensive in my constituency, where the headteacher is pushing forward a smartphone ban, because grades increase by almost two levels where schools have banned mobile phones.

Dr Spencer: I will come on to that a little later in my speech. Perhaps Government Members will have the chance to express their view on this matter on Report of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill in a couple of weeks' time.

Turning back to the research, a longitudinal study in the US of more than 6,500 children aged between 12 and 15, adjusted for baseline mental health status, found that adolescents who spent more than three hours a day on social media faced double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes, including symptoms of depression and anxiety. These findings have been brought into sharp focus by recent tragic cases of children taking their own lives after being the subject of online bullying or encountering harmful material online. Clearly, that weighs on all of us as legislators.

In government and now in opposition, the Conservatives have pursued measures to make the online world a safer place for children and young people. I am proud that the previous Government passed the Online Safety Act, among other measures, to make the online world safer. The Act requires platforms to take measures to prevent children from accessing harmful and age-inappropriate content, particularly relating to pornography, suicide and self-harm, serious violence and bullying. The Act further requires platforms to remove illegal content quickly and prevent it from appearing in the first place, and to use and enforce age-checking measures on platforms where content harmful to children is published through the adoption of highly effective age assurance technologies.

[Dr Ben Spencer]

In January, Ofcom published industry guidance on how it expects age assurance to be put into effect, including deadlines for platforms to conduct risk assessments and put certain safety measures in place. We can expect to see further developments in this area as the protections envisaged by the OSA are rolled out.

However, parents, including many in my constituency, are rightly concerned about the addictive nature of smartphones themselves and the impact on attention span and social development. According to polling by Parentkind in 2024, 83% of parents felt that smartphones are harmful to children and young people, while research carried out by Policy Exchange across more than 200 schools at the end of 2023 found that schools with strict mobile phone bans achieved, on average, better Progress 8 scores and better GCSE grades, despite the fact that the schools with highly effective bans had a higher proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than the schools with less restrictive policies.

In February, the shadow Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), tabled an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to require all schools in England to ban the use of mobile telephones during the school day. That, however, was rejected by the Government. I wonder how Labour Members feel about that. Should the Government decide to do so, perhaps further to the chief medical officers' review, Opposition Members will work constructively with them to seek practical and effective solutions that enable children to continue to benefit from the opportunities offered online, while protecting them from those harmful effects.

12.35 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute briefly to the debate, and as the youngest MP I have seen a lot of this happening throughout my time going through the school system. I have reams of positive things to say about the Bill that I will not have time for, but I wish to say briefly that I welcome it hugely.

I wish to focus on a couple of points that have not been covered much. There are benefits that some social media can bring. I would therefore argue that we must be careful to regulate it in the right way to ensure that we do not lose those benefits or that we are able to introduce them in other forms. Article 16 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child is about children's right to privacy, and we must try to strike a balance between a parent's ability to know what their children are doing online and who they are speaking to—that is incredibly important for safeguarding—and the need for young people sometimes to have access to private spaces.

The example I have in mind is that of young LGBT people in families who are not accepting of them. When someone in that situation is starting to understand their sexuality, which often happens around the age we are talking about of between 13 and 16, sometimes being able to find people in online communities who are going through similar experiences can provide an incredibly valuable support network that they otherwise would not have. Similarly, as some Members will know, I grew

up in a high-control religious group. I was lucky in that I went to a mainstream school, but lots of others do not, and they are kept in more secluded environments and have little contact with the outside world. The ability to find support networks outside can be valuable, and I am keen to ensure that we maintain that.

The onus must be on social media companies to up their game enormously regarding how they regulate online spaces, because so much is going under the radar and must be addressed through safeguarding. I am particularly struck by the fact that some apps out there that are aimed at young people between 13 and 17 portray themselves as forums for making new friends around the world. They do that based on swiping left or right, and with profiles based on photos, or on bios and interests. As everyone will immediately notice, that sounds a lot like dating apps, and indeed some of those apps are being used for that purpose by young people. That is incredibly alarming, and something we must get on top of. It is made even more severe by the fact that some people can match with others who have a significant age difference to them, which is unacceptable and is flying under the radar.

There are enormously significant issues regarding social media for young people, and I welcome the Bill as it provides an opportunity for us to get some of the research in place and to consider how we can address those issues properly.

12.38 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): When I was growing up, we were first becoming aware of the digital world. On coming home from school, I would log in to MSN Messenger, check MySpace, carefully arrange the 10 top friends on that platform, and check out online games. Now those early tools have been honed to be as addictive as possible. Social media is a space for unchecked bullying and a place for predators to hide. I got my first phone aged 13, but the most advanced technology on it was an FM radio. Today, phones are not phones at all—they are supercomputers in our pockets. No parent wants their child to be left out, and once that first child in a class gets a phone, the floodgates open. We must give schools and parents tools to overcome that collective action problem.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating the Fulham boys school in my constituency, which was the first school in the country to replace smartphones with brick phones? As a result, it has seen pupils become more engaged, better social interactions and improved classroom behaviour. Does he agree that that school sets an example for the country to follow?

Freddie van Mierlo: I happily join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating that school.

Unfortunately, what we have seen today is a tragedy of the Commons, with the weakening of this legislation. We could not, even in this Chamber, overcome the collective action problem to deliver tougher regulation—which we need to stop the misuse of technology and keep the next generation safe—rather than reviews and a promise to plan research. I am happy to see other Members contributing to the conversation, but I note that Reform Members, including the hon. Member for

Clacton (Nigel Farage), have decided not to grace us with their presence. If they cared so much about the protection of our children, they would be here.

In conversations with friends who have school-age children, I have learned of apps, such as Roblox, that allow any person to open a conversation with another user of the game. I also heard from campaigners that even Spotify can be used to share explicit images and conduct online grooming. I have spoken to parents in Henley and Thame who are distraught that their children were groomed by predators through social media. When they reported the crime to the police, they were told that nothing could be done because a virtual private network had been used. Technology is constantly evolving and we must stay informed of its developments. Parents must be informed of the risks facing children who use social media.

There is a way forward. We are all aware that social media companies are making huge profits from their activity. Introducing a social media levy to increase tax on those companies is an obvious choice. The money collected from the tax could then be used to support children by funding mental health services. Social media is having a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of children. The least we can do is use its profits to mitigate some of the damage.

The digital age of consent must be increased to 16. The age of 13 is too young for a child to consent to the collection, processing and storing of their data. The change would not ban children under 16 from using social media, but it would force social media companies to make applications safer and child-friendly for those under 16. My daughter is just 14 months old, but she is already being targeted by shows that seek to manipulate babies' brains to avoid losing their attention. That shows just how pernicious the online space has become, and as a father I fear what it will look like in 10 years' time. We must act.

Catherine Fookes: Thank you so much for giving way. Do you agree that, although this point has not come across in the debate, we all meet the most incredible young people every day in our constituencies, and we must congratulate them on the amazing things they do—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I remind hon. Members that interventions must be very short at this point, and please do not to refer to each other as “you”.

Freddie van Mierlo: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating young people on their work.

I say as a father that we must act now to reduce the harm caused to two current generations of children and never expose future generations to those harms.

12.42 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): In the brief time available to me, I want to reinforce my tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for his excellent work in leading the Bill, which I have been proud to sponsor. In the hearings over the past few months, it has been eye-opening to see parents and campaigners face to face

with tech executives, regulators and others, who have been either unwilling or unable to act to tackle this problem head-on.

I will pass on three messages to the Minister in the two minutes that I have. On health, at a recent event with local campaigners in Kensington and Bayswater, a doctor shocked the room when she said that the impact of excessive phone and social media use on children is now the main concern among her paediatrician peers—not pollution, not smoking, not diet. It is the issue we are debating today that most worries paediatricians.

Although there will always be calls for more evidence of causality, it is time, as others have said, to flip that narrative. We should challenge those who want to go slow on this issue to come up with any plausible alternative cause of the recent mental health trends. Next week, the House will discuss the huge rise in incapacity benefit, including for people with mental health challenges. If we want to tackle that issue, we must tackle the root causes such as the one we are discussing today, which will fail not only our children, but our future prosperity.

In the last 30 seconds of my speech, I want to give one story of hope from Andrew O'Neill, headmaster at All Saints Catholic college in north Kensington, who was recently awarded headteacher of the year. When he saw what had happened post-covid, with that toxic combination of isolation and smartphone addiction, he extended the school day, making it a voluntary 12-hour school day, with breakfast at 7 am and supervised study classes, cooking and extracurricular activities in the evening. He has managed to break that cycle—he is a pioneering head. I want that for every child in the country, not just those students.

The final word goes to Zayneb, who attends school in my constituency, and who has been watching from the Gallery all day. She said to me:

“You say you're just going to check a message, but suddenly you've fallen into the black hole of posts, YouTube videos, and endless scrolling. Next thing you know, two hours have passed, and you've done nothing productive.”

She asks whether this is truly the future we want for our children, or whether we will look back and regret it. Her message is that young people want control over their screens, not the other way around, and they need our help to make that happen now.

12.45 pm

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): I will run through some of the contributions to the debate and then give specific answers to some of the points that have been made. First, I will probably have the unanimous support of the House in praising my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister). [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I am slightly worried that he was referred to as a patron saint earlier, because the danger with patron saints is that they tend to be martyred at some point in their career, and I do not wish that for him. As I said earlier, I am not going to make any of the arguments that he told me not to make, because I do not subscribe to them. I am also not going to make any arguments today against action—that is an important point that the House needs to recognise. Everybody accepts that action in this sphere is inevitable.

[Chris Bryant]

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) gave us some shocking statistics from her constituency, as have many other Members. The hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), who is no longer in her place—[*Interruption.*] Oh, she is here; sorry, I would not want to mislead the House. She fessed up to her own social media use, but she did not tell us how many hours a day it is, so we were watching her throughout the debate to see how much time she was spending on social media.

It is absolutely true that many of us are just as addicted as many young people, and while our specific concern is about the effects on the mental health of children, there are of course issues for the whole of society. Other Members have referred to misinformation and how it is propagated, and how to access good, reliable information in a world that is profoundly chaotic, where algorithms do not necessarily subscribe to truth in the way that previous understandings of the media used to. I note that the hon. Member for Reigate said that the state must step in—we will hold her to that on many more occasions in future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) made some very important points, including that it is sometimes the most vulnerable children who experience these effects. She also pointed—as did several other Members—to the desensitising effect on boys, in particular, who see versions of sex online that normalise a set of expectations about what a relationship with another person might be and what sex might involve that are wholly alien to most people’s understanding of what they should be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) made a point that was also made in a previous Westminster Hall debate on this issue: does the burden of proof lie with those trying to prove that there is no harm, or with those trying to prove that there is harm? It is important that we look at the evidence in the round and come to a coherent, sensible, one-Government decision on how we can make progress in this field.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with a wiser person than me, who said that our psychology is neolithic, our institutions are from the middle ages and our technology is of today, and that we have to get better at being able to engage with that technology?

Chris Bryant: I think it was John Prescott who said something about ancient values in a modern setting. As we move forward, we need to secure the liberty of the individual at the same time as we protect the vulnerable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Katie White) made the point that she has had twice as much correspondence on this subject as on any other this year. She made a really important point, which applies not only to this area, but to many other areas in which we work with young people: if we possibly can, it is very important to be able to extend the years of childhood that a child gets to enjoy. Many years ago, I wrote a report about teenage pregnancy in my constituency. That is another aspect of trying to ensure that where

children delay their first sexual experience, it is almost certainly better for them and leads to better personal, social and other outcomes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) made a point about children attending A&E with psychiatric conditions. I urge him to be slightly cautious about the statistics here, because the work that I have done on acquired brain injuries suggests that sometimes people are actually presenting with a brain injury, rather than a psychiatric condition. That is one of the areas where we need to be much more intelligent about how we get data that informs our research.

We heard from the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding)—incidentally, I see “Esher and Walton” written down and think, “That must be a Conservative Member of Parliament,” so it is such a delight when I find that it is not.

Melanie Ward: In my constituency and across my area of Fife we have a real problem with violence and aggression in schools. Every week for the last month there has been a violent attack by children on children, and on almost every occasion it is filmed, shared on social media and amplified. Does the Minister agree that that is a real reason why we need action?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. The use of a mobile phone as another form of aggression is a very disturbing part of the trend we have seen. She is quite right that we need to consider action in that field.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton referred to services that are “inherently addictive by design”. I think there is actually a contradiction in terms there. They are not inherently addictive; they are addictive by design. Those are two quite different things. We should strive to achieve no services provided for children being addictive by design, which is precisely one of the things that the Government are determined about.

I should say to the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) that I indicated earlier that I had had no meetings with tech by making a zero with my fingers, but that is not quite true. I had a meeting a few months ago with Baroness Jones and TikTok, although I expressed as strongly as many Members have in this debate the kind of views that they have in relation to the operation of TikTok. It is not that I have been convinced by TikTok—if anything, we were trying to put the argument to it about the need for responsible activity in this field.

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification. In his negotiations with the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), he will have consulted and taken direction from No. 10. One of the concerns, given that he has instituted an investigation into the impact of UK legislation on American tech firms, is that President Trump might be upset if we were to take these kinds of steps. How much of that has been a consideration in him effectively filleting this Bill?

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman is beginning to subscribe to conspiracy theories. I have had no role in any negotiations with my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington or with Downing Street

on these matters, and I have not taken into consideration anything in relation to what Donald Trump might think about this field.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson) said that he is 32, which is obviously very difficult to believe. He referred to smartphones in 2007, but 3G was launched in 2001. I am slightly conscious that when I was at school, the only thing we were rowing about was whether we were allowed to take electronic calculators into O-level maths exams, so I sometimes feel a little out of my depth with all these young expressions of interest.

Kit Malthouse: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Chris Bryant: I bet this is not a point of order.

Kit Malthouse: It is a point of order. Madam Deputy Speaker, I wonder if you could give us guidance as to whether we actually have the right Minister responding to this Bill. If there were negotiations with the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) about the Bill, one would expect the Minister who had conducted those negotiations, and who was therefore able to speak to the decisions that have been made, to appear at the Dispatch Box. Have we got the right person?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. However, that is not a matter for the Chair. It is entirely up to the Government to decide which Minister they put up to speak.

Chris Bryant: I am afraid you will have to put up with me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) referred to the fear of missing out, which is such a potent aspect of many young people's lives. It had its previous version before digital arrived, but it is so much more acute now, and it cuts in so many different ways at the same time. She also referred to Ellen Roome and the issues in the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which we will discuss in the Public Bill Committee next Tuesday and Thursday, and then on Report in a few weeks' time. I look forward to her contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling), with whom I cannot compete for youth, made a very important point: one of the positive effects that social media can introduce, and which was not available to me when I was trying to work out, at the age of 15 or 16, whether I was gay, is that there is a diaspora—there are other worlds where there are people a bit more like me. That is a release for many young people, so being able to harness what is good in social media, and to lose what is bad, is the key task for us.

Nothing could matter more than the mental, physical and spiritual health of our young people. There are many aspects to that health, including addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling and, I would argue, as many others have done today, smartphone use. Harmful messages about body image, violent and risky sex, radicalisation, bullying, self-confidence and taking one's own life are all part of that. Physical health is, of course, part of

mental and spiritual health. As many Members have mentioned, getting out and about, eye-to-eye contact and brain development all matter. Let us be absolutely clear: excessive smartphone use is engaged in all aspects of mental, spiritual and, I would argue, physical ill health.

Algorithms can be set to increase addictive scrolling. Apps with weak age verification processes expose children to completely inappropriate material. The business model for some tech companies is not always conducive to children's health. We also have to consider the benefits of limited, rather than excessive, use of smartphones. A lot of modern life is accessed online, including homework. Social media can gather diaspora, but that too can be a minefield.

If hon. Members have not seen "Under the Volcano", which is a Polish film about a Ukrainian family stuck in Tenerife at the point of Putin's second invasion of Ukraine three years ago, they should watch it, because the children in the film are absolutely terrified of what social media is going to tell them about what is happening back at home. I am also conscious that for some neurodiverse youngsters, social media is an absolutely vital means of ensuring their health.

We fully recognise the difficulties facing parents, teachers and youth workers in adjudicating rows, as has often been referred to. Teachers know that they are part of a child's life for only 20% of their time, so the social expectations on parents are just as important as anything else. I fully recognise the complaint that I hear regularly from young people in my constituency: "There's nothing else to do around here." A hundred years ago, in every one of our constituencies, there would have been youth clubs, Scouts and Guides, and lots of different organisations that specifically catered for young people to do active things outside the home. Many of those things barely exist today, and that is part of what we need to look at.

Let me talk specifically about what we will do and what we are doing. I wish that the Online Safety Act 2023 had been introduced in 2020, 2021 or 2022, because it was far too delayed. It is extremely frustrating for Ministers that it has taken so long to get to this point. We are working with Ofcom to implement every element of the Act as fast as we can, but some elements are written into the Act itself. The Secretary of State wrote to Ofcom on 16 October last year to say that we want to implement everything as fast as we can, while taking on board the criticisms that some people have made of Ofcom.

The illegal content codes have now passed parliamentary scrutiny and will come into force this month; I hope that will produce some change. The draft children's safety codes which have been referred to are nearly finalised. The child safety regime will be in effect by the summer, which is good news, and the Online Safety Act itself, in section 178, says that it must be reviewed. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has launched its own feasibility study of the impact of smartphones and social media use, which will report in May. It is being run by the University of Cambridge and a consortium of experts. We hope that the Bill will help us to build on that feasibility study, so that we have the information that we need to take a considered view. We will work to roughly the same timetable as the one for which the Bill provides. The closer we can get to a causal and direct relationship between smartphone use

[Chris Bryant]

and mental health issues, and to clear evidence of the best, most effective, and most appropriate and proportionate intervention by the Government, the better.

We are introducing further measures in the Data (Use and Access) Bill. Under clauses 91, 124 and 81, new requirements for the design of processing activities by information society services likely to be accessed by children, so that they can be protected and supported, will make a significant difference.

The Bill's recommendations chime very much with what we intend to do, and are helpful in that direction. Of course we want the Online Safety Act to bed in; of course we want to implement the data Bill and those new provisions; of course we want to conduct fuller, more authoritative research and provide clear advice for teachers and parents across the land; and of course this is not the end of the matter. I shall be amazed if there is not further legislation in this area in the coming years. I commend the campaigners who have made such a strong case to us, via my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington.

The words of the paediatrician mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) are ringing in my mind. There is no option of inaction for this House or this country. There has to be action, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington for introducing the Bill today.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—
(Jeff Smith.)

Debate to be resumed on Friday 11 July.

Space Industry (Indemnities) Bill

Second Reading

1.3 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It may be of interest to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Bradford, part of which you represent, contains a centre of space expertise, namely the University of Bradford. I will return to that later.

I am privileged to introduce a Bill that will help to push forward investment in the UK's critical space sector. It will amend two sections of the Space Industry Act 2018 to provide legal certainty that all space flight operator licences must include a limit on the amount of the operator's liability to the Government under section 36 of the Act. What are space flight activities, one may ask? They cover launching spacecraft, such as satellites, into space, operating spacecraft in space—for example, allowing a spacecraft to orbit Earth—and bringing spacecraft back down to Earth.

Under the international law applicable to space, Governments, including ours in the UK, are liable for damage to property, death or personal injury caused by their space activities or by their nationals. That is a key reason why section 36 of the 2018 Act requires people carrying out spaceflight activities to indemnify the Government against such claims. The Bill provides legal certainty over the need to limit liability because that will encourage desperately needed investment in the sector.

The space sector and satellites are central to almost everyone's day-to-day life. Let us take something simple like a trip to a football match. Middlesbrough fans—I'm afraid I am not among them—have a famous fanzine called "Fly Me To The Moon". That is not a reference to Sinatra, but they might buy it using contactless. People will make their way to the match with the use of maps and travel updates on their phones and use Google Pay or Apple Wallet to store tickets and get into the stadium. All this depends on satellite technology. One may ask why the Boro fanzine is called "Fly Me To The Moon". It is because Bruce Rioch, a great Scottish manager, then manager of Middlesbrough, said of his captain:

"If I had to fly to the moon I'd take Tony Mowbray, my captain, with me. He's a magnificent man."

Both men played a significant role in saving that magnificent football club.

Suppose, Madam Deputy Speaker, you wanted to read on your device "The First Men in the Moon" by H.G. Wells. That requires satellites. The protagonist in that novel is a Mr Bedford. I was brought up in Bedford, a wonderful town in Bedfordshire, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) is a fine friend. Suppose you wanted to stream "Breakfast at Tiffany's", famous for Audrey Hepburn singing "Moon River". Streaming music depends on satellites. I confess that "Moon River" was one of my lullabies of choice when my children were younger and I was desperately trying to get them to sleep. I did not think that "Subterranean Homesick Alien" by Radiohead would be an apposite choice or, for that matter, Lou Reed's great song "Satellite of Love", so I stuck with "Moon

River". The House will be pleased to know that I do not propose to sing "Moon River", because I am appalling at singing.

The critical point is that satellites and related technology are critical to modern life, and they will become even more so. There is a significant economic opportunity for the United Kingdom here. European demand for satellites up to 2033 is forecast to be worth \$50 billion. Even 2% of that would bring around \$1 billion in revenues for the UK economy alone. This provides a serious economic opportunity to the United Kingdom, and we must seize it with both hands, because we must get growth back into the British economy, and that is what our Government are determined to do.

Space is an industry of the future—a future of hundreds of years—and it is critical that we invest in and support industries that can bring our family of nations prosperity for decades to come. As President John F. Kennedy said,

"man and his quest for knowledge and progress is determined and cannot be deterred. The exploration of space will go ahead, whether we join in it or not. And it is one of the great adventures of all time."

President Kennedy said that in 1961, and in 2025 I say it is high time that the United Kingdom got stuck into this adventure and seized the opportunities it will provide.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this Bill—he is reaching for the stars with it, quite literally. I am proud to have a company in my constituency called Alpha Data, which is just 50 metres from my constituency office, but the products it designs are 250 miles above us. It has a sensor outside the International Space Station that measures atmospheric heating and cooling. Alpha Data employs 30 people in its office, but its supply chain stretches from inside the city to Kilsyth, the Scottish Borders and nearby Livingston. Does my hon. Friend agree that this company is evidence that the space sector is thriving in Scotland, and that this Bill should help it to go "To infinity and beyond"?

John Grady: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. Edinburgh has a thriving space sector, as does Scotland. My hon. Friend has for many years been heavily involved in work to grow the economy in Edinburgh and the Borders, and I pay tribute to him for that.

I must, however, take this opportunity to pick a minor bone with my hon. Friend. He mentioned that Glasgow does not have a castle, and I wish to correct the record. We have a fine ruined castle called Crookston castle. It is the second-oldest building in Glasgow. The first-oldest building in Glasgow is the beautiful cathedral. I will not indulge in a dispute about whether Edinburgh or Glasgow is the better city. They are both beautiful, great cities. Glasgow is slightly better, but there you are. I am obliged to my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I am also glad to be able to correct that point.

There is another reason why it is important that we have a thriving space and satellite industry. Space is critical to defence, and we must have a thriving space sector to protect our country. The United Kingdom works with allies to ensure that our interests are defended in space. However, the world is becoming more unstable, and it is essential that we have our own capabilities to launch and operate satellites from the United Kingdom,

and this Bill is important in that regard, too. It will help to secure a vibrant end-to-end space industry in the United Kingdom, and that is important for defence. To take one example, having our own domestic launch capability is important, and a vibrant civilian sector will help to cover the costs of that launch capability. This Bill also has a national security theme.

Owing to much hard work, including by the last Government, the UK Space Agency and many others, the United Kingdom also has a firm foundation for a thriving space industry. In the time available, I cannot provide a complete survey of the vibrant and growing space industry, but here are some key points. One key task we have had is to develop our own launch capability to put satellites up in space, and then to get them back down. That is why there is so much chat about spaceports—in my life, at least.

SaxaVord, the UK spaceport in the Shetland Islands, is one of only two licensed vertical launch spaceports in Europe. That is at the far end of the north of the map of our family of nations. Down in the far south-west, we also have an operational spaceport in Cornwall. That illustrates that space is an opportunity for our family of nations from the very top to the very bottom—I mean that only in a cartographic sense; I am not looking to offend any Members from Cornwall.

There are also spaceports under construction and planned in: Sutherland, on the far north of the coast of Scotland, to the west of Thurso; North Uist, a wonderful place, which I commend as I spent much of my honeymoon there; Glasgow Prestwick; Spaceport Machrihanish, on the southern tip of the Argyll peninsula, which I would also recommend for a visit to Scotland; and, Snowdonia. Some may wonder where those places are. They are all wonderful places, and they illustrate that space is an opportunity across the United Kingdom.

Let us turn to the satellite or, as Lou Reed sang, "Satellite of Love". The UK has incredible talents in manufacturing satellites and satellite technology. As a Scottish MP, I focus on Scotland, and as a Glasgow MP, I focus on Glasgow, but let us start in the Moray firth, where my mother came from. It has a fine tradition of engineering. For those who follow highland league football—I suspect I am in a minority of one in the House today—the fact that Forres Mechanics is one of the oldest football clubs in the north of Scotland points to a tradition of engineering there. The Jones shipyard in Buckie is another great engineering industry in the north of Scotland.

Of significantly more relevance to this debate is that Forres is home to Orbex, which is developing a rocket called Prime. It will be the first UK-manufactured and UK-launched orbital rocket. Prime is set to take off from SaxaVord in 2025. The UK Government have recently announced a £20 million investment in Orbex—an important investment that demonstrates the opportunities being brought to the north of Scotland, for which we need to redouble our efforts to secure economic growth and prosperity.

My home city of Glasgow has a rich history of innovation and an incredibly promising cluster of space expertise. As a Glasgow MP, I am determined that it should have a bright future in space. Glasgow is building more satellites than any other city in Europe. There are

[John Grady]

fantastic companies in the area including, Alba Orbital, which specialises in PocketQube satellites, AAC Clyde Space, which has expertise in small satellite technology, and Spire Global, which is a leading provider of space-based data analytics and space services. This year is Glasgow's 850th birthday. The Bill will help secure the prosperity of Glasgow for the next 850 years, creating jobs and economic growth in my great city of hard work, innovation and enterprise.

There is clear economic analysis that shows that the space industry is an important opportunity area for growth and jobs. The latest "Size and Health of the UK Space Industry" report estimates that 228 organisations in Scotland generated a combined income of £298 million in 2021-22—almost double that of 2018-19 in real terms. About 6,500 people work in space in Scotland, and the figure for the UK is between 48,000 and 52,000. Income amounts to between £17.5 billion and £20 billion. There are more than 100,000 jobs in the supply chain as well.

Let us pause for a moment on that: we have only just got going on this and we have 48,000 or more jobs. There is much potential here for many more good, high-paid jobs of the future, which is what Britain needs.

Kanishka Narayan (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): My hon. Friend has given detailed and eloquent descriptions of the UK space sector, and Glasgow's contribution in particular, but what will the provisions of the Bill do for the rest of us—including those in south Wales and across Wales—so that space is also felt in our communities?

John Grady: The Bill applies across the United Kingdom, and obviously there is a space industry in south Wales, too. It will encourage investment in south Wales by protecting investors against unlimited liability. I see this as critical for the space industry in south Wales as well as in Scotland. Naturally, I focus on Scotland because I am obsessed with the place, but, I would add, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it is very important for Bradford, too.

It is important to note that the space industry is a source of good jobs, and not just for people with PhDs in astrophysics. Last year, the Scottish Affairs Committee heard that there were great opportunities for many different people in the space industry. It will provide jobs for school leavers, graduates and PhDs across the spectrum. That is something that is brilliant about space.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that the Ministry of Defence is a massive investor in the space sector, having invested £6.5 billion over the last decade? Does he welcome that investment as we are strengthening European security?

John Grady: I am obliged to my hon. Friend for his intervention. That is a very important point. Every week, we can pick up the paper and look at the discussion about where we need to invest in defence. We must invest in space, and we must have our own capability here in the United Kingdom—that is critical.

Over my lifetime, the domain of warfare has, sadly, expanded from ground, sea and air to space as well as online. It is critical that we invest in our capabilities here. The Bill is important for that. It is critical that we

continue to pursue investment by the Ministry of Defence and the UK Government, which I believe has cross-party support. It creates economic opportunities for the United Kingdom, too. The lesson of history and technological development is that investment in defence has significant civilian spin-outs, so it is quite right and proper for us to invest in it.

In summary, we have a huge opportunity and it is one that we must seize. The Bill has one, sole objective: to help get investment into the space sector so that we seize this opportunity. With that in mind, I now turn to provide more detail about the legal and commercial background to the proposed Bill. I must admit that, given my previous career as a lawyer, I find this bit the most interesting. However, I quite accept that for others it may have a more treacle-esque quality to it. I beg forgiveness, but I am afraid I must proceed!

As I have explained, the Bill seeks to limit space operators' liability. I start by emphasising that there is a very, very strong safety regime in operation here. Spaceflight activities are very heavily regulated by an independent regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority, to ensure that they are safe. In order to carry out spaceflight activities, one must obtain an operator licence granted by the CAA, which is independent of Government. It has a clear legal duty to secure the health and safety of the public and the safety of their property. That trumps all the CAA's other duties. It must put safety first.

A range of tests applies to the granting of licences. The applicant must be able to demonstrate that it has taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the risks to people and property are as low as possible, and that the level of those risks is acceptable. More generally, there is a detailed and robust safety regime governing spaceflight activities operated by the CAA. So, here we are concerned with small risks that are reduced to the minimum extent possible by a strong regulatory regime.

Under international space law, the UK Government have a long-standing legal liability for damage caused by spaceflight operations. There is, despite the safety regime, a residual risk that things can go wrong and that the Government can face claims. The UK Government can make claims against operators under section 36 of the 2018 Act. Again, that is quite proper. Under the regime, operators have to assume risk and under the Bill, although it limits liability, operators continue to bear risk. Of course, the Government need to ensure that operators can pay out on claims made against them, which is why the 2018 Act regime and the licences make provision for compulsory insurance to be put in place by the operators. And, of course, it is usual for businesses to insure against foreseeable risks.

Under the regulatory regime, the risks must be properly assessed and appropriate levels of insurance put in place. The policy for that is set out in a detailed guidance document published by the Department for Transport, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—as it was then—the UK Space Agency and the Civil Aviation Authority. I think everyone will be relieved to hear that I do not propose to give a detailed exposition of the regime or take them through the documents, but the critical point is that the regime requires appropriate levels of insurance to be in place that protects the taxpayer and is supervised by a strong independent regulator.

The risk for spaceflight operators is that claims from the Government under section 36 exceed the carefully assessed insurance. The current legislation does not require the CAA and the Government to cap operators' liability. The relevant section makes it entirely optional. Section 12(2) of the 2018 Act provides that

"An operator licence may specify a limit on the amount of the licensee's liability under section 36 in respect of the activities authorised by the licence."

The key word here is "may". My proposal is that "may" is changed to "must", and that an "any" in section 36 is changed to "the" as a consequence. The Bill simply swaps two words with two other words.

The Government have a long-standing policy, as did the preceding Government, that liability should be limited. However, the issue for investors is that that is not set out in statute. This means that a future Government and regulators could change the policy with comparative ease, and that could damage existing investments and could lead to investors finding that they are exposed to unlimited liabilities. This is deterring, and will continue to deter, investment in the United Kingdom. The issue is causing real concern to investors.

This is a point that the space industry has made to the Government. In 2020, a cross-departmental consultation took place on the insurance and liability regime under the 2018 Act. In summary, many respondents raised concerns with the lack of a legally firm guarantee in the policy to limit liability. That caused concerns that operators would be exposed to unlimited liability in future. The then Government accepted the point but explained that introducing a provision to require a cap on liability would require primary legislation—and that is what I am proposing today. The Government also made it clear that, in the meantime, all operator licences would include a limit of liability. I agree with that decision.

The issue was also discussed in the 2021 report prepared by the taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform, which proposed the introduction of a mandatory cap on the liability of licence holders, to encourage investment in the sector. Respondents to a UK Space Agency consultation in 2021-22 reiterated calls to make the limit of liability in section 12(2) of the 2018 Act mandatory. This is a long-standing unresolved issue.

The space industry and potential investors are right to be concerned. As some hon. Members know, I am a recovering lawyer. In my past career, I had to deal with complex liability issues—I reassure Members that none of them was of my own making. I learned that investors are happy to accept risk, but if they are investing millions or billions in a high-risk industry, they want to know that they are not exposed to unlimited losses beyond what they can reasonably insure.

The investors are correct to state that a Government policy can be withdrawn with much greater ease than a statute. Indeed, the plain fact, in my experience, is that the scope for legal challenge when Government policies are withdrawn is often quite limited. In such a situation, many investors simply will not invest. They want to know that risks are clearly and fairly allocated, manageable and covered by insurance, and they want to understand that the liability regime is legally solid. In contrast to a guidance document, a statute will provide much greater protection. Investors accept that it will not provide

absolute protection, but a statutory protection will give much more comfort. That is a reasonable position for potential investors to adopt.

It is important to understand that investors have a choice of places in which to invest. Many countries want this space investment, and the United Kingdom has to be attractive to investors. These investments are long term and investors need to be sure that they are covered on a firm legislative basis—they need some security. My understanding is that all other launching nations—that is, nations with launch capability—limit liabilities or provide a state guarantee for the type of activities that currently take place from their territory.

At present, faced with this massive economic opportunity, we are at a disadvantage. There is a clear risk to the competitiveness of our space industry and, as a result, to its growth. The unlimited liability of the indemnity to Government is damaging investor confidence and makes the United Kingdom a less attractive place from which to launch. That will undermine our ambition for growth in the sector, and our ambitions to ensure that we can keep our country safe and to grow our defence in this area. The Bill confronts the problem and will make the UK a much more attractive place to invest.

To sum up, Madam Deputy Speaker—I suspect some people will be glad, given the dry topic, although I am happy to keep going—the space sector is central to almost everyone's life. How could we check our emails in this Chamber without it? There is a significant economic opportunity for the UK here. The space sector is critical to our defence. The United Kingdom has a firm foundation for a thriving space industry, and we must build on it, including in Scotland, south Wales, Cornwall and the south-east of England. There are even people on the Isle of Wight who work in space.

There is a robust safety regime governing space operated by an incredibly highly experienced independent regulator. Operators have to put in place compulsory insurance, but there is a concern for investors that above that insurance, they will have unlimited exposure. That has been repeatedly explained to Government. The investors' position is reasonable. The proposed change would limit liability and make the UK a more effective place to invest.

The Bill will help create economic growth, jobs and prosperity for decades to come from Cornwall to Shetland. It is good news for the great cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and for great south Wales, and for growth and jobs across the United Kingdom. It is time to resolve this issue; jobs and investment depend on it—including in Bradford, Madam Deputy Speaker, which is a real centre of excellence for space.

The Bill changes two words: "may" to "must", and "any" to "the". It may be one of the smallest Bills in recent memory. I have not done the research into the smallest Bill in Parliament's history—I guess we are looking for a one-word Bill—but this Bill has one big objective: to ensure further investment in the UK space industry. I could say that this is one small step for Parliament, but a big step for the space industry, if I was any good at puns and humour. But, as I suspect some of the hon. Members from Scotland could tell us, I am no good at puns and I am humourless. Nevertheless, I commend the Bill to the House.

1.31 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary group for space. It is perhaps fitting that a week after the planets aligned in the night sky for the first time in 360 years, this House is considering legislation that could help the UK's thriving space industry.

Almost a fifth of UK jobs in the space sector are based in Scotland. Scotland's space sector leads in small satellite manufacturing. Glasgow builds more small satellites than any other place in Europe. Scotland is also the data-driven capital of Europe, hosting more than 170 data science companies. I commend the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) in his Bill, which would remove barriers to spaceflight activities in Scotland and the UK as a whole, growing the space launch sector.

The Bill helps to demonstrate how specific measures supported by the UK Government in reserved matters can help developing industries in Scotland and the UK to grow and prosper. Just as engineers need certainty in their calculations for successful space launches, companies need certainty to be comfortable when investing in an industry. This Bill, by providing an operating liability cap for spaceflight operators, would deliver the legal certainty for the space sector to know the up-front maximum amount they could be liable for. That would reduce uncertainty and make it easier for them to secure insurance coverage.

I am aware that talk of insurance and liability is not as interesting as spaceflight itself, but they are, none the less, important for the development of the sector. The Bill signals that it is a growth sector that we are willing to support and to be in dialogue with. It was informed by a consultation on spaceflight liability, insurance and charging by the previous Government. My hon. Friend's Bill would help reduce the financial risk for those businesses and would align the UK with international standards, thus making it a more attractive location for space companies to invest and operate in.

Overall, the Bill would mean more space flights out of Scotland and the rest of the UK, more innovation, and more well-paid jobs. Supporting growth in the space sector would also see a network effect across my city of Glasgow and further afield. My constituency of Glasgow North is home to the University of Glasgow, which houses the expertise, skills and talent that not only benefit the sector already, but serve as a vital pipeline for its future growth.

Glasgow has long been a hub for small satellite design and manufacturing, with Scotland holding the title of the second largest producer of satellites after the United States of America. In the Glasgow North constituency, the West of Scotland science park and the Skypark in Finnieston further strengthen that ecosystem, hosting manufacturers and research and development sites that support everything from rocket launchers to small satellite spacecraft. Those facilities play a crucial role in driving innovation and providing high-quality skilled jobs, reinforcing Glasgow's position at the forefront of the global space industry.

I urge colleagues to support the Bill to help the space industry achieve the legal certainty around liabilities that it needs to continue to thrive and source investment. With that growth, we can help deliver jobs and prosperity

for Glasgow, Scotland and the rest of the UK. I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing the Bill to the House, and I am pleased to support it.

1.35 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I am proud to speak in support of the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on the space industry. Like large parts of Scotland, my constituency has a burgeoning footprint in the aerospace industry—indeed, not just the industry, but the supply chain, because as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) pointed out, Kirkintilloch and Kilsyth are very much part of my area and it is becoming one of our largest industrial sectors.

To be honest, my interest in space, like that of many in my generation, comes from a combination of sci-fi and being made to watch the launch of the space shuttle. As the opening statements of “Star Trek” told us, space is “the final frontier” and we should “boldly go where no man has gone before”. Given that what separates the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East from mine is the M73, a major part of Scotland's motorway and logistics infrastructure, it is probably fair to say that people do not boldly go on that journey every day, although having once spent the night on the motorway during a snowstorm, it does feel a bit like the final frontier at times.

The Bill is exceptionally technical, and the need for it is immense. The Prime Minister rightly reminded us this week of the need for Europe to be united and not rely on the United States when conflict comes to our continent. While that is true in Ukraine, it is also immediately true in space. There may be competition within the sector in Europe, and we have even heard about competition within the sector in Scotland, but that is healthy. However, we must break up the dominance of the US private sector in this space. To develop the sector at warp speed is vital.

Constituencies such as mine are crying out for advanced engineering jobs—jobs that are highly skilled and naturally well paid. Our local economies benefit from people coming from all over the country to work in those factories and warehouse units. People visit those units, as I have had the privilege to do, and they meet the range of people who work there. No longer is this the engineering I knew in my childhood—it is no longer pale, male and stale. The role of women in the industry is obvious, which takes us right back to the original series of “Star Trek” in the '70s, where the inspirational and transformative effect that Nichelle Nichols had as Lieutenant Uhura cannot be overstated. The fact that she was hired by NASA to recruit women and people of colour for the space shuttle programme between 1997 and 2015 showed the impact that she had. Many astronauts have credited Nichols and Uhura with inspiring them to want to work in that industry. Mae Jemison was the first African-American woman in space in 1992, and a year later she appeared on the decks of the USS Enterprise as part of “Star Trek: The Next Generation”.

All the devices that we love to watch on “Star Trek” are what we are using today—look at our iPads. It had the first handheld mobile devices and personal access display screens. In the “Star Trek” world, Jean-Luc Picard

would say to his replicator, “Tea, Earl Grey, hot,” and it would then appear from the ship’s reserves. We are not quite at that level of sophistication yet, although the work of 3D printers and computer-aided design, and the effect of that on the advanced engineering sector, cannot be overestimated. Indeed, we are now seeing food products being printed, so maybe in the not-too-distant future Patrick Stewart himself will be able to order up a “Tea, Yorkshire, hot.”

NASA has said that, although not yet developed, the warp drive is something that could be possible in the future. Investment in our sector makes it happen—or, again in the words of Jean-Luc Picard, it makes it so.

1.40 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate in support of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) and his mission to make positive change in this industry. I profess that I have little knowledge about space, but he and others have made their points so well about how this slight change to the licensing of spaceflight—the launch, flight and return of spacecraft satellites, which is something I can just about envisage—would encourage greater investment in businesses. That growth and investment is so important for all of us and for our economy. So much of our day-to-day life is reliant on satellites. We had an important debate earlier about the use of smartphones—but hey, we all need them, and they are reliant on satellites in space.

I reflected on spaceflight and activities in outer space. Like some others in the Chamber, I remember “Flash Gordon” and “Star Wars” coming out. It was so surreal and fantastical; it was, indeed,

“A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....”

Okay, I got it in *Hansard*.

Encouraging investment in space is really important, and I speak as the granddaughter of an eminent physicist. Again, it is the combination of science and the evolution of engineering and computing—all of this—that is so important for the future of business in the space sector.

As we are talking about investment in businesses, I want to encourage young people to search out a career in the future space industry. Others have spoken about careers in space science and technology, particularly in Scotland, which is great to hear. Although my hon. Friend represents Glasgow East, he is originally from Bedfordshire, which is another reason why I wanted to speak in this debate, which gives me a brilliant opportunity to talk about the University of Bedfordshire. The main campus is in my constituency of Luton South and South Bedfordshire, but the other campus is in Bedford itself. There are some brilliant opportunities to study on courses in artificial intelligence, robotics, computer science, software engineering and applications, electronic engineering and mechanical engineering, all of which would lead to brilliant careers in the space industry, so I strongly encourage young people who are looking to forge a career to consider them, as well as career changers—I wholeheartedly believe in lifelong learning, so maybe I could yet become someone involved in space.

The space industry is an important growth area for jobs across the UK. There are some in my constituency, and it is fantastic that we are looking to grow our economy up and down the United Kingdom, so I absolutely

welcome this change. Small it may be, but it will have a big impact. I wanted to get on record my support for this measure and its importance for people in my constituency who may want to seek out a future career in the space industry.

1.44 pm

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I challenge anyone who has listened to the speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) not to think, “What a time to be alive.” We also have three castles on the Isle of Wight, one of which imprisoned Charles I, and it also has a donkey that powers a wheel to draw water from its well. I have no idea what use that is to this debate, but I felt very much left out.

I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this important Bill, which not only reaffirms the UK’s commitment to advancing space travel and exploration but ensures that that progress is built on a foundation of safety, accessibility and innovation. At a time when the global space sector is increasingly dominated by billionaire-led ventures, the Bill sends a clear message that the UK remains dedicated to a space industry that is both pioneering and responsible—one that prioritises safety, fosters innovation and creates opportunity for all.

I am proud to say that the Isle of Wight has a fantastic history of supporting and growing the UK’s space industry—it gives colleagues a break from hearing me talk about ferries. As in many other areas, we punch above our weight in this regard. In 1955, Saunders-Roe, based in East Cowes, began developing the Black Knight research ballistic missile. Over the course of its programme, Black Knight achieved 22 successful launches without a single major failure, a remarkable feat that showcased British engineering excellence. That legacy highlights the Isle of Wight’s pivotal role in the history of British space exploration and technological innovation, demonstrating its potential to contribute to the UK’s modern space ambitions.

However, we want to be not just a part of space history, but a part of space future. One of the biggest barriers to growth in the UK space industry has been the issue of liability. At present, the Government risk unlimited liability when launching satellites or conducting spaceflight operations. That uncertainty discourages investment, as insurers and financial backers are unwilling to support projects with unpredictable risks. The Bill before us is a simple, but crucial, fix: it will ensure that all spaceflight licences set a clear limit on operator liability, bringing us in line with international standards. That change is particularly important for smaller, emerging space companies, many of which could see the Isle of Wight as a viable location for future space-related ventures.

Rachel Hopkins: I am really pleased to hear my hon. Friend mention small businesses. Does he agree that start-up and scale-up small businesses are vital for our economies up and down the country?

Mr Quigley: I do indeed agree that small businesses are going to be the way forward when it comes to space technology. The Isle of Wight is a viable location for future space-related ventures, whether in satellite manufacturing, research or launch support services.

Alex Ballinger: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Quigley: Indeed I will—I am quite enjoying this.

Alex Ballinger: My hon. Friend mentioned satellites. Does he recognise the massive benefits that satellites bring to the UK—everything from contactless transactions to supporting our defence and national security?

Mr Quigley: Bearing in mind the last Bill we were debating, I am not sure how much we can say about the benefits that satellites have brought, but yes, I do appreciate that.

We on the Isle of Wight already have the infrastructure to build on, with our skilled workforce, proximity to the south coast's aerospace sector, and strategic location for maritime and aerospace testing. We are well placed to benefit from the fairer, clearer regulatory framework that we will create by passing this Bill. Not only are we strengthening the UK's position in the global space industry, but we are opening up new opportunities for regions such as the Isle of Wight. Let us ensure that our island and the UK as a whole remains at the forefront of space innovation. I urge colleagues to support the change of two words that this Bill would effect, for the sake of not only our commitment to the growth agenda, but this country's commitment to the future.

1.49 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on introducing this important debate. The two-word change might be the most consequential change ever made in Parliament. I am pleased to support the Bill.

Today marks the commencement of British Science Week, a celebration of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. This year's theme, "Change and adapt", is particularly fitting—it feels almost as if the stars have aligned—because we are debating the space industry today, which is built on technology, engineering and mathematics. The Bill perfectly aligns with the theme of British Science Week, as it seeks to implement small but significant changes to adapt the space industry in the UK and make it fit for the future.

As many other Members have explained, the space sector is an incredibly valuable industry for the UK economy, and one that we should all take pride in. The UK has long been committed to boosting commercial industry, with over 1,500 space companies on our shores. The UK leads in start-up and scale-up investment, second globally only to the United States. That is a huge achievement and a real opportunity that we must continue to nurture.

A consultation undertaken by the previous Government showed that operators holding unlimited liabilities often viewed that as a barrier to conducting spaceflight activities from the UK. The same consultation confirmed that other launching nations limit liabilities or provide a state guarantee for spaceflight activities conducted from their territory. This reality does not give investors a firm footing when looking towards the UK as a place to invest. If we are truly serious about fostering growth across the length and breadth of our country, the space sector must play an incredibly important role. The Bill ensures that companies and investors are confident about the UK as a space in which to invest.

People in Halesowen may question what this means for them, as our small part of the west midlands does not have the largest space industry, but we all benefit from the services born of the space sector. Satellite technology, which I mentioned just now, is made possible by the space industry and enables us to buy our morning coffees with contactless payments. Satellites assist with navigation and, importantly, many of them support our defence and national security, keeping us all safe.

The Ministry of Defence has been a major player in this field for some time, investing £6.5 billion over the past decade, including £5 billion for satellite communications through Skynet, and £1.5 billion through the defence space portfolio. The defence space strategy sets out our focus on intelligence, surveillance and satellite communications. I know that colleagues from across the Chamber will welcome that approach, as do industry and allies alike. The additional £1.5 billion of investment through the defence space portfolio brings significant investment to space research and development, and the jobs, skills and expertise that go with it. Through that investment, we are ensuring not only that we meet the threats of the future, but that we help to build the capability, expertise, skills and jobs that will serve defence and the wider civil space programme. Any efforts to expand on that are therefore wholly welcome.

Investment in space is much more than that, however. I know that for many of the Members in the Chamber, particularly those of us with a keen interest in "Star Trek", the prospect of sending rockets into the sky is an exciting one. At its core, investment in the space industry is about so much more: unlocking the economy and allowing significant economic growth.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My hon. Friend talked about how Halesowen might not benefit hugely from the space industry, but the Government are developing our industrial strategy right now, and space should be right at the heart of it because of what it could bring Halesowen and similar towns and cities across the country. Does he agree?

Alex Ballinger: I welcome the UK's industrial strategy, particularly the defence industrial strategy. Many businesses in Halesowen, such as Somers Forge, work in the UK defence sector—primarily the Navy—given our engineering expertise in a heavily industrial part of the country, but there are opportunities for lots of businesses across the country to get involved in the space sector. This small change will unlock a lot of investment that could be used in many different places.

There are other reasons to support the sector. If our goal is to eliminate the obstacles that hinder new businesses from establishing themselves in the UK, these two small words will help to make that change. In doing so, we aim to create an environment in which companies are encouraged to set up operations here, rather than relocating to other countries. We must focus on retaining jobs and ensuring that the employment opportunities of the future are available right here in the UK. Additionally, fostering a thriving business ecosystem will not only boost our economy but drive innovation and technological advancements. By supporting the sector, we can create a sustainable and prosperous future for our nation, attract global talent and investment across science, technology, and research and development, and contribute to the Government's core mission of growth.

Once again, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East on his Bill. It is a significant step towards ensuring that the UK remains at the forefront of the space industry, driving economic growth and innovation for years to come, and a clear signal to the world that the UK is open for business, ready to lead in the space industry and dedicated to creating a thriving environment for growth and development. By supporting the Bill, we are investing in not only the space industry, but the future of our country, ensuring that we remain competitive on the global stage and continue to attract the best and brightest minds to our shores.

1.54 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): It is an honour to rise today to speak on the Space Industry (Indemnities) Bill and to champion the vital opportunities the space sector provides, especially to constituencies in Scotland, but also across the whole of our country, and to my area of Nottinghamshire in particular. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on introducing the Bill and commend him for talking for 30 minutes, given that he is changing only two words of legislation.

I begin by echoing my colleagues' sentiments about the transformative potential of our country's space industry. The industry is already worth £17.5 billion to our economy, employing 50,000 people across the nation. It is quite literally a sector with no limits, and the Bill represents a crucial step in ensuring that we remain a global leader in space exploration, satellite technology and aerospace innovation. I have already mentioned the UK's modern industrial strategy, which this Government are developing, and I genuinely hope that space sits at the heart of it.

In Rushcliffe and across Nottinghamshire we are witnessing the profound impact of this growing sector, and I am immensely proud to highlight some of the exciting developments that are taking place in our region. Just a short journey from my constituency is the Sherwood observatory, in Sutton-in-Ashfield, which is currently undergoing a £6.8 million transformation, and will soon open a state-of-the-art planetarium and science discovery centre, providing an unparalleled gateway to the stars for local students and visitors alike. What makes this project particularly remarkable is its innovative use of a Victorian water reservoir, blending historical preservation with cutting-edge science education.

Funded by the national lottery, the towns funds and private donations, the planetarium will inspire countless young minds, encouraging the next generation of scientists, engineers and, hopefully, some astronauts. The planetarium is set to generate a host of economic opportunities for Nottinghamshire, attracting visitors from across the UK, bolstering local tourism and supporting businesses in the area. Of course, it also underscores a commitment to making science accessible to all, regardless of background or geography.

Closer to Rushcliffe, we have the University of Nottingham's Institute for Aerospace Technology, a shining example of our region's commitment to excellence in research and innovation. The IAT is at the forefront of aerospace and space research, working with leading global companies to develop technologies that will define the future of space exploration. I am also proud to note that the university ranks among the top institutions in

the UK for aeronautical and aerospace engineering, securing seventh place in the UK "Complete University Guide" for 2025. This ranking is a testament to the exceptional work being done to prepare students for careers in the aerospace sector and develop groundbreaking technologies that will propel our nation to new heights, both figuratively and literally.

The Nottinghamshire space sector is about not just innovation, but inclusion and opportunity. The industry offers young people in our region the chance to pursue exciting, well-paid careers without needing to leave their communities.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The space sector offers opportunities to all our constituents. The defence industrial strategy is an opportunity to create and support activities based in STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—particularly in relation to space. Does my hon. Friend agree that my industrial strategy submission would be a worthy read for all Members today, as it highlights just that?

James Naish: I obviously have not read my hon. Friend's submission, but if he wants to send it to me I would very much welcome reading it.

The supply chain of the space sector is vast and diverse, as my hon. Friend has just alluded to, with almost 2,900 suppliers nationwide, half of which are small and medium-sized enterprises. By supporting this Bill and ensuring that the space industry can flourish in the UK, we are supporting businesses in Nottinghamshire and beyond that employ local people, contribute to the local economy and strengthen our communities. By virtue of even discussing the space industry here today, we are sending a clear message that the UK is a competitive and supportive environment for space businesses. This is about not just fostering innovation, but ensuring jobs and investment today and ensuring that expertise remains here in the UK, benefiting constituencies such as mine. Nottinghamshire is proudly playing its part; from Sherwood observatory's planetarium to the University of Nottingham's aerospace research, our region is a shining example of the transformative power of the space sector.

This Bill is an essential piece of legislation, as it addresses the current requirement for unlimited liability in cases of damages involving UK-owned satellites, which has inadvertently driven operators away from the UK to other countries with more favourable terms. By supporting the industry today, we are not just enabling launches into orbit, but launching a brighter future for young people, our economy and the UK as a whole. Collectively as a House, I hope that we will seize this opportunity to lead the world in space innovation while ensuring that the benefits of this industry are felt in every corner of the country.

2.1 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What fun we have had. We could have proper jobs, but instead we are talking about space industries and debating their importance. I recognise the ambition of the last Government; when deciding which Department should monitor space industries, one might have thought it would be the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, but no—we thought it should be the Department for Transport.

[Jerome Mayhew]

I am delighted to stand in front of you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to support this hidden jewel in our high-value industry. In the latest data that I could find, from 2023, the industry has revenues in the United Kingdom of £18.9 billion. It is supported by about 1,800 businesses, the vast majority of which are SMEs, right across the country in all our constituencies, developing the small satellites that are the particular expertise of Glasgow. This is the first time that I have had a Glasgow mafia of MPs in the Chamber all underselling their own constituency or city, because while they said that Glasgow produces more satellites than any other city in Europe, I believe the Department for Transport said in the previous debate in February 2024 that it is the largest manufacturer of satellites in the world outside of California.

There are 52,000 full-time equivalent workers employed directly in the sector. If we add in a supply chain of about 130,000 people across the country, we can see that this is already a very significant sector. It is growing in terms of employment, at 6.7% per year, and in terms of investment. Again, in 2023, the last year for which figures were available, there was investment of £8.85 billion into the space industry in the UK, and there is huge opportunity for more growth.

Applications for small satellites are going through the roof—on their way to orbit—and the geography of the UK is almost uniquely suitable for low Earth orbit satellites. Whereas the large satellites that we used to send up into space need to be sent up near the equator, being closer to the north pole makes launches into low Earth orbits more suitable. The other thing we have is lots of sea around us in case it all goes wrong. Additionally, the increase in the geopolitical uncertainty of the world makes it more important than ever that we develop our domestic capabilities in this area.

For all those reasons, the last Conservative Government backed commercial spaceflight from the UK and created the founding instrument for the industry, the Space Industry Act 2018. It created the legal framework for commercial spaceflight, and it was followed up in 2021 by the creation of a spaceflight regulator—the Civil Aviation Authority. I am proud to say that we took advantage of the genuine Brexit benefit of being able to create a regulatory environment far faster, and in a more comprehensive fashion, than our EU friends over the water have been able to do. It gives us a genuine commercial opportunity for rapid growth, which we have already seen.

Although the Space Industry Act 2018 is good, it is not perfect. As we have seen from yesterday's news in Florida, when we occasionally have what is described as a "rapid unscheduled disassembly", what goes up can come down. When it does so, it can cause loss and damage. UN space treaties make nation states responsible for loss and damage caused by space activity launched from their territorial areas, and it is for this reason that section 36(3)(a) of the 2018 Act passed financial responsibility from the state to the operator, requiring that the person carrying out spaceflight activities must indemnify His Majesty's Government for loss, subject to any limit set out in section 12(2), which gives the regulator—the Civil Aviation Authority—the power to set an upper limit for that indemnity.

The rationale for a limit on indemnity is clear: without it, it would be impossible for insurers to assess the quantum of risk associated with an unforeseen event. In actuarial terms, if we cannot assess the quantum, the risk can no longer be insurable, yet we have already imposed through legislation a legal duty on any space operator to have sufficient insurance, which prompts the question of what insurance is sufficient. This issue has been identified and is the genesis of the two-clause Bill that we have before us today. The problem with the wording is that the cap on the indemnity is not mandatory; the Bill simply allows for a cap.

Before taking an investment decision that could involve many hundreds of millions of pounds, big investors need reassurance beyond a Government policy statement to give them the confidence to commit large sums for investment, and this Bill fixes the problem. Section 12 turns the power to cap an indemnity into a requirement to do so. The last Government supported a private Member's Bill introduced by the former Member for Woking, Jonathan Lord, which had suspiciously similar drafting terms. The Second Reading of that Bill was held on 23 February last year and, to my great disappointment, the legislation was lost in the election wash-up as we approached July.

His Majesty's loyal Opposition wholeheartedly welcome the reintroduction of the Bill today. If nothing else, it has given us an opportunity to rehash some rather painful space puns—*Hansard* is still reeling from last time. I have read *Hansard* from February last year, and there is a noticeable difference in the kinds of space puns used. From Labour Members, I am sorry to say that we have had references to Trekkies, "Flash Gordon" and "Star Wars". From the Conservatives, we have had references to "The Clangers" and the Soup Dragon, which are much more patriotic.

Other contributions to today's debate are worthy of mention. I have already referred to the over-representation from Glasgow—the city's MPs spoke for about half the debate—but some very serious points have been made. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady), who I think is the first space lawyer in Parliament, spoke about the geopolitical risks and the need for a satellite launch capability in the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) noted that about 20% of all space jobs are in Scotland, and the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) highlighted the increased role for women in the sector and the potential to break down stereotypical barriers, for which I commend her.

Moving south of the border, the hon. Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) made unfortunate references to both "Flash Gordon" and "Star Wars", but she also made a serious point about the opportunities for young people in her constituency and beyond. Moving further south still, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) commented on what a time it is to be alive—I agree with him. He will have noted that the previous career of the hon. Member for Glasgow East was chargeable by the hour, which might explain the position in which we have found ourselves.

All those contributions recognise the hugely important role that space already plays in our economy and the incredible opportunity that the sector has to drive growth for all of us. The Bill gives the Minister the opportunity

to confirm that His Majesty's Government, despite the change in party, remain fully supportive of space industries and that he is wholly behind the Government's target for the UK to be the leading provider of commercial small satellite launches in Europe by 2030.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East on proposing this legislation. It changes two pesky words—just six letters if we add them up—but is six years in the making, which begs the question about the speed at which our legislative processes are able to operate. After the first Bill's rapid unscheduled disassembly in the general election, I hope this Bill has a smooth lift-off and takes its place in the firmament of British legislation.

2.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for bringing this short but crucial Bill before the House. I commend him for delivering such a brilliant and informative speech and for managing to cling on for as long as he did; some would call him the "Rocket Man" of Parliament. I thank all other Members who have spoken in the debate. Speaking of stars, I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) a very happy birthday for yesterday; I hope he had a stellar time.

I am pleased to confirm that the Bill has the full support of the Government. Before I begin, let me outline some general observations about the UK and spaceflight. The UK's approach to launch positions the UK as a leading international partner in the space sector, ensuring Europe's independent access to space. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has responsibility for co-ordinating civil space policy, working closely with Departments across Government to ensure that space services can support their needs and that space science and research can act as an enabler across the economy, while building strong links with the wider science ecosystem. To achieve our ambition, Government have invested more than £57 million through the LaunchUK programme to grow new UK markets for small satellite launch and sub-orbital spaceflight.

The UK has one of the most advanced and trusted modern space regulatory frameworks in the world. On 8 October, the Secretary of State for DSIT announced the new Regulatory Innovation Office, to reduce the burden of red tape and speed up access to new technologies that improve our daily lives. The RIO has made space one of its top priorities, and we look forward to working with it on our wider regulatory reforms to enable innovation.

This Government are implementing a series of space regulatory reforms stemming from the recommendations published in the space regulatory review in May 2024. The Government have worked with the sector to determine a prioritised approach to the reforms, to maximise the growth and innovation potential for the sector.

One recommendation involves the implementation of a regulatory sandbox to stress-test the regulatory framework for enabling rendezvous proximity operations. The sandbox commenced in October 2024, with stage 1 due to be complete in March 2025, providing vital recommendations to enable the growth of these novel missions and to strengthen the UK's capabilities.

We are also exploring financial tools, incentives and market access schemes that promote sustainable activities and encourage self-investment, inward investment and

support a level playing field for UK companies. Alongside the regulatory reform package, work is under way to develop a range of new innovative regulatory measures to support the growth of the UK sector, new mission types and to incentivise the uptake of space sustainability measures.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, the Bill will amend two sections of the Space Industry Act 2018 to provide legal certainty that all spaceflight operator licences must include a limit on the amount of the operator's liability to the Government under section 36 of the 2018 Act. This short, but crucial Bill will go "far, far away" to encourage much-needed investment into the sector.

Before I outline why the Government fully support the Bill, and boldly going where no man has gone before, I will briefly outline some of the UK's achievements in spaceflight. On 9 January, the UK made history by conducting the first ever orbital launch attempt from UK soil through Virgin Orbit at Spaceport Cornwall, demonstrating the UK's growing launch capability and position as a leading spacefaring nation. In December 2023, SaxaVord spaceport on the Shetland Islands became the UK's first vertical launch site to receive a spaceport licence. In January 2025, Rocket Factory Augsburg became the UK's first licensed vertical launch operator. The UK's approach to launch positions the UK as a leading international partner in the space sector.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, Scotland makes a vital contribution to the wider UK space ecosystem. Scotland's space sector is home to advanced satellite manufacturing capabilities, and has a fast-growing satellite launch market. In fact, Glasgow builds more small satellites than anywhere outside of California. The UK is now the second-most attractive destination for commercial space investment after the United States.

This Government have made clear that unlocking growth is vital to rebuilding the UK and supporting high-tech jobs, which unlocks investment and improves living standards across the country. We are capitalising on the UK's excellence in science and innovation to ensure our world-class research translates to commercial success, rebalancing the system and setting up the financial services sector to innovate, grow and seize the opportunities for investment in business, infrastructure and clean energy across Britain.

The space sector is hugely valuable to the UK's economy. It is worth more than £18.9 billion and directly employs more than 52,000 people. It supports more than 126,000 jobs across the supply chain and at least £346 billion of the UK's GDP is supported by satellite services, such as navigation, metrology, communications and Earth observation. It is now possible to launch satellites from UK spaceports, rather than relying solely on overseas sites to launch UK-built satellites into orbit.

As I previously mentioned, in January 2023, Virgin Orbit conducted an historic first launch from the UK at Spaceport Cornwall. In December 2023, SaxaVord spaceport in the Shetland Islands became the first licensed vertical launch spaceport. This year, we hope to witness the UK's first vertical launch by German company Rocket Factory Augsburg, with more to follow. Growing our launch capability is already creating high-skilled jobs and opportunities in communities right across the UK, as well as catalysing investment across the supply chain.

[Simon Lightwood]

The Government are investing in new launch companies such as Orbex, which has built factories in Scotland, creating hundreds of new jobs, ready to take advantage of the new opportunities that the Government have created. SaxaVord spaceport anticipates that by 2025, the spaceport site could support a total of 650 jobs in Scotland, including 140 locally and 210 across the wider Shetland region. Other launch operators, such as Skyrora, a UK company based in Glasgow, are thriving. It has indicated that it will conduct its first sub-orbital launch from the UK in the near future.

The UK's space industry already supports an industrial base of over 1,500 space companies. It provides high-skilled, high-quality jobs across the UK, with over 77% of employees holding at least a primary degree. Building on the success of the UK's space sector, the Government will continue to support business through a stable policy environment, strengthening our economic institutions and giving investors the certainty they need to fuel growth. The Government recognise the important contribution that the space sector makes to ordinary people's lives. Growth is the Government's No. 1 mission, and the Bill has the potential to drive growth within the sector by encouraging further investment.

It is important that the UK builds on the successes of an already thriving and dynamic space sector. The Government are delivering our plan for change with investment and reform to deliver growth. We will ensure, through the measures that we are taking to deliver growth, that the UK becomes a leading provider of commercial small satellite launchers in Europe by 2030.

To achieve our ambition, the Government will continue to support spaceports and launch operators to grow new UK markets for small satellite launch and sub-orbital spaceflight. The Government are committed to making improvements to both the Space Industry Act 2018 and the space industry regulations to ensure that our legal framework and regulations remain effective and internationally competitive. The UK has one of the most advanced and trusted modern space regulatory frameworks in the world.

Let us explore for a moment what liabilities are covered by the 2018 Act. There are two types of liability covered. Section 34 places a strict liability for injury or damage caused to persons or property on land or water in the UK or in the territorial sea to the UK—or on an aircraft in flight over such land, water or sea—by a craft or space object being used by an operator carrying out spaceflight activities in the UK. The uninvolved general public suffering injury or damage can bring a claim against the operator without having to prove fault. Section 36 places a liability on the operator carrying out spaceflight activities to indemnify the UK Government, or a person or body listed in section 36(2), for any claims brought against them for loss or damage caused by those activities. Therefore, UK nationals have the same easy recourse to compensation and protections as foreign nationals have under the UN liability convention.

The Government recognise that the question of liability and insurance is of utmost concern to the space sector. In response to a consultation on the then draft space industry regulations in 2020 and a call for evidence to inform orbital liability and insurance policy in October 2021, the industry made it clear that holding unlimited liabilities

will have an adverse effect on the UK's spaceflight industry. The industry has advised that it is impossible to obtain insurance for an unlimited amount, and therefore impossible to obtain insurance that will provide full coverage of an operator's liability to indemnify the Government and their liability to uninvolved third parties. Furthermore, potential liabilities for spaceflight are not easily quantifiable. If the Government did not limit a spaceflight operator's liability, spaceflight companies and investors would instead look to more favourable regulatory regimes in other countries where Governments share the risks involved by limiting an operator's liability or by offering state guarantees, such as in the United States or in France.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East explained, there are powers in the 2018 Act to limit a spaceflight operator's liability when carrying out spaceflight activities from the UK. The Act enables commercial spaceflight activities, which include launching a spacecraft and operating a satellite in orbit, for example, or other activities such as the operation of a spacecraft and management of a range to be carried out under licence in the United Kingdom. The Act sets out the broad licensing and regulatory framework for carrying out such activities and is underpinned with more detailed provisions in the Space Industry Regulations 2021.

The 2018 Act currently provides powers for the regulator to specify a limit on the amount of the operator's liability in the licence, but does not make it mandatory. Currently, section 12(2) provides that an operating licence may specify a limit on the amount of a licensee's liability to indemnify under section 36. Current Government policy is that the regulator should use those powers to specify a limit on operator liability in the licence so that no operator will face unlimited liability.

The Government fully support the Bill and its further progress. It is consistent with our policy that all spaceflight licences should have a limit on liability, so it will not impose any more liability or risk on UK taxpayers than the current policy. The Government also recognise the value that industry ascribes to legislative certainty on this matter. The space sector continually expresses its concerns about the use of the word "may" in section 12(2) of the Act. I am therefore grateful to my hon. Friend for the Bill, which, by amending section 12(2), will meet a key request from the sector.

As a the Member of Parliament for Wakefield and Rothwell, let me end by paying tribute to the proud Yorkshireman and inter-cosmic former captain of the USS Enterprise, Patrick Stewart—"Star Trek: The Next Generation" being far the best iteration in the Star Trek franchise. I will leave the House with this: "Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the UK Government. Our continuing missions: to kick-start economic growth and make Britain a clean energy superpower; to seek out and break down barriers to opportunity and take back our streets; and to boldly build an NHS fit for the future." Make it so!

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): The Member in charge of the Military Action Bill gave instruction earlier today that he wishes to defer it until Friday 4 July.

Green Spaces Bill

2.26 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am honoured to rise to present my Bill to create an office for green spaces, a Government office that will promote access to green space across the UK. It will support the creation, maintenance, improvement and integration of green spaces, and in doing so will improve the health and wellbeing of the UK, add up to £3.8 billion to tax revenues, contribute to our net zero journey, and create tens of thousands of jobs. It is a win, and who could object to more people than ever being able to lie under a tree or feel the grass beneath their feet? Eighty-one per cent of British adults agree that gardens and green spaces benefit their physical health, and 85% of adults agree that gardens benefit their state of mind. Green spaces and gardens can provide real natural healthcare solutions. Urban vegetation removes harmful pollutants, and urban cooling from green and blue spaces is vital in a warming world—and estimated to be worth £27 billion, according to the Office for National Statistics.

Under the Bill, green spaces include urban parks, neighbourhood areas, and significant natural landscapes. I believe that a co-ordinated, cross-Government approach is sorely needed. Green spaces must be a priority as our planning policy is developed, and the Liberal Democrats want to see more green spaces being covered in native trees and wild flowers. The previous Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and a House of Lords horticulture inquiry backed cross-governmental action. Last year the Committee said that both the quality and the quantity of green spaces were in decline, and urgent action was needed to reverse that.

We are lucky to have Monty Don, Alan Titchmarsh and Charlie Dimmock to inspire us with our gardens, but the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. As the Member of Parliament for South Devon, I am very aware of how important and beneficial green spaces are—I feel it every weekend—but two in five adults spend less than an hour a day outdoors, while more than half have no access to a public park or common within walking distance. We need to do so much better.

The UK's gardens, parks and green corridors are not just nice-to-have amenities; they are essential infrastructure in an uncertain world. The office for green spaces would bring together planning, health, environment, and other departments to work together to deliver real growth in our green spaces. By establishing this dedicated Government office to oversee and champion these spaces, we can secure their future and unlock their full potential for people, communities, businesses and the public purse.

2.29 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for tabling the Bill, and for giving the House a chance to both consider and re-emphasise the importance of our shared green spaces. Parks and green spaces are an essential part of our local and social infrastructure, and the Government are firmly—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 20 June.

Business without Debate

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS ACT 1946 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

DANGEROUS DOGS ACT 1991 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

DOMESTIC ENERGY (VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

BBC LICENCE FEE NON-PAYMENT (DECriminalISATION FOR OVER-75S) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

CONTROLLED DRUGS (PROCEDURE FOR SPECIFICATION) BILL

Bill read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

QUANTITATIVE EASING (PROHIBITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Owing to an error in the Public Bill Office, and through no fault of the Member in charge, the Mobile Homes Act 1983 (Amendment) Bill has not been printed. It therefore cannot be moved today. We will therefore move on to the next Bill set down for today.

PETS (MICROCHIPS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

ANONYMITY OF SUSPECTS BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

**CHILDREN'S CLOTHING
(VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

HIGHWAYS ACT 1980 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

**BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
(PRIVATISATION) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

**UNAUTHORISED ENTRY TO
FOOTBALL MATCHES BILL**

Bill read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

**VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS ACT
(REVIEW) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

**NHS ENGLAND (ALTERNATIVE
TREATMENT) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

TERMINAL ILLNESS (RELIEF OF PAIN) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

**MARRIAGE (PROHIBITED DEGREES
OF RELATIONSHIP) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March.

Wickford Station

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeff Smith.)

2.35 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful to have been given this opportunity to raise a matter that is extremely important to my constituents, namely the rebuilding of Wickford station. I appreciate that the Rail Minister sits in the House of Lords, so he cannot be present to respond to the debate. I am grateful to his ministerial colleague, the Local Transport Minister, for being present in lieu, especially on a Friday afternoon when, no doubt, he also had pressing constituency demands. I thank him for that.

Before I get into the matter of the station itself, perhaps I can explain for context why its proposed redevelopment is so important for the regeneration of Wickford, the second largest town in my constituency. Wickford and my constituents who live there have been through a tough time over the last few years since the covid pandemic. We have seen a number of banks and several other retail outlets close on the high street, and footfall is not as high as local traders would like. The police station closed several years ago, although I understand that Basildon borough council, the local authority, has plans to redevelop the site as a community hub.

We used to have two medium-sized supermarkets in the town: a relatively new one run by Aldi and a more long-standing one run by the Co-op. Unfortunately, the Co-op store closed several years ago, while Aldi demolished its old store in order to build a new, enlarged version. The net effect was that for over a year the town had no supermarket of its own, other than a small Iceland in the high street. That meant that my constituents often had to travel some distance to conduct their weekly shop. On top of that, there have been quite a number of flats built in the town in the past few years, which has meant that we have lost quite a lot of car parking space, particularly as a large part of the town's main car park, located next to the old Co-op site, has been blocked off, making the town a more difficult place to visit for those who have to come by car as opposed to rail.

I am pleased to report that Aldi rebuilt its store, which is at the bottom of a shallow slope leading directly down from Wickford station, and I had the honour of reopening it back in November 2023. In addition, the developers who own the old Co-op site, which is a five-minute walk from Wickford station, have submitted planning permission to Basildon borough council to demolish it and rebuild a brand-new store with a number of low-rise flats on top. We are very hopeful that they will soon succeed in agreeing a lease with a major supermarket chain, the name of which I have been asked not to mention because the negotiations have not yet concluded but is an open secret across the entire town. I very much hope that the negotiations will come rapidly to a close and then the company concerned can make a formal announcement.

Lastly, there have been a considerable number of roadworks in Wickford over the last few years, some of which have, unfortunately, overrun badly, including some not far from Wickford station itself. By far the worst transgressor in this regard is Cadent, which principally

maintains gas infrastructure. It has further works planned in Wickford and other parts of my constituency, including Hockley, where the residents are so fed up with endless roadworks that some have nicknamed the village “Blockley”. In my experience, Cadent often starts late and clocks off early, which means that its works take far longer than would be necessary otherwise. It is one of the least productive companies I have ever seen. As I have a Transport Minister in front of me, I must tell him how appallingly Cadent has behaved with regard to my constituents. I hope we can follow that up separately, perhaps with his colleague the Roads Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood).

I mention all this to convey to the Minister that the town has gone through something of a tough time in recent years. As the local MP, I am very keen to promote its regeneration. That, I hope, segues nicely to the situation at Wickford station itself.

The issue arises because several years ago, Abellio Greater Anglia—as it was then known—demolished half of Wickford station in order to extend the platforms for a new fleet of 720-class trains. Those new trains were designed to replace relatively old class 321 rolling stock, which unfortunately suffered from quite a lot of reliability issues—I can see the Minister nodding. I am pleased to tell the House that since the new class of trains have been introduced, reliability has improved markedly, so in that respect my constituents have been getting a better service. However, the long-promised rebuild of the station has yet to occur. At present, Wickford station basically consists of several platforms, an old footbridge without a lift, and a number of very unattractive portacabins. I hope the Minister will accept that that is hardly a station fit for the 21st century.

The whole issue of rebuilding the station has turned into something of a Norse saga. I will not try the Minister's patience this afternoon by attempting to recount every single twist and turn of the tale; suffice to say, the rebuild is long overdue. For several years, I have been consistently lobbying the Department for Transport to try to achieve the reconstruction of the station. As part of that effort, I made representations to the then Rail Minister, Huw Merriman MP. I am pleased to say that I managed to persuade him to ensure that funding was provided by the Department to allow Greater Anglia to undertake the work. I then told my constituents in all good faith that we finally had the money, and that I was therefore confident that works would begin.

In addition, Greater Anglia is part-owned by Mitsui, a very large Japanese corporation headquartered in Tokyo that has a number of global investments in different sectors, including transport. Back in March 2024—prior to the general election—I was serving on the House of Commons Defence Committee when we undertook a trip to Tokyo in order to prepare a report into the new global combat air programme, which aims to be the RAF's new Spitfire for the 21st century. As we were in Tokyo anyway, in order to try to progress the rebuilding of Wickford station, I took the opportunity to try to organise a meeting with Mr Hayato Iiyama, who is the deputy general manager of Mitsui's mobility and industrial business division, and as such oversees that corporation's transport-related investments in the UK. The embassy absolutely went the extra mile—or perhaps I should say track—and managed to set up that meeting.

[*Mr Mark Francois*]

I was delighted to spend over an hour with Mr Iiyama to familiarise him with the background and context of the issue. I think it is fair to say that as an investor in Greater Anglia, he was very supportive, and undertook to see what he could do to help. I place my thanks to both him and Mitsui on the record. I should also like to thank the British ambassador, Ms Julia Longbottom, and her staff for helping to facilitate our discussion. I subsequently joked with her that when the new station eventually opens, I would like to see a plaque saying, “This station was rebuilt with the assistance of the British embassy in Tokyo.” If representatives of Greater Anglia are listening to this debate, as I hope they are—I have a funny feeling that they are—that is the least they could do after all of this.

Back in Britain, following the general election, Greater Anglia initiated a competition for a contractor to rebuild Wickford station. Unfortunately, because the programme itself had been subject to multiple delays, by the time the bids came back, it had slightly exceeded the originally allocated budget. Nevertheless, I understand that Greater Anglia has negotiated with the Department, which has managed to provide some extra resource so that the project can now go ahead—I thank the Department for that. On 28 February 2025, Greater Anglia formally announced that a contract to rebuild the station had been signed with Walker Construction, and that the rebuild of the station would finally go ahead. Indeed, Martin Beable, the managing director of Greater Anglia, said at the time, to quote from its press release:

“We are glad to confirm that the contract for the station upgrade at Wickford is now signed. We look forward to confirming details of the timings for the delivery of the scheme later in the Spring and then to the implementation of the project to provide customers with better facilities at the station.”

On that point, as someone who campaigned hard during the previous Parliament against what I described at the time as misguided proposals to remove the ticket offices in the majority of stations across the country, I am pleased to see that not only were those proposals abandoned, but the new design at Wickford station will include a ticket office. Indeed, the new design is, as I understand it, likely to be used as a model for the construction or reconstruction of other small and medium-sized stations across the country. As part of the design, there is an iconic clock tower—or so says the marketing material—on which people seem to have firm views either one way or the other. For the record, I quite like the look of it, but I appreciate that some of my constituents have different architectural tastes, shall we say. Nevertheless, the overall design is a good one, and the sooner they start building it, the better.

Having been in a lot of discussions with Greater Anglia over this project for several years now, I hope the Minister will forgive me if I take the opportunity, at Greater Anglia’s request, to remind him of the Department’s proposals to upgrade Ely junction, which it believes is an urgent and critical priority, and which has widespread business and industry support across East Anglia. I hope the Minister will forgive my cheek in taking this occasion to remind him of that priority.

Turning to the timings of the station rebuild project, given the history of all this, I can understand why Greater Anglia is cautious about providing timings for

the programme because were they to be exceeded—for instance, because of bad weather during the construction phase—there would be a further wave of criticism from my constituents. Nevertheless, I do think it is reasonable to give my constituents at least some indication of how long all this will take.

Having spoken recently with the organisation, Greater Anglia is confident enough for me to say that it expects work to begin on the site this summer and that the work will be completed by 2026 at the latest, though it is hopeful that it might be able to shave some time off that, particularly if the good Lord is kind with the weather, which I very much hope He may yet be. I appreciate that there will be some inevitable disruption at the station while the works are undertaken. Nevertheless, Greater Anglia assures me that it will do everything it can to run a train service while the work is under way.

There is one additional issue that I would like to raise with the Minister regarding disabled access. A number of my constituents have contacted me to express their dismay that the proposed design does not include wheelchair-accessible facilities, such that people would still need to negotiate the old footbridge to reach the London-bound platforms. I note in passing that when the new station was constructed at London Southend airport several years ago, it included full disabled access as part of the design. I understand that would normally be facilitated by an Access for All grant, which Greater Anglia has previously applied for, but unfortunately it has been unsuccessful, at least to date. Perhaps the Minister would allow me to put in a plug for any future resources, which might yet be looked on more favourably, to solve this problem.

While such facilities would clearly be desirable, especially for my disabled constituents, given all the previous delays to the project, the absolute priority must be getting the rebuild under way. If we could eventually achieve full disabled access, that would be the icing on the cake.

To summarise, I thank the Minister for listening to my impassioned plea on behalf of my constituents after years of delay to finally get Wickford station rebuilt. As I said earlier, this has been a Norse saga with a whole number of twists and turns, but now that Greater Anglia has finally signed the building contract with Walker Construction, I hope that work can get under way this summer, and hopefully be completed by the end of 2026 at the latest and ideally sooner.

Having campaigned hard in the previous Parliament to maintain ticket offices in our stations across the country, I am pleased to note that the design of the new Wickford station will indeed contain a ticket office, as I believe that it is an important element of customer service. I am sure that my constituents will welcome the fact that the new station will have one as well. While the current design for the new station, which will be used as a model for other new small and medium-sized stations across the country, does not include full disabled access, I hope that at some point that will be provided at Wickford as well.

In the meantime, I am very pleased that the long-awaited rebuild of Wickford station will now finally go ahead, in order to serve my constituents and provide what they have long asked for: a station in Wickford that is fit for the 21st century. I thank the Minister for his patience as I have outlined so much of the background to the story. I now very much look forward to his reply.

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) on securing this debate and providing the opportunity to discuss the rebuilding of Wickford station. I also thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions today.

I recognise the right hon. Member's concern and frustration at the length of time it has taken for the station rebuild to progress, but let me explain some of the background, with which I am sure he will be familiar. The original station building needed to be demolished to facilitate and enable the introduction of Greater Anglia's brand-new, longer fleet of trains. Otherwise, the bay platform—the dead-end platform—at the station could not be extended to accommodate the new trains. Alternative options, such as extending the platform in the opposite direction, would have been far more expensive, as that would have required re-signalling, and there was no space to implement that particular option.

It is important to reiterate that, without carrying out the bay platform extension, the Southminster branch would have been the only part of the Greater Anglia network not to benefit from the £1.4 billion investment in new trains, which are now operating across the entire Greater Anglia network. The changes at Wickford station were therefore essential, and a scheme was developed both to extend the platform and to provide new station facilities in place of the old building.

With the approvals secured, the old station building was demolished, and the station became reliant on temporary facilities. The delivery of the Wickford station scheme was then delayed by covid-19 and the wider funding challenges facing the rail industry in its aftermath. Understandably, in a cost-constrained environment, where the industry's revenue was vastly reduced for a couple of years, the introduction of the new trains was a key priority, as it affected millions of passenger journeys and would underpin the recovery of passenger numbers from the pandemic.

It is worth explaining a little more about the new train fleet programme. The new, longer trains required a significant investment programme at stations and depots across the Greater Anglia network. There has been significant investment in depots such as Ilford and Norwich Crown Point. Several stations on the West Anglia route needed platforms to be extended, and funding needed to be secured for those vital works to take place, in addition to the platform extension needed at Wickford station.

The fleet transformation programme has allowed Greater Anglia to introduce the new class 720 trains, which have addressed key customer priorities, with additional seating capacity, air conditioning, plug and USB points, and improved accessibility features. Furthermore, they are more reliable and resilient, improving operational performance on the network and therefore improving the service provided to passengers.

I am pleased to note that Greater Anglia is one of our highest-performing operators in quarter 2 of 2024-25, during which 85.6% of trains were classed as on time, leaving within one minute of schedule. When we compare data from before the introduction of the class 720s with more recent data, the improvement is clear. In 2019-20,

on-time performance was 69.9% and 3.2% of services were cancelled. In 2023-24, on-time performance was 86.2% and cancellations had halved to 1.6%. In fact, Greater Anglia has consistently been one of the best-performing UK train operators since April 2023, and the new trains have been a key factor in that positive track record.

To return to the station project itself, a combination of the funding challenges facing the post-pandemic rail industry and the need to ensure that the new trains were all in service as soon as possible contributed to the delays in the scheme. However, despite those challenges, Greater Anglia continued to develop the design and concepts for the project. As a result of its work, Greater Anglia has planning approval for a new building and awarded the design and build contract to Walker Construction towards the end of last month. The contract has been signed. Detailed timescales for implementation are now being finalised and will be confirmed once agreed.

The Wickford station redevelopment project represents a landmark in UK rail infrastructure. As the first of its kind, this project uses the new and innovative Network Rail hub station modular design concept, which integrates sustainability, adaptability and community engagement into a cohesive, modern station blueprint. The hub design has been developed by Network Rail over several years, and this project is the first to use the modular design in practice. By combining innovative design elements such as modular pods, photovoltaic canopies and energy-efficient systems, as well as a highly cost-effective design and build methodology, the project establishes a new benchmark for railway stations nationwide. The new station will have features that improve the passenger experience, with a large canopy providing shelter for 70 seated and 345 standing passengers, a spacious waiting room, an accessible toilet and an integrated ticket office. Automatic ticket gates will also be a feature, enhancing security at the station, protecting industry revenue and managing passenger flows.

The Department will continue to seek further opportunities to improve rail accessibility, including taking advantage of the opportunities created by our rail reform programme. This includes the establishment of a powerful new passenger watchdog, which will champion passenger interests with a view to improving service performance and to ensure that GBR and other operators meet passenger expectations.

The Government are determined to clamp down on street works—referred to by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford—that cause unnecessary disruption in local areas, which is why we have announced increases to fixed penalty notices and extended overrun charges of up to £10,000 a day so that they also apply at the weekend. The Government also want to see the roll-out of lane rental schemes in England, which are a tool to help highway authorities to reduce the impact of works taking place on the busiest streets at the busiest times by charging utilities up to £2,500 a day for works on these roads. We have recently announced that at least half of the surpluses from lane rental should be spent on highway maintenance. Following publication of the “English Devolution” White Paper, a consultation is under way on devolving powers to approve new rental schemes from the Secretary of State to Mayors.

[Simon Lightwood]

On accessibility, the plans for Wickford station improvements also make provision to allow for the future installation of lifts; any future funding would, of course, be subject to the ongoing spending review. This Government are committed to improving the accessibility of our railway and recognise the considerable social and economic benefits that it brings to communities.

In conclusion, there is positive news on the Wickford station upgrade scheme. With the design and build contract now awarded, I am pleased that this station project can proceed, and works will commence in 2025.

Mr Francois: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is obviously coming to a conclusion. I want to thank him again for being here this afternoon and for the support that has been given to the station rebuild. As the constituency MP, I am very grateful. I wonder if he could give me some comfort on one further point.

The works will be extensive, so is it still the intention to try to maintain train services through Wickford, as far as possible, while they take place?

Simon Lightwood: This Government are determined to put passengers at the very heart of our railway, so I am sure that every effort will be made to ensure that that is indeed the case.

As well as delivering a modern, welcoming experience for customers, the station will set the standard for future buildings, being the first of the new and innovative Network Rail hub stations. I am looking for colleagues at Greater Anglia to progress this important project at pace, to ensure that the permanent structure is put in place to serve the customers and constituents who use the station.

Question put and agreed to.

2.58 pm

House adjourned.

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