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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 13 March 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Business Support: Rural Areas

1. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support businesses in rural areas. [903158]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Businesses in rural areas offer significant potential for growth and are central to our economy. We are working across Government to unlock the full potential of rural businesses as part of the Government's growth mission. We are committed to launching a business growth service inspired by the US Small Business Administration, which will operate in partnership with devolved Governments and the growth hub network in England to make it easier to access support from Government for all businesses.

Jamie Stone: In conversation this morning with Trudy Morris, the CEO of the Caithness chamber of commerce, she outlined the sheer importance of tourism businesses to the local economy and the farmers in Scotland. The concern expressed to me is on the rate of VAT on tourism and similar businesses, and although we do not know whether the Highland council will impose a tourism levy, that could be a double whammy. I do not expect for one instant hon. Members on the Front Bench to say, "Jamie, you can have a cut in the rate of VAT"—well, I dream sometimes—but I would be grateful for a meeting to discuss the nature of the problem and how we could possibly tackle it.

Mr Speaker: You might get a chocolate biscuit these days.

Gareth Thomas: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman, as I cannot fulfil his dreams right now. However, I am happy to meet him to talk about that issue. I recognise that there is considerable interest in that question from the hospitality industry, so I am happy to meet to hear, in a bit more detail, the particular concerns expressed to him.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Business Secretary, the Minister and the Chancellor have all said that they want growth, including in rural areas. I have searched high and low for business growth statistics since the Budget of broken promises, and I find that, in the last quarter, there has been a growth of 50% in the number of businesses that are in critical financial distress. Why does the Minister think that is?

Gareth Thomas: I say gently to the hon. Lady that the difficult decisions that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor had to take in the Budget were, interestingly, particularly well explained by her former colleague Kwasi Kwarteng, who made it clear that he thought they had to be taken because of the mistakes that he and the Conservative party had made when they were in government.

Manufacturing: West Midlands

2. **Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support manufacturing in the west midlands. [903159]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): It was a good night for Villa fans last night, so I congratulate anyone in the west midlands who supports the club, as my husband does.

The west midlands, in many ways, leads the country on manufacturing, and it has one of the UK's largest specialist workforces. Whether in automotive, aerospace or the rail supply chain, it is an incredibly important area. We have invested in the west midlands investment zone—Made Smarter, the High Value Manufacturing Catapult; it is all there—but we want to keep breaking down barriers to growth in the area, which is why advanced manufacturing is such a key part of the industrial strategy that we will announce soon.

Shaun Davies: In Telford and the wider west midlands, we have a strong and proud British manufacturing base, as the Minister has just outlined. One of the biggest challenges that I hear from businesses is the uneven playing field between us and the rest of the world on pay rates and regulation. Clearly, no one wants a race to the bottom, so will the Government back British business to ensure that we sell more, make more and do that in the west midlands and in Telford in particular?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we do not want a race to the bottom. Advanced manufacturing jobs in the west midlands are well paid for a reason: there is a very highly skilled workforce and we want to protect and grow that. He is right that there is more that we can do. Some £2 billion was set aside in the Budget for the automotive sector and just shy of £1 billion for aerospace. That will help; however, we can further reduce the barriers, whether around regulation, planning or trading and export, and we are working as fast as we can to do just that.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): In Staffordshire and the west midlands, we are the only part of the country that is a net exporter of manufactured goods. The threat from Trump on

tariffs could have a significant impact on manufacturers right across Staffordshire and the west midlands. What action are the Government taking to ensure that we will continue to export our world-leading products?

Sarah Jones: The right hon. Gentleman is right that the west midlands is a big exporter to many different countries, including the US and others. Of course, we will keep talking with the US, as the Secretary of State has been doing, and will ensure that we are standing up for British industry and doing the right thing.

Regulatory Environment

3. **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve the regulatory environment. [903160]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The regulatory environment does not work as well as it should. Unnecessary red tape is choking competitiveness, creating unnecessary burdens for business and putting up barriers to growth. That is why we are introducing a Government-wide target to reduce the administrative costs of regulation by 25% by the end of this Parliament. That will be supported by a baselining exercise to understand the administrative costs of regulation to businesses. The Prime Minister will set out more details later today. This is just the beginning; details of our ambitious action plan to reform the regulatory landscape will be set out shortly.

Callum Anderson: Over eight years and four Prime Ministers, the last Conservative Government commissioned review after review into UK corporate governance and audit reform, and delivered absolutely nothing. For UK plc to be globally competitive, we need robust corporate governance frameworks which balance the needs of investors and society for information with the administrative burdens on companies. Will the Minister update the House on what progress his Department is making on bringing forward an audit reform and corporate governance Bill?

Justin Madders: As my hon. Friend is right to recognise, this issue has been around for some time, and the Government have announced their intention to publish a draft audit reform and corporate governance Bill for scrutiny in this Session. Investors and the public need access to truthful reporting from our most important businesses on their finances and related issues. My Department continues to progress that important work, and a timetable for the publication of the Bill will be confirmed in the usual way for draft legislation in due course.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Since leaving the European Union, we have been diverging progressively and passively—not making an active decision to diverge because it is good for us, but because we cannot keep up with the number of regulations coming through the European Union. That has been particularly disadvantageous for energy trading. What conversations has the Minister had with Government colleagues around aligning with the EU on emissions trading?

Justin Madders: That is an important question. The Minister with responsibility for emissions trading, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), is in charge of that matter, and it is one of the discussions we are having as part of the EU reset.

High Street Businesses

4. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support high street businesses. [903161]

16. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high street businesses. [903180]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Working across Government, we are determined to revitalise our high streets and support the businesses on them. We are working with industry to create a fairer business rates system that protects the high street and supports investment. We have introduced the Crime and Policing Bill, which will give better protection for businesses and retail workers against assault and theft. Our forthcoming small business strategy will set out our plan for further support for small businesses on the high street and beyond.

Dr Huq: From 5 am to 10 pm daily, the Patels' newsagent, off licence and post office was an Acton staple—until Horizon slapped it with a £123,000 demand, and Mrs Patel had a series of mini-strokes. Will Ministers look into the fact that their compensation was rejected because Mr Patel was the postmaster, and show their love for high-street heroes everywhere by attending a tea organised by the all-party parliamentary group for ethnic minority business owners on 3 April? You are welcome too, Mr Speaker.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful for my hon. Friend for raising the case of the Patels. I am keen that any sub-postmaster who was a victim of the Horizon scandal gets access to the compensation they rightly deserve as quickly as possible. She will understand that I cannot comment on individual cases, but if she wants to write to me about the specific case, I would be happy to look into it further and to discuss it with her.

Bradley Thomas: There are over 70 pubs across Bromsgrove and the villages. One of them—the Queens Head—faces a staggering £42,000 annual increase in the cost of business rates and national insurance contributions as a result of choices made by this Government. That is on top of increasing concerns around a banter ban. Will the Minister confirm that nobody will be ejected from a pub or hospitality venue for sharing a joke, and will he outline what steps he is taking to support pubs, rather than putting them out of business?

Gareth Thomas: I note in passing that 10,000 pubs closed their doors under the Conservative Government, so I do not think the pub industry is looking to the hon. Gentleman's party for guidance going forward. On the specifics he asked about, he will be aware of our plan for business rates reform, which will help and make a significant difference to many pubs. On the so-called "banter ban", I gently suggest that he should not believe everything that he reads in the newspapers.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Pubs and restaurants are part of a thriving high street in Doncaster that is known for its iconic nightlife. Will the Minister set out what action the Department is taking to support hospitality and ensure that high streets continue to thrive, and may I invite him to Doncaster to see how nightlife is done properly?

Gareth Thomas: I will give careful consideration to my hon. Friend's very generous offer. In answer to the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) I mentioned business rates reform, which could make a significant difference for many businesses in the night-time economy. Another crucial issue that we want to tackle is the rising crime and antisocial behaviour on our high streets. As she will know, the Crime and Policing Bill, which is beginning its journey through Parliament, will make a significant difference in that regard.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The high street trader John Lewis Partnership is announcing its annual results today. It is a highly successful business but this year it will not be paying a dividend to its partners, the workforce, because it has to absorb national insurance costs. Does the Minister understand the real impact that NI contributions are having on what his party likes to describe as "ordinary working people"?

Gareth Thomas: I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman and his Conservative colleagues that we had to take the difficult decisions in the Budget to increase employer national insurance contributions because of the mess that their party left the country in. The shadow Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), helped to write the Liz Truss Budget that did so much damage to our country—we are trying to sort out the mess. The shadow Secretary of State still has not apologised for his part in that fiasco. He should take the opportunity to do so during these questions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Yesterday, the owner of the hugely popular Rumsey's, which is celebrating 21 years on Wendover high street in my constituency, emailed me to say:

"We estimate the changes coming in April will add 15% to our staff costs that we simply don't have. Therefore we have had to sadly make redundancies, put in a recruitment freeze and implement staff hour cuts to offset this."

With real-world testimony like that replicated up and down the country, will the Minister finally acknowledge that an urgent change of course is needed to support high streets, scrap the employer NI rise, save jobs and protect communities?

Gareth Thomas: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that it would be interesting to know whether he now regrets the enthusiastic support he gave the Liz Truss Budget, which did so much damage to our country's public finances. Our Budget in October last year started the process of sorting out those situations. I looked with interest at his website recently, which has a "My plan" section. It is completely blank. Although that is probably better given that he so strongly supported the Liz Truss Budget—there is at least a bit of progress.

Greg Smith: Well, that was no answer to my question whatsoever. It is almost as if Labour Members have not realised that they are in charge and that it is their decisions that are having this impact. Let me tell the Minister something else that Rumsey's reported to me:

"The reduction in business rate relief will leave me no choice but to raise prices simply to break even, further limiting growth and accessibility for customers."

I just do not know how much more the Minister needs to hear to understand the scale of the problem on our high streets. He talks of business rates reform, but the only business rate change we have seen is the devastating cut to business rates relief, which is hurting high streets now. Will he reverse it?

Gareth Thomas: Had the hon. Gentleman's party been elected, retail, hospitality and leisure relief would have come to an end. We have extended retail, hospitality and leisure relief. We have set out in the Budget our plans to permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties on the high street from 2026-27. We are taking measures to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour on the high street, which his party could have done more to tackle but chose not to. We are bringing in new legislation to end the immunity for crime on the high street where shoplifters steal goods worth £200 or less, and we are creating a specific offence of violence against retail workers to try to make it easier for businesses operating on the high street.

Minimum and Living Wages

5. **Kenneth Stevenson** (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the national minimum wage and national living wage on families in Airdrie and Shotts constituency. [903162]

6. **Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the national minimum wage and national living wage on families. [903165]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): More than 3 million workers are expected to receive a pay rise due to increases to the national minimum wage in April, protecting the lowest paid in society. After our changes to the remit, we accepted in full the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission, which considers the impact of rates on business, competitiveness, the labour market, the wider economy and the cost of living. Our impact assessments are available only by region—estimates by constituency are not available—but the simple truth is that workers in every constituency are better off under this Labour Government.

Kenneth Stevenson: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Just yesterday, Parliament approved Labour's new deal for working people—the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. This will see a pay rise for more than 200,000 working Scots, many in the Airdrie and Shotts constituency, and a marked improvement to terms and conditions, which will be beneficial to our young workforce. Does he agree that with a Government committed to improving the pay, terms and conditions

of workers across the country, the working people of Airdrie and Shotts will always get a better deal with Labour?

Jonathan Reynolds: The plan to make work pay is a core part of our mission to grow the economy, raise living standards and create opportunities for all, and there will be significant benefits for workers in insecure and low-paid jobs in central Scotland, including in Airdrie and Shotts. This plan is about making people stay in work. It is about making work more secure and more family-friendly, improving living standards and putting more money in workers' pockets, but it is also about showing that politics can work for people who may have given up on this place as somewhere that can improve their living standards, their lives and those of their families. For that, I am very proud of this Government.

Luke Akehurst: The 6.7% increase in the national living wage in April clearly shows that this Labour Government are on the side of working people in North Durham and across the country and are making work pay. Can the Minister tell me how many families in north-east England will benefit from the increase in the national living wage and national minimum wage next month?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. Around 140,000 workers in north-east England will feel the benefits of this direct pay rise. I know his North Durham constituency well—I am no stranger to Chester-le-Street—and not only will his constituents get a pay rise, but his local shops, his restaurants, his pubs and more will get what they need most of all: customers who have got a bit of money to spend.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Last Friday, I spent the day visiting local shopkeepers in Kelso, many of whom employ their staff on the national minimum wage and the national living wage. Their biggest pressure just now is dealing with this Labour Government's national insurance hike. They are facing a very difficult choice about whether they continue to employ people. What is the message from the Minister to those hard-working local shopkeepers?

Jonathan Reynolds: The thing I would cite most of all to the hon. Member's constituents is the doubling of the employment allowance in the Budget and the threshold being removed, which means that some smaller businesses will actually be paying lower national insurance contributions than they would have paid before the Budget. However, I never shy away from the fact that the choices we had to make in the Budget were out of necessity, due to the black hole that was left behind. I am yet to hear any offer from Conservative Members as to how they would fill it.

At these questions, we will talk about tripling compensation for victims of the Post Office Horizon scandal only because the money is there. It was not there under the Conservative party. We will talk about money for the steel industry, standing behind that industry. Again, money was promised but not delivered. If promises are made, the resources to do those things have to be there. They were not there under the Conservative party. They are under Labour.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Whether it be the increase in the minimum wage, the increase in employer national insurance, the increase in business rates, or indeed the changes made to the Employment Rights Bill, all of these measures collectively are negatively penalising many businesses across my constituency, whether in Keighley, Ilkley or further afield. As a result, redundancies are having to be made, or the price of products and services are having to increase, and these businesses cannot absorb the additional increase that this Labour Government are putting on them. Did the Government undertake any economic impact assessment of what all of these measures collectively would have on hard-working businesses across my constituency?

Jonathan Reynolds: As I have said to Conservative Members before, of course we are very sensitive to the aggregate impact of Government policy, because, frankly, having observed the Conservative Governments of the previous 14 years, I thought they completely missed this point and at many times had different Departments doing completely opposing things.

I want to say something specific on business rates. No business rates relief was planned had the Conservative party won the election. The reduction to 40% was an increase in what was in the national accounts—again, short-term decisions for short-term, partisan, political benefit; no serious plan for the future.

The hon. Gentleman will have seen the figures from the Insolvency Service this week, which are very interesting. They show that fewer people have been made redundant over the past 12 months than in the year before, so I am afraid that the doom-mongers of the Conservative party have been proved absolutely wrong by the statistics that we have.

Product Safety Regulations

7. Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help microbusinesses comply with the general product safety regulations.

[903166]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The Government are committed to supporting microbusinesses to comply with the general product safety regulation. For Northern Ireland, we have published additional guidance for businesses, and we will publish an update in the coming weeks, in the light of feedback we have received. We will continue to engage with businesses to ensure that they can trade freely across the UK. Businesses targeting the EU market may use the Government's export support service. Since October 2024, the Department's export academy has delivered eight free online GPSR training sessions to almost 5,000 attendees.

Tony Vaughan: I thank the Minister for his answer. My constituent George Stevens runs a microbusiness in Lydd making handcrafted stringed instruments; it has been running for over 30 years and he has many EU customers. He is deeply worried about Brexit-related red tape, which is holding back his EU exports. Can the Minister give him an assurance that, as a result of the proposed measures, he will now find it easier to trade with the EU?

Justin Madders: Microbusinesses such as that of Mr Stevens are central to the Government's growth mission. We are committed to strengthening our relationship with the EU and to tackle trade barriers and frictions, and we regularly engage directly with businesses and their representative organisations to understand the difficulties they face. Our export support services help small and medium-sized enterprises navigate opportunities in EU markets and get the practical help they need to do so. For example, the Unlock Europe programme, which was launched in December as part of the export academy, offers practical guidance to help UK businesses enhance their exporting potential to the EU.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Our country's very high electricity costs are another huge problem facing businesses in my constituency and nationally. Reintegrating our power markets with Europe's through the single-day ahead coupling system would cost our country nothing, save costs for businesses, reduce carbon dioxide and make our power markets more efficient. Will the Minister take fast steps to reintegrate our electricity markets with those of our European neighbours?

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Member for his tangential question relating to GPSR. He makes an important point about energy costs, and we are working closely with the EU on how to build on that, and of course the industrial strategy will also be looking very closely at how energy costs can be brought down for businesses.

Employment Regulation

8. **Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con):** If he will take steps to reduce employment regulation for businesses. [903167]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The plan to make work pay is central to our plan for change, to grow the economy, raise living standards and create opportunities for all. It will tackle low pay, poor working conditions and job insecurity, creating long-term growth and investment to support businesses. Insights gained from our ongoing engagement with businesses will help us ensure proportionate and effective policy. Our plan to make work pay will ensure a level playing field, so that employers that are trying to do the right thing are not undercut.

Katie Lam: I sent a survey about how the Government have treated business to every registered company in the Weald of Kent, and they are terrified. Some 80% of them—four in five—are less likely to hire following soaring taxes and the truly dire Employment Rights Bill. The Regulatory Policy Committee found the Government's own impact assessment for the Bill not fit for purpose. Will the Minister conduct a proper assessment of the damage the Bill will do, or should I send him mine?

Justin Madders: I am always grateful for advice. If the hon. Lady is conducting surveys, she might look at the one that said that 76 of her constituents supported the plans in the Bill to bring in day one rights for sick pay. The importance of this Bill cannot be overstated. We have a plan to bring businesses up to a standard where work is respected and people have security and dignity. If the hon. Lady cannot understand that, then she needs to get out a bit more.

Trade Union Recognition

9. **Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to support trade union recognition in the workplace. [903169]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The Government are committed to simplifying the process and law around trade union recognition so that working people have a more meaningful right to organise through trade unions—of course, I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in this respect. Through the Employment Rights Bill, we are reforming the process for statutory recognition applications; with existing thresholds presenting too high a hurdle in modern workplaces, they are increasingly fragmented. We are also taking steps to strengthen protections against unfair practices during the recognition process, which we debated at length yesterday.

Josh Newbury: In January, Bidfood, a food wholesaler and major employer in my constituency, announced overnight that it would derecognise the GMB and Unite the union, removing the ability of thousands of workers across the country to collectively bargain through their trade unions. The unions fear that Bidfood workers could now be left at risk of fire and rehire before protections in this Government's Employment Rights Bill come into force. Does the Minister agree that employers should not be trying to dodge protections under the Government's plan to make work pay, and will he join me in supporting the GMB and Unite as they seek to protect their workers at Bidfood?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend will understand that I cannot comment on individual cases, but I am deeply troubled by what he has said. I can be clear that the Government are determined to reset industrial relations, so that employers and trade unions work together in partnership rather than in conflict, as we have heard. We encourage all employers to engage with unions in the spirit of co-operation and collaboration. Working in that way benefits employers and workers alike. As he knows, the Employment Rights Bill will end the unscrupulous practice of fire and rehire, which has no place in a modern economy and workplace, so if any company is thinking of doing that, it should think again.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Minister's response. After I worked in my mum and dad's shop, I joined the firm Henry Denny and I was required to join the union. I was not sure about joining, but when I did so I found out that the union backed me as a worker against the employers whenever they were bringing in things that were wrong. So I encourage everybody who joins a workforce to join a union, because it will protect them whenever they need help.

Justin Madders: The hon. Member could not have put it better. He has explained the benefits of trade union membership, which is something that Members on the Conservative Benches clearly do not understand.

Hospitality Industry

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

10. **Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support the hospitality industry. [903170]

15. **David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the hospitality industry. [903179]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): We are creating a fairer business rates system, reducing alcohol duty on qualifying draught products, and our forthcoming small business strategy will set out our plan to further support small businesses on the high street and beyond. In addition, through the Hospitality Sector Council, we are addressing, with business, strategic issues related to high street regeneration, skills, sustainability and productivity, and we have recently saved the pint.

Sir Edward Leigh: Obviously the Minister is working very hard, but he looks a bit tired, so may I offer him some Lincolnshire hospitality? Will he come and stay for a glorious weekend in one of our farm cottages, to enjoy our great skies and bracing air, and help our distressed farmers? Frankly, they need the income. The problem is that the Government have abolished the furnished holiday letting scheme, which was a tremendous encouragement for the countryside. I do not expect an answer now, but will he consider approaching his right hon. Friend the Chancellor to see if we can reinstate that in the Budget, to help our farmers and the countryside?

Gareth Thomas: Unusually for the Conservative party, the right hon. Gentleman has made an extremely generous offer. I am almost as tempted by that as by the offer from my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson) to visit Doncaster. I am happy to look at the issue he raises and I will write to him with more details.

David Reed: The Crusty Cob bakery has been a constant in east Devon for the past 55 years, but last week the family-run business closed the doors on all nine of its shops, making over 100 local people redundant. The owners stated a panoply of issues, from manufacturing costs to reduced high street footfall and energy prices, but the kicker is the decision that this Business Secretary's party has made to slam companies with increases to the national living wage and employer national insurance contributions. The effects of this Labour Government's decisions are setting in and literally destroying working family businesses. Will the Business Secretary and the Minister please give a message to the Crusty Cob team who have just lost their jobs?

Gareth Thomas: I understand that this will be an extremely worrying time for employees of the Crusty Cob and their families. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that we are offering a 40% discount to retail, hospitality and leisure properties as part of our business rates package. We are going to reform business rates more substantially, with a permanently lower multiplier in 2026 that, while it clearly will not help the Crusty Cob and its employees, will help other businesses on the high street.

I am slightly surprised that the hon. Gentleman should be so opposed to an increase in the living wage—I do not know whether that is his party's policy. I also gently remind him of the data from the Office for National

Statistics, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out, showing more people in jobs this year compared with last year.

Post Office Horizon: Compensation

11. **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that compensation is paid to people impacted by the Post Office Horizon scandal in a timely manner. [903171]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): In the past eight months we have trebled the total amount of compensation paid and ensured that more than 2,300 victims who had as yet received nothing have now had some financial redress. We are making up-front, fixed-sum offers and interim payments where possible to speed up the delivery of redress. There is still a lot more to do, though, and we remain committed to ensuring swift and fair redress for every postmaster affected by the Horizon scandal.

David Davis: I thank the Minister for that answer. He and I will agree that the Post Office Horizon scandal is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in modern times, but the problems with the Post Office and its injustice extend far beyond that. Some 21 cases relating to the precursor system, Capture, which bear the same hallmarks as those in the Horizon scandal, have been referred to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. I am afraid that the CCRC is famous for taking years to come to obvious decisions, so can the Minister tell me that it will deal with this in months? If not, will his Department intervene directly?

Gareth Thomas: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of Capture. As he will know, we have published our response to the independent Kroll report on the Capture software issue and the way in which the Post Office responded to the data that came out of it. We have been meeting sub-postmasters who used the Capture system and who were the victims in that regard to talk through a redress scheme with them. We are also working closely with the Criminal Cases Review Commission and have made it clear to the Post Office that it must co-operate with requests from the CCRC so that we can speed up its deliberations on the 21 cases.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I recently met a constituent who is a former postmaster affected by the Horizon scandal. He has applied for compensation but feels that the process is taking too long, with unreasonable asks. Given the legal ruling that postmasters should be afforded the benefit of the doubt, what steps is the Department taking to ensure that compensation claims are processed fairly and without delays that could further affect the victims?

Gareth Thomas: As my hon. Friend will know, we inherited a compensation process that was perceived by many sub-postmasters as being slow, legalistic and adversarial, so we have already taken a series of steps to try to speed things up, particularly in trying to get out more fixed-sum payments—for example, we are moving in more staff to support work on the compensation process. If she would like me to look in more detail at her constituency case, I am very happy to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Business Secretary met recently in Japan with Fujitsu, which developed the Horizon system and has offered to contribute to the compensation for victims. Can the Minister tell the House how much the Secretary of State has asked it to contribute, so that taxpayers are not on the hook for £1 billion?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Lady is right to reference the discussions that my right hon. Friend had with the chief executive officer of Fujitsu. That company has agreed to begin talks about its contribution to the costs of compensation. She will understand that we also need to wait for Sir Wyn Williams' inquiry to conclude, and for his recommendations regarding compensation from Fujitsu to be heard and understood. I am sure she will also understand that I am not going to give a running commentary on the discussions with Fujitsu, but I welcome the fact that it has agreed to begin talks.

Small Business Support

12. **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support small businesses. [903172]

14. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support small businesses. [903175]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): Small businesses need a better deal—certainly better than the one they got from the last Government—and our small business strategy, which is due this year, is designed to do that. We have already provided more support through the British Business Bank; we have worked with the Federation of Small Businesses to take action on issues such as late payment and retail crime; and we have announced the creation of the new business growth service, which aims to transform business support services. Later today I will attend a small business summit in Sussex to progress those plans and meet small business leaders.

Alex Baker: Too many small and medium-sized defence businesses in my community struggle to access the banking and finance facilities they need, often on the basis of self-imposed ethical criteria. Will the Business Secretary join me in welcoming how many investors and financial institutions have responded to the campaign I am leading with my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) and 100 other Labour parliamentarians, calling on our banks and fund managers to broaden their approach to defence investment? Will he call on investors to take action so that we can defend our country, support Ukraine, and fire up our industrial base?

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend and thank her very much for her question. She will know that my Department, alongside the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence, convened a roundtable in December to listen to these perspectives, and now all three Departments are working together to ensure that the problems she has articulated do not occur.

It is essential that the British people do not think that the substantial, significant and historic investments in defence that this Government are making come in some way at the expense of domestic prosperity. There is no prosperity without security, but we should also acknowledge the tremendous economic contribution made by our defence sector—there is not a foreign and domestic split in that regard. I thank my hon. Friend for her outstanding leadership in galvanising parliamentary support for that campaign, and I hope it will have unanimous agreement in every part of the House.

Dr Gardner: As the Secretary of State is aware, the ceramics industry, including in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South, is facing immense competition from imported counterfeit goods. Many of those goods contain false backstamps that mislead consumers and—as the GMB union has raised with me—threaten great British companies such as Dunoon, Duchess and many others. Will the Minister meet me again to discuss in more detail creating offences and tabling regulations to deal with imported counterfeit ceramic goods?

Jonathan Reynolds: My Department has a very strong relationship with the ceramics sector through the Energy Intensive Users Group. We have regular meetings with that group, and I would also like to mention the British Ceramic Confederation and our old friend Rob Ffello, who is a strong voice for the sector. There are many challenges for the ceramics sector, not least decarbonisation, but on the subject of consumer protection, it is firmly against UK consumer law for firms—wherever they are located—to give consumers false information, such as through fake product markings. We have strengthened the regime in this regard, with new enforcement powers for the Competition and Markets Authority coming into force next month, but I will of course get my hon. Friend any meeting she requires.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): A constituent in Chorleywood recently contacted me after needing an emergency locksmith due to a broken key. Initially quoted £40 over the phone, she was later charged £1,460, and was only given the new key after making that payment. While I applaud this Government's ambition to reduce regulation, can we ensure that there is appropriate regulation so that consumers are not unfairly overcharged, as in this instance?

Jonathan Reynolds: I, too, have heard the kinds of stories that the hon. Gentleman has articulated—there are definitely concerns in that regard. Broadly, the Government's regulation agenda is not necessarily about deregulation, but about effective and proportionate regulation. I feel that our regulatory sector has grown a lot in recent years, and that it does not always compare well to those of other countries in terms of timeliness and business response. That is the agenda we are pursuing, but I will certainly write to the hon. Gentleman about the issues he has raised, which are very relevant. I appreciate the opportunity to do so and thank him for raising them today.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Many families are supported by the work of my constituents, Alison and Kevin, who run a small care business. They tell me that they already operate on tight margins in a sector under

huge pressure. The hike in employer national insurance contributions will force them to make tough decisions on staffing and simply reduce the amount of care they can offer. Kevin and Alison rightly say that this hike makes no sense at a time when the Government tell us that they want to move to community care provision and get people out of hospitals. Does the Secretary of State not agree?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Member for her question, and I thank Alison and Kevin for their important work. We already talked about the difficult choices that the Government faced and the unenviable choices that had to be made. Health and social care was a beneficiary of the additional revenue that needed to be raised to meet some of the challenges we face, but we are not casual about the impact of that, and we recognise the pressures that come from that. I would say that I do not agree. Taxes have to apply to every sector, and we cannot carve out certain sectors. However, I appreciate the pressures that she articulates. That is why the rest of the Government's agenda is set to address all those factors.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Small businesses are the backbone of the British economy. Up and down the country, we have success stories of innovative start-ups and family-run businesses that should be part of the Government's plan to get Britain growing again. Under the Conservatives, the number of small businesses in my constituency decreased by 360 between 2021 and 2024. The Tories messed up our national and local economy. Is the Minister concerned that his Government's national insurance rises will damage the economy, just as the Conservatives did?

Jonathan Reynolds: If we were listing the difficult things that small businesses had to deal with in the previous 14 years, we would be here for most of the day and the weekend, if we are being honest. Whether it is how the Conservatives handled Brexit, the mini-Budget or austerity, we could go on and on. I say to the hon. Member that we are not casual about what we have had to ask of business because of the unenviable situation we inherited, but the fundamentals of the UK are incredibly strong in political stability and openness to the world, and we have the changes we are making to planning, skills, regulation and energy to make sure we are delivering.

National Insurance Contributions: SMEs

13. **Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):** What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of changes to employer national insurance contributions on small and medium-sized enterprises. [903174]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): The Treasury published a tax information and impact note in November 2024, alongside the introduction of the Bill containing the employer national insurance contribution changes. It sets out the impact of the policy on the Exchequer and the impacts on business, and that approach is consistent with previous tax changes.

Mr Carmichael: The impact I hear from SMEs in my constituency, predominantly in the visitor economy, is that they are anticipating cutting the hours of part-time staff or laying them off and reducing the number of seasonal employees that they will take on. Will the Minister take those concerns seriously and work with Ministers in the Scottish Government to ensure that the legitimate concerns of SMEs in my constituency do not blossom into a full blown crisis of confidence?

Gareth Thomas: I am always happy to work with the Scottish Government and other devolved Governments on how we can improve the business environment. I am sure the right hon. Member will join me in encouraging the Government in Scotland to mirror the changes we have made to business rates relief. Given the sizeable increase in the Scottish budget, it is somewhat surprising that the SNP has not been willing to support the retail sector through an extension of retail hospitality relief.

International Investment: Scotland

18. **Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help increase levels of international investment in Scotland. [903182]

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The Government are committed to supporting investment in Scotland in line with our growth mission. The Prime Minister recently announced that the National Wealth Fund will provide £200 million of investment in new opportunities in Grangemouth in particular. That announcement came alongside the recently announced £55 million grant for the Port of Cromarty Firth, the two investment zones receiving £80 million over the next five years and our expanded Office for Investment.

Frank McNally: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. The National Wealth Fund has recently invested £43.5 million in Pulpex Ltd to construct a sustainable packaging facility near Glasgow, which is a welcome move and will support jobs and growth. What further measures are planned to attract similar green industry investments in communities such as my own in North Lanarkshire, which has Scotland's fastest-growing economy?

Mr Alexander: My hon. Friend is a tireless advocate for the communities of Coatbridge and Bellshill. I can assure him that the National Wealth Fund's strategic partnerships trial will see each local authority within the Glasgow city region, including North Lanarkshire, being invited to submit project proposals, including for projects focused on, I hesitate to say, green jobs in Coatbridge.

Topical Questions

T1. [903183] **Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): My Department works night and day to deliver our plan for change by making Britain the best place to invest, work and do business. This Government

have provided political stability and openness to the world, and we are continually improving the business environment.

Since the last Business and Trade questions, we have published a new steer for the Competition and Markets Authority so that it has growth and investment in mind, and more pro-business regulatory reforms will follow. In Delhi last month, I relaunched our trade negotiations with India, and I have just returned from Tokyo, where the Foreign Secretary and I announced a first-of-its-kind industrial strategy partnership with Japan. We are also ensuring that our “make work pay” reforms deliver for businesses and workers.

Finally, we have engaged closely with the new US Administration, including Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and the new US trade representative, Jamieson Greer. The new US trade policy is challenging, but we believe that our decision to engage and seek potential agreement on a new economic deal between the UK and the US offers us an opportunity to ensure that the UK is the best-connected market in the world.

Joy Morrissey: Businesses across Beaconsfield, Marlow and the south Bucks villages are facing crippling costs from the Government’s national insurance tax raid and the Employment Rights Bill. Can the Secretary of State reassure or advise my businesses? Should they stop hiring, cut staff, increase prices, or all of the above?

Jonathan Reynolds: I would say that businesses in the hon. Lady’s constituency should contact their local Conservative MP and say, “What was your plan?” because I think we have had three oral question sessions where this has broadly been the only thing that the Conservatives have to say. I genuinely want to know: what was the plan to pay for Post Office compensation? What was the plan to pay for the steel industry? When the Conservatives commissioned the public sector pay bodies with the remit that they were given, got the findings back, hid them and did not tell the British people during the general election campaign, what was the plan? How would they have reconciled that? The small business leaders, and businesses of every size, in the hon. Lady’s constituency know how to make difficult decisions. What—

Mr Speaker: Order. Look, this is getting ridiculous. We are on topicals, and that is the worst example I have seen of an answer to a topical.

T2. [903184] **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): The south-west has a huge number of innovative start-up and scale-up businesses, but we attract only about 3% of private equity and venture capital funding per year. What is the Department doing to ensure that foreign direct investors are aware of, and have access to, the fantastic business infrastructure opportunities that we have in Exeter and across the south-west?

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): I saw many incredible businesses when I went to the Exeter business park last year. When I was in Saudi Arabia in January, I was with a range of businesses that were promoting investment, including many from the south-west. There is more that we can do, but there are some brilliant people there who are doing brilliant things. I think we can go further, and I am certainly very happy to work with my hon. Friend on that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): How have we got to this point? After 35 weeks as Trade Secretary, 18 weeks since the US election, and an entire month since steel and aluminium tariffs were first announced, the Secretary of State is only now going to sit down with the Secretary of Commerce of our closest ally. While he has been correcting his CV, steelworkers and businesses are hurting today. This is a colossal failure of trade policy on his watch. Why has it taken so long, and when can we expect an agreement?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman may have not seen the news recently, but the UK, led by our Prime Minister, has had the best engagement of any country with the new US Administration. Is it not good to see again a British Prime Minister who is respected on the world stage and delivering for Britain? We have had tremendous engagement with the new US Administration, and I am looking forward to meeting them in person next week.

Andrew Griffith: Once again, no answers come there forth. Over 1 million jobs in this country depend on trade with the United States, including thousands of jobs in our steel industry. The Secretary of State does not know when he is going to get a deal. Will he publish his red lines for that deal, his objectives and what he hopes to achieve from meetings next week?

Jonathan Reynolds: On steel and aluminium tariffs, the US Administration’s position is that there are no exemptions for anybody—that is across the board. I think they recognise the very strong case that we have, but that is their position.

No, I will not publish my negotiating red lines before a negotiation. Frankly, that is the worst advice I have ever heard in the House of Commons. The Conservative party fell out with the EU, would not deal with China and could not do a deal with India. It fell out with the United Arab Emirates and could not do a deal with the Gulf. It got nothing out of the US. It did deals with Australia and New Zealand, then disowned them. We will take no lessons from the Conservatives.

T4. [903186] **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): Social enterprises contribute 3.4% of GDP, and towns such as Leigh and Atherton benefit greatly from them. Will the Minister outline what the Department is doing to support social enterprise and co-operatives so they can contribute to the growth agenda in the UK?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): My hon. Friend is a great champion of the social enterprise sector. She will know that we are committed to doubling the size of the co-op and mutuals sector. We recently met the recently launched mutuals and co-op business council to begin working with businesses on our plans to expand the co-op and mutuals sector. She may also be aware that our social enterprise boost fund is currently spending some £4 million on helping to support social enterprises that are already up and running.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrats spokesperson.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): If the Government have to push forward with retaliatory measures against the United States for its steel tariffs, they must strike at the political allies of the President to meaningfully move on the conversation. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether Elon Musk's Tesla is being considered as a potential target for retaliatory measures?

Jonathan Reynolds: We reserve the right to take any action in response to any changes to our trading relationships, but I do think we can look to the opportunity for the UK, which is greater than for any other country, to get to an agreement that improves our terms of trade with the US. I reserve the right to take any action, but I think we can look forward in a positive way to improving that trading relationship, and that right now is my message and focus.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Bloore.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab) *rose*—

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Bloore. [*Laughter.*]

T6. [903188] **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Fly by Nite haulage, based in Redditch, is trusted to deliver by the biggest names in music, TV and theatre. However, post-Brexit rules on visa and work permits are damaging the creative industries' opportunities on the continent. Would the Minister agree to meet me to discuss how we can break the logjam and support British success stories such as Fly by Nite?

Mr Speaker: It was Chris Bloore's turn. I am following the Order Paper, but I am going from side to side. Chris Law will come afterwards; he was not next.

Jonathan Reynolds: There are many Members called Chris.

I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As he will know, the creative industries are part of our industrial strategy. We are hugely proud of their soft power and economic impact, and of course we will get him the meeting he requests.

T3. [903185] **Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Some 66% of hospitality firms say they will have to cut staff or staff hours, 75% say they will cut investment, and 97% say they will increase prices because of the Chancellor's manifesto-breaking national insurance increases. What assessment has the Minister made of the number of workers being dragged into national insurance contributions for the first time, and if the Government must continue with this disastrous policy, will they at least delay it for 12 months to bring it into line with the introduction of business rates reforms?

Gareth Thomas: We have had one or two questions on this topic, and the hon. Member will therefore not be surprised by my answer. I gently point out that the difficult decisions we took on employer's national insurance contributions in the Budget were a direct result of the mess the Conservative party, which he supported so enthusiastically, left for this Government.

T7. [903189] **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): The big six supermarkets are acting like a cartel, forcing unfair prices on farmers and pursuing unscrupulous practices such as farm washing. Does the Minister agree with me that we should look again at the Groceries Code Adjudicator and consider whether it is fit for purpose?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The Groceries Code Adjudicator's annual survey shows high levels of compliance by the supermarkets. However, a statutory review will actually commence next month, and I would encourage her and all stakeholders to contribute to it.

Mr Speaker: Now it is Chris Law's turn.

T5. [903187] **Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The US President said that the EU was created to "screw over the US". However, while the EU stood up for its economy and imposed a \$28 billion counter-tariff, the UK is being screwed by the US, which has made it clear that the UK will not be an exception to its levies, despite the Prime Minister's pleading. Will the Secretary of State tell me whether the Government are content to remain a bridge between the EU and the US if it is a bridge that the US continues to walk all over, risking the UK economy with every single step?

Jonathan Reynolds: The simple position is that we will represent the UK's national interest in this matter. The US has objections about its significant deficits in manufacturing goods with China and the EU, but that is not the relationship between the US and the UK, so there is a chance for the UK to pursue a different policy—one that produces greater benefits for every part of the UK than perhaps are available to other countries. Of course we are cognisant of the overall impact—no one wants to see this type of turmoil in the global economy—but our job is to deliver for the UK, and that is exactly what we are focused on doing.

T8. [903190] **Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Rural businesses in North West Leicestershire highlight the lack of accessible public transport, including having no passenger rail, as a barrier to attracting new employees and to growth. What conversations has the Minister had with the Department for Transport about the barriers that rural businesses are facing?

Gareth Thomas: We know that rural businesses want to see more investment in bus services and better transport infrastructure. My hon. Friend will appreciate that the Chancellor announced in the Budget some £650 million-plus in funding for local transport, which is designed to support everyday journeys and improve transport connections. I am sure, too, that she will welcome the better buses Bill, which is coming in to give local authorities—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Seamus Logan.

T9. [903192] **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Scotland's goods exports to the US were worth over £3.7 billion last year, and scotch whisky exports were £971 million—the largest slice by value.

If the Prime Minister cannot protect the UK and Scottish steel industries, how can Scottish people be sure that he will be able to protect our whisky industry from malicious US tariffs?

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): I can assure the House that we are in regular touch with the Scotch Whisky Association. We fully appreciate the significance and importance of that industry not just to Scotland but to the UK. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, we are well served by a serious Prime Minister in these serious times, which affords us the opportunity for a dialogue in trade frankly not available to other countries.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Liam Byrne.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): President Trump's new tariffs are double trouble for Britain's steel and aluminium suppliers. They will dent £350 million of sales, but they also risk swamping the UK with over-subsidised Chinese steel diverted from America. What is the Secretary of State's game plan now to redouble defences for our UK metal makers?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am incredibly grateful to the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee for that question. He is right to say that the challenge here is not just the direct trade we have with the US, but the impact of trade diversion. He knows we already have 16 anti-dumping, anti-subsidy measures in place against 14 separate product categories. Once the annual tariff-free quota is hit, a 25% tariff applies to those. I can tell him and the House today, though, that I will support UK Steel's application to the Trade Remedies Authority for a review of the steel safeguards—we do have to think about what will be coming—and a new one for the aluminium sectors.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am sure that Ministers will join me in welcoming the £90 million investment by dairy firm Arla in the plant in my constituency, which will create up to 90 jobs. Does not that reinforce the fact that agriculture remains at the heart of the rural economy in constituencies such as mine? Should not the Government be supporting that industry, rather than trying to destroy it?

Mr Alexander: I can assure the House that we do welcome the investment of which the right hon. Gentleman speaks. Speaking on behalf of the constituency of East Lothian, I recognise fully the importance of the rural economy and agriculture's contribution thereto. That is why we are in regular dialogue with the NFU and other key stakeholders.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Together with the Startup Coalition, I recently held a roundtable with brilliant local start-ups working out of Future Space at the University of the West of England. Issues that they have been facing for a long time include accessing the same opportunities and support for growth as larger businesses. Would the Minister please set out what support his Department will be providing so that our very smallest businesses can thrive too?

Gareth Thomas: One of the big issues that small businesses wanting to scale up face is access to finance. We are actively working across Government on what else we can do to support businesses to get access to the finance they need, including through the British Business Bank.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): In my constituency, a planning moratorium has been in place for more than five years due to water pollution, with an estimated effect on the local construction industry of half a billion pounds, despite the fact that new house building is a minute proportion of the problem. Will the Secretary of State meet me and representatives of the Herefordshire construction industry to try to find a solution to this devastating problem?

Jonathan Reynolds: The frustration that comes across in the hon. Lady's question relates to exactly the sort of problem the Government are fixing. I would be more than happy to work with her and any Secretary of State or Department necessary to unblock that for her.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Will the Minister outline what steps the Department is taking to help increase trade with the Asia Pacific, and in particular the Philippines, where a major local company in my constituency, Beaver Bridges, is hoping to expand and grow significantly, with the trade support of this Government?

Mr Douglas Alexander: I happen to be meeting the Philippine Government next week, although alas in London, not in Manila. The Department is working hard to agree a Government-to-Government financing framework partnership. That is just part of the work we have under way. If I can be of direct assistance to my hon. Friend and to her local business, I will of course be happy to speak to her.

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): The invest in women taskforce aims to drive investment in female-powered businesses at every stage. That includes putting more money in the hands of female investors, as we know that women back women. Does the Minister agree that one solution to tackling the gender disparity in investment decision-making roles is to set a minimum level of female representation for all investment committees that receive British Business Bank funding?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a strong correlation between the proportion of women on an investment committee and the proportion of female founders receiving investment. My Department leads on the investing in women code, whose 270 signatories commit to supporting female entrepreneurship. One of the key metrics we check is the gender balance on investment committees and investment teams. I am pleased to say that the code signatories significantly outperform the wider market in their support for female founders. Investment funds backed by the British Business Bank are expected to sign up to the code and the bank itself is a signatory.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Over 100 jobs have been lost in Falkirk since September due the previous Government's failure to keep their commitments to the bus manufacturing sector. We need a plan for bus manufacturing. Has the Minister engaged with the Department for Transport, the bus manufacturing industry or regional mayors, prior to launching the UK bus manufacturing expert panel?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend asks a very good question. I am very pleased that the Department for Transport today launched the new UK bus manufacturing expert panel. We need to support our bus manufacturing, both for the transition to net zero and for building our businesses in the UK. I am very happy to work with him on that.

Business of the House

10.37 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I shall.

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

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

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

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

FRIDAY 21 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 24 March will include:

MONDAY 24 MARCH—Second Reading of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

TUESDAY 25 MARCH—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Great British Energy Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2025.

WEDNESDAY 26 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make her spring statement, followed by remaining stages of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

THURSDAY 27 MARCH—General debate on St Patrick's Day and Northern Irish affairs, followed by general debate on the 10th anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 28 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

Jesse Norman: I am sure the whole House will want to join me in recognising and thanking the salvage and nature recovery specialists who are even now scrambling to clear up after the disastrous collision in the North sea.

They say a conservative is a socialist who has been mugged by reality. If that is so, we are witnessing the extraordinary sight of a Prime Minister who is being visibly mugged by reality in slow motion before our very eyes. The Government's brand of socialism started well from their point of view, if disastrously for the country: we had the union pay-offs, the rapid settlement of pay disputes in the public sector—for zero apparent efficiency benefits—and a heavily tax-and-spend Budget. The Chancellor was even so bold, as Members will

recall, as to announce to the CBI that she would not be raising taxes or increasing debt over the course of the Government. As she said:

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

However, the Budget started to unravel almost as soon as it was published. We had the bizarre sight of a Government who were ever more committed to talking about growth while clubbing growth to death across a variety of sectors: through the national insurance rise and the £5 billion burden of the Employment Rights Bill, of course, but also through their loss of credibility in the markets, which has pushed up gilt yields by 25% since September. Great British Energy was announced, and did nothing. The Government made an unsuccessful attempt to claim credit for the achievements of the newly rebranded National Wealth Fund, which had been set up only weeks before. The system of infrastructure monitoring and planning has been dismantled, and there has been no news for three months on the decision on small modular reactors, which was due on 1 December or thereabouts. Can the Leader of the House update the House on when we can expect that decision?

Then President Trump got elected, despite—or perhaps because of—the special SWAT team of Labour activists sent over to campaign for his rival, and then the mugging by reality really began. The Energy Secretary was forced to pare back his ruinously expensive zero-carbon energy plans; the Prime Minister had to announce his plan for change; the Government were forced to accelerate their defence spending plans in order to address the situation in Ukraine; and so it continues.

This week, we have heard of the Government's so-called Operation Chainsaw—or should that be butter knife?—to reshape the civil service. Next week, we will have hasty and almost certainly ill thought through cuts to welfare. Labour was red under the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), became a gentle cerise for voters at the general election and, now that reality is setting in, it is a pleasing shade of purple, with more and more patches of blue. The Prime Minister and the Government are becoming more Conservative by the day.

In sharp contrast, it is the Government's policy towards rural areas that is most striking. We have seen the family farm tax and the disproportionate effect on hospices and social care services in rural areas arising from the rise in national insurance. Now, in the same week, we have seen new compulsory purchase powers to seize farmland and the abrupt and unexpected end of the sustainable farming incentives scheme. The Government are simultaneously reducing farm incomes, threatening farm holdings and forcing the sale of family farms through their inheritance tax changes. I am sad to say that even the £35 million allocated by the previous Government to clean up the River Wye—one of the natural glories of this country—has been cut to just £1 million. The Labour message is clear: do not be a farmer. Do not feed the country. Do not give us food security. Do not work every hour God sends, whatever the weather—we do not care.

The Leader of the House has been very clear that it is her policy not to answer Opposition questions, or even to answer questions about her policy of not answering questions. She ignored my questions yet again last week, but perhaps she can have a go at these questions now. Why have the Government taken such a punitive

[*Jesse Norman*]

approach to the countryside? Are they doing so deliberately, or is it just by accident? Finally, will she come to visit some farmers in Herefordshire with me so that she can see the actual effect of these policies for herself? We will throw in some magnificent Shepherds or Rowlestone ice cream, as well, if that will make any difference.

Lucy Powell: I start by congratulating young carers across the country on their day of action yesterday.

I know the whole House will be as hopeful as everybody else in the country about Ukraine, as talks continue this week and over the weekend. I am sure we all welcome the resumption of military aid and intelligence sharing between the US and Ukraine. This really is an important moment for peace in the region and the ball is now firmly in Russia's court.

The shadow Leader of the House spent most of his speech last week and this week giving a long lecture about why I do not answer his questions while actually failing to ask me very many at all. We had a couple of small questions today at the end of another diatribe that, as ever, took us through various myths and misinformation. He will know that this Government had to take some very difficult decisions to deal with an economy that no Government would want to deal with: high and rising debt; stagnant growth; low productivity; low wages; and public services on their knees. That is why we have had to take some difficult decisions to fix those foundations, but, most importantly, to get that investment back into our public services, as we desire to do.

The shadow Leader of the House again raised the point about national insurance, but I must point out to the House that he was a Treasury Minister when his Government raised national insurance not only on businesses, but on working people as well. I am sorry to tell him that this Government absolutely back British farmers. We are doing what we can to support them: we have increased the farming budget to £5 billion over two years, which is far more than the Conservative Government ever did; we have set out a new deal for farmers; and we are investing in our flood defences. We also have a plan for sustainable food, and he knows better than anybody that the sustainable farming incentive had a capped budget, which his Government did not announce. They failed to spend any of it, and, given the action that we have taken, it has been oversubscribed in the meantime. That is why we have closed that fund, but we are setting out a new fund after the spring statement next week.

I might give the shadow Leader of the House an alternative point of view on recent history. Order Paper aficionados will have noticed that Tuesday marked our 100th sitting day of this parliamentary Session —[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] That is 100 days of boosting our public services, investing in jobs and growth, and reforming the state in favour of people and against vested interest. That is also 100 days of change and 100 days of putting the Government back in the service of working people.

We have had the most ambitious King's Speech programme of any incoming Government. Ten Bills have now received Royal Assent, including: the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024, ending the scandal of free cash going to failed rail companies;

and the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, ending bonuses for water bosses polluting our waterways. Very soon, we will have Martyn's law, keeping the promise that we made to Figen Murray. And there is more on the way: strengthening renters' rights; switching on Great British Energy; introducing new powers to tackle phone thefts; seizing off-road bikes; creating respect orders; banning knife sales; and introducing stronger protections against stalking and spiking. We are unblocking house building and energy infrastructure, which, for too long, has stalled. Yesterday, we completed our Commons stages of the Employment Rights Bill, giving people dignity and security in work. And that is just a few of the things that we have done.

Beyond that, we are fixing the big problems that the country faces: with waiting lists finally coming down; more GP appointments; breakfast clubs in school; a 25% increase in returns of people with no right to be here; more affordable housing and restricting the right to buy; finally getting rid of hereditary peers and cracking down on MPs' second jobs; and the biggest devolution of powers in a generation. And that is just a snapshot of those 100 days.

Mr Speaker, you will be pleased to know that, in that time, we have made 115 statements to this place, because, like you, I respect the House of Commons and I respect that we make announcements here first. But what a contrast to the previous Conservative Government. They had to be dragged here to make statements. Their last King's Speech was threadbare. The pinnacle of their ambition was to ban pedicabs in London, and they are not doing much better now, are they Mr Speaker? Hardly any of them turn up to debates. They are barely here for PMQs, although I do not blame them for that. They were a zombie Government, and is not the truth that they are a zombie Opposition now?

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I recently met my constituent, Becky, who is profoundly disabled after her mother was given Primodos, a hormone-based pregnancy test that was popular in the '60s and '70s and taken by roughly 1.5 million pregnant women. It was directly linked to miscarriages and severe birth defects in a study commissioned by the University of Oxford in 2018. Will my right hon. Friend make time for a full debate on this scandal, or join me in calling for a full public inquiry?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I am hugely sympathetic to families who have suffered from hormone pregnancy tests. She will be aware that Baroness Cumberlege's independent review highlighted the healthcare system's failure to listen to patients' concerns around those tests. She will also be aware that the causal links have been reviewed many times, but I will ensure that Ministers get back to her with a full update.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): As Members of Parliament, we have many issues that demand our attention, but few that can be more important than ensuring children are well fed with healthy, nutritious food. I am sure that Members across the House wish that all families are able to provide that every day for their children, but we must face the tragic reality that many

children go hungry. In government, the Liberal Democrats were proud to introduce universal free school meals for infants. We ensured that every child could access a healthy lunch each day, because when children go hungry, they make less progress and have poorer behaviour and health outcomes.

A free school lunch may be the only healthy cooked food that some children get, or even their only meal of the day. That is shameful in a country such as England. That is why we have tabled amendments to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that would increase the after-tax threshold for free school meals to £20,000 a year, expanding eligibility for free school meals to a further 900,000 children. We are also committed to introducing auto-enrolment for those who are eligible for free school meals, ensuring that children are automatically considered eligible when their parents apply for relevant benefits or financial support.

Does the Leader of the House agree that no child should go hungry in 2025, and will she ask the Government to embrace cross-party working to support the Liberal Democrats' long-standing calls for free school meals when the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill returns to Parliament next week?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising such an important issue, which is of great concern to her and many others in the House. I am sure that in the coming days, not just with tomorrow's private Member's Bill but with the two days of debate on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, we will have plenty of time to debate these sorts of issues in the House.

Free school meal eligibility should be looked at in the round. That is why this Government are developing a child poverty strategy, which includes free school meals. In the meantime, the hon. Lady will be aware that we are rolling out free breakfast clubs in schools, because she is right that having a meal inside a child can stop them feeling hungry, but it can also help them to learn, concentrate and do better at school. That is why we are committed to those free breakfast clubs, and to our child poverty taskforce, which will also look at free school meals.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): This Sunday marks Disabled Access Day and the importance of accessibility and inclusiveness for all. Sadly, disabled people in Luton South and South Bedfordshire cannot access Luton station because of the delays and failures of Network Rail in progressing the Access for All programme and installing lifts at Luton station. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on how our plan for Great British Railways will improve infrastructure and ensure reliable, affordable and, importantly, accessible train services for everybody?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the frustrations and problems that my hon. Friend's constituents have had with station accessibility, which gets raised with me in business questions regularly. The Government are committed to improving it. They are difficult challenges, and the Rail Minister is actively considering the best approach to the Access for All programme, but I will ensure that he has heard her question and that she gets a full reply.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, if we are given Thursday 3 April in the Chamber, there will be a debate on the impact of digital platforms on UK democracy, followed by a debate on access to sport and physical education in schools. It would be helpful if she indicated whether we will get Tuesday 8 April, the day before the recess, and the date for estimates in May.

In addition, on Tuesday, there will be a debate in Westminster Hall on retrospective accountability of the construction industry, which many colleagues are concerned about. On Thursday, there will be a debate on the prevention of drugs death and, in response to the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles), the first anniversary of the Hughes report on valproate and pelvic mesh. On 1 April, there will be a debate on eating disorders and on Thursday 3 April a debate on waste incinerators, followed by a debate on Government support for Thames Water. On 8 April, there will be a debate on persecution of Christians.

Today is Purim, when Jewish people throughout the world celebrate their deliverance from the first attempt of genocide of Jewish people at the hands of the then Persian empire. Tomorrow is Holi, when Hindus throughout the world will celebrate the deliverance of Vishnu from Holika, the evil witch who was consumed by fire. For colleagues who are going to Holi festivals for the first time, I advise them not to wear business attire because colours will be thrown and they will be coated in various different colours, and they will probably not be able to clean the clothes afterwards.

Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing Jewish people everywhere chag Purim sameach and all Hindus happy Holi?

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, as ever. He has announced a number of important debates that will be popular among hon. Members, on issues such as Thames Water and, as has been raised with me a number of times including recently, pelvic mesh and valproate. May I join him in the advice he gives to hon. Members and also in wishing those celebrating Purim and Holi the best of times this week?

On his question about 8 April, which is just before recess, I am not in a position to announce future business, but I will look very kindly on his request.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I was delighted to meet my constituent Amy Scullard at the Pebble Brook Community Cafe last week. Amy helps run a peer support group in Aylesbury for parents and parents-to-be who are struggling with their mental health, as so many people do. Amy is an absolute inspiration and I look forward to joining her group in future. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the vital role that such mental health support groups play and will she continue to ensure that mental health gets the attention that it deserves in Parliament?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all those who run the Pebble Brook Community Cafe and all the vital work that they do. Perinatal mental health is a really important issue that people have come to know about more in recent years. I am a long-standing supporter

[Lucy Powell]

of the first 1,001 days campaign and the importance that that brings. That is why we are so focused on the early years and some of the issues that my hon. Friend raises and I think that would make an excellent topic for a Westminster Hall debate.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As a believer in parliamentary democracy, I fully support the Government's right not to exploit shale gas deposits in the UK on environmental grounds. However, may we have an urgent statement from the appropriate net zero Minister on the Government's decision from next week to start filling in and putting permanently beyond use the two existing shale gas facilities in this country, rather than keeping them in reserve for an emergency should a future Government ever need to exploit them?

Lucy Powell: May I thank the right hon. Gentleman for agreeing with the Government that we should not exploit fracking? That was in our manifesto and we are committed to not doing fracking. I will ensure that Ministers update him on those matters, as they have been doing, coming regularly to the House. We have had a number of statements from Ministers from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, who are keen to update the House as and when. However, I will ensure the right hon. Gentleman is updated on that particular issue.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): The prolonged time that the Disclosure and Barring Service takes to check the many applicants for work in vital public services in education, health and social care is impacting tens of thousands of people across the UK. Indeed, many applicants have had offers of work retracted due to the significant delays they have experienced. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time to address that critical issue?

Lucy Powell: DBS checks are an important part of many public service jobs, and it is disappointing to hear of the delays that my hon. Friend's constituents have faced. In fact, those delays have been raised with me previously. Ministers are keen to hold the DBS to account where standards are not being met, so I will raise the matter with Ministers. My hon. Friend should be aware that, in some circumstances, his constituents can request a hardship escalation where the delay is affecting job applications.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May we have an early debate in Government time on the ending of the radio teleswitch, upon which many people who rely on electric heating and storage heating depend? It was last debated in an Adjournment debate on 4 December. That spawned a ministerial roundtable on 5 February, which promised further updates, but none have been forthcoming. With just over 100 days to go, it would be good to know that there is a sense of urgency in Government.

Lucy Powell: I strongly hear what the right hon. Member says about the impending deadline, and I am sorry if this House has not been kept as up to date as it should have been. I will make inquiries and ensure that he and the rest of the House are kept updated.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): In recent weeks, many of my constituents have shared their concern about the Consett Empire reducing its opening hours. The Empire is a real cultural centre of the community that makes arts accessible to local people and provides a hub to help combat loneliness. I continue to speak with officers, staff and trade unions about the Empire, but can we have a debate in Government time on what we can do to ensure that venues like the Consett Empire stay open and thrive?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear what is happening to the Consett Empire in my hon. Friend's constituency. I agree with her that music venues and cultural hubs like that are vital to our high streets, communities and the cultural offer that we all want to see. The Government are committed to ensuring that we maintain such assets, but I will ensure that she gets an update on this particular issue.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am concerned that the Department for Work and Pensions has confirmed that there is a backlog of more than 30,000 pension credit claims still to process. That is in spite of assurances from the Minister in October that 352 extra staff had been deployed at the point of the Chancellor's announcement to scrap the winter fuel payment. A further 537 staff followed that announcement, and in January it was announced that another 156 staff would be recruited. By my calculation, that is 1,045 staff and the backlog still remains. Will the Leader of the House make Government time for a debate or statement so that we can understand what is going on with the backlog? I am concerned that pensioners are still waiting for pension credit and winter fuel payments at a time when they desperately need them—the winter is still not over.

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Member will know that we saw an 81% increase in claims, and the latest statistics show a 64% increase in successful pension credit applications, which I am sure is something she will welcome. We have deployed an additional 500 staff to process applications, and there has been a huge increase there, which is to be welcomed. She will know that for any successful application, the moneys will be backdated to the day the person applied for it, so they will get that, but I will ensure that the House is kept up to date.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): May I, too, wish a very happy Holi to all the Hindus celebrating in the UK and across the world tomorrow?

An issue that is personal to me and to many of my constituents is Parkinson's, and World Parkinson's Day takes place on 11 April every year. I pay tribute to Parkinson's UK for all it does to support people with Parkinson's. Research suggests that personal independence payment assessors do not have sufficient understanding of the fluctuations in symptoms that people with Parkinson's experience. Consequently, people with Parkinson's are denied much-needed support. In fact, in almost every instance in which Parkinson's UK's expert social security advisers have assisted a member of the Parkinson's community to challenge an initial PIP decision, it has been overturned in the claimant's favour. As such, can we have a debate in Government time on supporting people living with Parkinson's and other degenerative conditions, and about the social security support available to them?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Parkinson's UK for its work. He is absolutely right. I am sure that every single one of us will, as constituency MPs, recognise the challenges for PIP assessors in properly assessing those with fluctuating and chronic illnesses. It is vital that those assessing access to benefits have the necessary training and understanding of chronic conditions such as Parkinson's. I will ensure that Ministers keep him and the House updated on that.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Dundee University in my constituency has one of the world's leading life sciences departments, but it faces a significant deficit that is being compounded by nearly £3 million of employer national insurance contributions. May we have a statement from a Treasury Minister as soon as possible, and might a pause be put in place for establishments facing serious financial difficulties that will be seriously compounded by the rise in employer national insurance contributions?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the difficulties faced by the university in the hon. Member's constituency. As he will have heard me say earlier, these are not decisions that any Government want to come in and make, but we have had to deal with the inheritance we found ourselves with and ensure that we get vital investment into our public services, particularly the NHS, which we found completely on its knees with such high waiting lists. The university, life sciences and research sectors have had very good settlements in Budgets over recent years, and they are expected to fund the national insurance rise from within their own budgets. I will ensure that he is kept updated.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): The Canal & River Trust manages 2,000 miles of waterway, including nearly 500 miles in the north-west. I recently met the trust and its dedicated volunteers, who highlighted confusion about ownership and funding difficulties. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking that organisation, and does she agree that a debate on that important part of our heritage would give it the focus that it deserves?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely recognise what my hon. Friend describes. I recently met the Canal & River Trust. I am not sure whether there is a canal that connects her constituency to mine, but I could definitely get on a barge and go from my constituency to hers—

Mr Speaker: And mine.

Lucy Powell: And to yours, too, Mr Speaker—we are very well connected in our region in that regard.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: canals not only provide the blue space that many of our towns and city centres need, but offer tourist attractions and many other assets. We should support the work of the Canal & River Trust.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Many valued public servants work at Porton Down in my constituency. It was home to the Health Protection Agency when I first became an MP, then to Public Health England and then the UK Health Security Agency. In 2015, the decision was made to establish a new facility in Essex. I have been applying and will continue to apply for an Adjournment

debate, but we could really do with a statement from a Health Minister on the future of the UK Health Security Agency, which is a vital facility for this country. My constituents need to know what is happening with it.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman has not yet been successful in applying for an Adjournment debate, but the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who chairs the Backbench Business Committee, and Mr Speaker are both in their places and have, I am sure, heard his plea. The future of the UK Health Security Agency, which does great work, is of national importance. I will ensure that he gets an update at the earliest opportunity.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a coincidence to be called after the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen). I thank the Leader of the House for mentioning Young Carers Action Day, which was yesterday. The hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) and I took an open-top bus tour with some young carers and got hailed on. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating my constituent Danielle, who won a prize in the national Show Racism the Red Card poetry competition for her poem "Like a Butterfly", and does my right hon. Friend recognise the importance of creative writing in breaking down barriers and challenging division?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Danielle on writing an award-winning poem and all the young carers in his constituency and beyond. I heard on the radio this morning that AI thinks it can now do creative writing for all of us, but I am sure it cannot beat Danielle and the creative writing endeavours of young people.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier this week, I had a meeting with the UK Chamber of Shipping. Coincidentally, it was the day of the incident in the North sea, so obviously we discussed that, but the main point of the meeting was to discuss the impact of shipping on the UK economy and my constituency in particular. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of the shipping sector to the UK economy?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman's constituents and others will have been affected by the events in the North sea this week. As a great island nation, shipping is vital to the economy of this country, to our trade and to our standing. I am sure that Ministers would be happy to update the House regularly on these matters.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I have been working for several months to help a number of my constituents get the wheelchairs they need to have good-quality, independent lives. While I understand that it is the role of integrated care boards to deliver equality of service, the problem is much more widespread. The Wheelchair Alliance recommends that NHS England plays a more active role in ensuring that ICBs prioritise wheelchair services and dedicate sufficient resources to them. Will the Minister allow time to debate the many challenges people experience regarding wheelchair provision?

Lucy Powell: I am sure we can all recognise the frustrations that many people have with wheelchair provision. My hon. Friend is right: there is still far too much variation, including regional variation, in the quality and provision of NHS wheelchairs. A new wheelchair quality framework is soon to be published by NHS England, and I will ensure that she and the rest of the House are updated on that.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): My constituent Jennifer, an American citizen, came here in 2018 on a spousal visa, which was renewed in 2022. She applied for indefinite leave to remain in May last year. The Government website says:

“you’ll usually be told whether your application has been successful within 6 months.”

It has been 10 months. Jennifer’s now expired visa has given her employer concerns about her right to work, and that financial uncertainty is exacerbated by the fact that she cannot be added to the couple’s mortgage, which affects the works they need to do on their home. Jennifer has tried and I have tried, so I wonder whether the Leader of the House could try to raise this case with her colleagues in the Home Office to see what has happened, get it sorted and reduce the stress that this delay is causing Jennifer and her family.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the frustrating experience that the hon. Lady and Jennifer have had. The hon. Lady will know that there has been a backlog in these cases. We have put in place extra caseworkers and are dealing with the backlog as quickly as we can. As ever, I would be happy to raise this case and see whether I can expedite an answer.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): In my 2025 Cramlington and Killingworth priorities survey, residents consistently raised antisocial behaviour and off-road bikes. The measures in the Crime and Policing Bill will send a strong message that this behaviour will no longer be tolerated, but can we have a debate on the action this Government are taking to tackle the issue and ensure that the police have the powers and resources they need to remove these menacing bikes from our streets?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Like her, I welcome the measures in the Crime and Policing Bill, which had its Second Reading earlier this week. The powers we are giving the police to seize and crush these menacing off-road bikes, quad bikes and others is probably one of the most popular things this Government have done in recent weeks among my constituents. She is right: we need to make sure that once the new powers are given, the police have the resources and can operationalise their intention.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Last week, it was announced that £600,000 of funding had been secured to resurface Huntingdon High Street, improving not only the look and feel of the high street but its accessibility. I wholeheartedly support that proposal, and it is great to see more steps being taken to make it attractive to new businesses. The funding was secured by Huntingdon’s BID—business improvement district—team, Paul Sweeney and Mags Clark, who have been doing fantastic work to improve Huntingdon and make

it a vibrant and thriving town centre. I have worked closely with Paul, and his ongoing efforts to encourage local people back into town have been instrumental in its regeneration. Could the Leader of the House make time in the schedule to debate how we can regenerate our high streets?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, and I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Huntingdon High Street and the local BID team on securing those funds. I know from my own constituency that BID teams do a really brilliant job in securing that kind of investment and having a plan to regenerate town centres, as is happening in Huntingdon. I wish the hon. Gentleman well in that. I look forward perhaps to receiving an invitation in a future question to a new café or pub, or even a hairdresser, in his constituency which may flourish as a result. These are important matters that we will continue to debate in the House.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Last week I attended the community pub hero awards in Parliament and saw Terry Cole and Keith Fulwood from the Royal Oak pub in Chapel Ash in my constituency receive awards for best community fundraising hero and outstanding contribution for their voluntary work in supporting the NHS by delivering blood and medication on motorbikes, thereby saving lives. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Royal Oak pub on its achievement and acknowledge the wonderful contribution our local pubs make to our communities? May I also invite her to have a drink in the Royal Oak the next time she finds herself in Wolverhampton?

Lucy Powell: I am always happy to pay a visit to a Royal Oak pub. I am sure we all have a Royal Oak pub in our constituencies, but my hon. Friend’s in Wolverhampton led by Terry and Keith sounds like it goes way beyond its role as a pub. It sounds like it is a community hub that does so much to support his local community, so I am delighted to join him in thanking them.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): In Northern Ireland we have the ludicrous situation of soldiers being investigated for engaging armed and dangerous terrorists without first exposing themselves to being murdered by those same terrorists. This is the tip of the iceberg of the demands for one-sided justice in Northern Ireland. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on defending historical truth and challenging the one-sided revisionism that is eroding trust in the justice system and distorting the legacy of the troubles and the memory of the innocent victims who lost their lives at the hands of bloodthirsty terrorists?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Lady is disappointed with the Government action in this area. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland believes that the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 needs reform and replacement, and he has been working closely with all the parties in Northern Ireland on that. He has updated the House regularly on those discussions and on his progress, and he will continue to be forthcoming in those conversations and to the House. I will ensure he has heard the hon. Lady’s question.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): First, I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group for Fairtrade. The Government have inherited a wide range of trade negotiations with partners including the Gulf Co-operation Council, Israel and India, all of which will have implications for the UK economy, the environment and global trade. What efforts is the Leader of the House making to ensure there is adequate time in the Commons to discuss trade deals?

Lucy Powell: I am sure my hon. Friend appreciates that I take the scrutiny of Government trade deals and other Government action incredibly seriously. I hope he is aware that the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 made provision for statutory consultation and scrutiny by Parliament of these sorts of measures. However, as part of the work I am leading in the Modernisation Committee and elsewhere, I am always happy to consider other proposals to ensure that we have robust scrutiny by Parliament of any such deals.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): I recently enjoyed the privilege of meeting two inspirational constituents, Helen and James, who for the past 15 years have been foster carers to many children across Bromsgrove. When I met them I also met their lovely 11-year-old foster child Lizzie; she is very happy and confident, making clear the benefit of fostering in society. Lizzie raised with me the question of whether fostering can be included on the curriculum to reduce stigma so that children across society are aware of different family structures. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the fantastic work of foster carers across the country, and please will she raise this question with colleagues in the Department for Education on behalf of Lizzie?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking Helen, James and all the foster parents in his constituency and all our constituencies. It sounds like Lizzie has found a great home to live in, which is what we want for every family. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that those who put themselves forward for fostering are some of the best people in our country and society. We owe them a huge debt and the children who are placed with them really are lucky. He raises their very good suggestion about how we can ensure that people are well educated about fostering and understand it, so that others aspire to foster. I will raise that with Ministers, but he might want to raise it himself during the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill debate next week.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): March is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. I am proud to serve as a Target Ovarian Cancer ambassador and I do so on behalf of Diane Boothby from my constituency who is a survivor of ovarian cancer and campaigns tirelessly to raise awareness. On Tuesday, I will be hosting an ovarian cancer awareness drop-in event in Parliament. Will the Leader of the House have the opportunity to stop by, and will she consider whether there is an opportunity for a debate in the Chamber on ovarian cancer, a disease that is impacting more than 40,000 women in this country?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Diane for all her tireless work in raising awareness of ovarian cancer, and I thank everyone involved in the work of

Target Ovarian Cancer. I will certainly try to pop by his event next week. We are committed to improving diagnosis and treatment for all cancer patients, and we will be publishing a new national cancer plan shortly. I will ensure he and the whole House are kept updated.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): In business questions last week I raised with the Leader of the House my concern at the last-minute cancellation of the cross-party talks on social care. Despite her very sympathetic response, I still have not received any communication from the Secretary of State. Does the Leader of the House think that she might be able to expedite the restarting of those crucially important talks to tackle the crisis in social care, so that I do not need to ask the same question at business questions next week?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady should keep on at me when we do not live up to what we say at the Dispatch Box. I have raised the issue with the Department of Health and Social Care and I will continue to do that for her. I am sorry it has been another week and she has not heard. The Secretary of State will be here shortly to give a statement on a related matter—not quite the same matter—so she may want to raise it with him. I thought that he might already have been in his place for her question. I will ensure she gets a quick response.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I recently visited Ysgol Pencae in my constituency to talk to pupils about my role as an MP. We practised bobbing, which I have been doing this morning, and they asked some wonderful questions. The children at the school learn in the medium of Welsh, so as it is Your Vote Week, will the Leader of the House say bore da to the pupils at Ysgol Pencae and tell them what is her favourite thing about being an MP?

Lucy Powell: Bore da to all the children in my hon. Friend's constituency, in Bangor, Aberconwy and elsewhere. Who would know that bobbing was such a skill, Mr Speaker? It keeps all our gluts in check, certainly for me at business questions. My favourite thing about being a Member of Parliament is being able to stand up, advocate for and represent my constituents. First and foremost, that is the job that we are all here to do.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): During Business and Trade questions earlier, we heard mention of the fantastic value of the export of our food and drink to the United States, which was a sound point. The food and drink industry supports tourism all over the UK, and the whisky distilleries provide fantastic local employment in some of the remotest parts of Scotland. Mr Speaker, next time you travel on London North Eastern Railway, the biscuits you eat will have been made by Mr Gary Reid of Perthshire. I declare an interest because my brother is a cheesemaker. May we have a debate on the food and drink industry in the UK, which is one of our greatest achievements?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. We have great British food and drink, whether it is whisky or the great cheese that the hon. Gentleman's brother makes. A big cheese-lover, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Withington

[Lucy Powell]

(Jeff Smith), is sitting next to me on the Bench; the hon. Gentleman's brother might want to give him a sample. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the many great foods and drinks we make in this country are a really important part of our exports around the world, to America and elsewhere. I will ensure that the House is kept up to date on these issues; they would make a good topic for a debate.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I am sure you will agree, Mr Speaker, that one of the best parts of being a Member of Parliament is visiting our fantastic local schools. When I have done that in recent months, I have been shocked by what I have seen. I have seen pupils at Deanesfield primary school, my old school, learning in mouldy and crumbling portacabins. I have seen Bishopshalt school, a fantastic secondary school, with broken plumbing and toilets. Just last week, I saw pupils at Glebe primary school, which flooded in September, still learning in facilities that have not been put right by the council. Can we make time in this place for a debate about much-needed capital investment in school buildings and how we build on the fantastic legacy of the last Labour Government's Building Schools for the Future programme?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we came into government we found the shocking state of capital investment in our schools really appalling. We know that we need to do more, and we are doing what we can initially. We have set aside more than £2 billion for the next financial year, which will probably only scratch the surface, but that will include funding for Hillingdon council to improve the maintained schools in his constituency. He is absolutely right to raise those issues.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): The Worth valley in my constituency is probably one of the most beautiful parts of the countryside, but it is under threat from the Walshaw moor wind farm, which is potentially the largest wind farm development in the UK, ripping through 235 hectares of protected peatland—one of our most protected natural carbon stores. Local campaign groups are staunchly and quite rightly against it, as am I. In the interests of party unity, I have written to all neighbouring MPs—West Yorkshire is a lonely place for a Conservative, as they all happen to be Labour MPs—but I have not had a response from any of them, despite writing to them back in January. Can we have a debate in Government time about the importance of raising our local concerns about wind farm developments and Labour's announcement that it is removing the moratorium on wind farm developments?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to tell the hon. Gentleman that we stand proudly behind our lifting of the moratorium on onshore wind developments, because they are absolutely vital if we are to get the energy security, jobs of the future and lower bills for his, mine and everybody else's constituents that we so desperately need. I am sorry that he has not had a reply to his correspondence, but we have brought in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which we will debate next week and which ensures that those affected by energy infrastructure near their homes will have other incentives and rights that they might

want to consider. I am afraid we will have to keep going further and faster on these issues; that is vital to our future energy security and to lowering people's bills.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Last week, my constituent Liz, from Bignall End in Newcastle-under-Lyme, came to my surgery and shared the story of her autistic daughter, who lives with selective mutism. Liz's daughter was referred to the child and adolescent mental health services, but the services provided were not suitable for her needs. Can we have a debate on how we can specifically, properly and quickly improve mental health support for children and young people under the age of 18 in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across our country?

Lucy Powell: Supporting young people with their mental health needs is urgent and vital to tackling many of the issues we face, not just for the individuals themselves but for many other societal issues. We are bringing additional support for mental health advisers into schools as well as many other issues. My hon. Friend might want to raise that in the debate on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill next week.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The community equipment services sector, with its organisations such as Millbrook, which serves constituents in my constituency, plays a vital role in working with local authorities and the NHS to help people to live independently outside hospital, providing essential equipment such as bed aids, bathroom safety equipment and mobility tools. That delivers significant cost savings to the Government. I met representatives yesterday who told me that rising national insurance contributions are placing extra strain on a sector already under pressure. They also told me that there is a mixed picture in the reuse of equipment, so there is loads of potential to save the Government money. Will the Leader of the House allow time to debate the use of community medical equipment to ensure that the sector is at the forefront of helping people out of hospital and back into their homes as part of its critical role in supporting a functioning health and social care system?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member is absolutely right that early intervention and services in the community—those services that can help to keep people living independently at home, and that help with discharges from hospitals and care homes—are absolutely vital to our country and our health service, and to keeping people living well for longer. Many of those services, such as Millbrook in her constituency, are either charity or community services. This Government have supported many of those services through increased budgets for the national health service and for local government, but we need to do more to ensure that the services provided by people such as those supporting Millbrook are holistic, well supported and long term.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. We have an important statement coming shortly, but I would like to get as many Members in as possible, so can we have very short questions and perhaps shorter answers from the Leader of the House, please?

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Yesterday, I was proud to vote for the Employment Rights Bill, which—among other actions—will ban fire and rehire tactics. However, Tory-led Devon county council is currently threatening over 800 of its employees, including many of my constituents, with those exact tactics. Will the Leader of the House allocate time in this House to discuss that disgraceful decision?

Lucy Powell: That sounds like a really disgraceful decision, and one that I am sure my hon. Friend and the rest of the House will stand up against. That is why we need the Employment Rights Bill—I am glad that it has now passed its Commons stages. We want to end fire and rehire for good, and I am surprised that the Conservative party voted against it.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): As the Leader of the House knows, there is strong opposition among residents in the Scottish Borders to plans by ScottishPower Energy Networks to build massive pylons along a 94-km route through the Scottish Borders. The regulator, Ofgem, plays a vital role in the decision-making process but, shockingly, is refusing to meet me or the local action group. Can the Leader of the House write to her Cabinet colleagues to try to encourage Ofgem to engage with me, and can she speak to Ofgem on our behalf and try to persuade it to speak to local residents?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely will—I am sorry to hear that Ofgem has not got back to the hon. Gentleman, and I will raise the matter with Ministers. As I am sure he appreciates, new infrastructure means difficult decisions in many of our communities, but we are determined to achieve the energy security and lower bills that we need. However, I will ensure that he gets a response.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): Children and young people on the Isle of Sheppey face massive barriers to opportunity compared with those in more affluent parts of Kent. Last week, many families on the Isle of Sheppey were devastated to learn that children are to be sent many miles away to the mainland—several hours by public transport—for their secondary school places. I have spoken to parents, headteachers and local councillors about this, and although the issues are clearly complicated, the root of the problem is that many people at Kent county council do not understand the challenges that my constituents on Sheppey face. Will the Leader of the House advise me on how best I can raise the issue with Ministers in the House, and may we have a debate about the allocation system for secondary schools, particularly how it relates to areas of extreme need and deprivation?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that my hon. Friend's local council seems to be so out of touch with the needs of families in his constituency. He will know that planning for secondary and other school places is a matter for local authorities; they do get funding to provide extra spaces where they are needed, but they have to do that in advance and be in touch with their local communities. However, I am sure that my hon. Friend will be able to raise those issues next week during the debate on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Wylfa is the best nuclear site in the UK, but the new national policy statement for nuclear energy has scrapped the list of best-suited sites. May we please have a debate in Government time on whether this Government are still committed to developing a new nuclear project at Wylfa?

Lucy Powell: This Government are committed to new nuclear energy and have recently made announcements on that endeavour. However, I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets an update on the nuclear proposals in her constituency, and that the House is also updated.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): In Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme I have been working hard to reconnect our communities. In January I submitted my proposal for the Doncaster East super-loop bus service to the Mayor of South Yorkshire. In February I met Hornsby Travel, a valued family-run bus company serving the Isle of Axholme. This year, it celebrates its 110th anniversary, recognised with a visit from Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Hornsby Travel, and will she support my efforts to ensure that my constituents have access to the transport links they need?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Hornsby Travel on its amazing anniversary—there were cheers across the House when he mentioned it, so it sounds like a popular bus provider in his constituency. We have brought forward the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, currently passing through the other place, to ensure that local communities have the bus services they need.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Rental income from social housing is currently 16% below inflation. Homes for the South West, which includes Curo in my constituency, is under a contractual obligation to do repairs while also building new homes under increasingly stretched grant funding systems. It makes doing both highly impossible. May we have a debate on how we can protect our tenants to get the repairs they need, while also addressing the social housing crisis?

Lucy Powell: That is exactly what this Government are trying to do, through a range of measures. We have the Renters' Rights Bill going through Parliament at the moment. We have the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to support developers and those who want to build more housing, especially social and affordable housing. This Government are committed to supporting tenants and getting the new homes built that we need.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): This week, Union Yard, a new quarter of Aldershot, has opened, including the Makers' Yard, a home for local creative businesses. That has been delivered by the previous and current administrations of Rushmoor council. Will the Leader of the House join me in sending best wishes to local residents Jess and Georgina of Kitschy Bits Boutique ahead of their opening in Makers' Yard on Saturday? May we have a debate on what this Government are doing to support more retail opportunities for local creative businesses as part of our growth mission?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Jess and Georgina on their opening. She is right that local businesses on our high streets, especially creative businesses, are vital to the future of our town centres.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Zoe is a bright and exceptionally politically engaged young woman in Falkirk. She has had to seek private diagnosis for postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, or POTS, following admission to hospital on several occasions for symptoms consistent with POTS. No national guidelines for POTS exist and, alarmingly, no dedicated clinical pathways for its treatment are available for patients such as Zoe. Will the Leader of the House support a debate to discuss the creation of national clinical guidelines for POTS patients?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about Zoe's experience. The situation in Scotland with the NHS is particularly worrying under the Scottish Government. The majority of services for POTS in England are commissioned by integrated care boards, but I will raise this matter with Health Ministers—they have all just taken their seats on the Front Bench for the forthcoming statement, so they will have heard his question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Human rights violations in Algeria, particularly against the Kabyle Berber minority, are of growing concern. Reports highlight increasing repression, including arbitrary arrests, surveillance and restrictions on religious freedom, leading worryingly to Algeria's placement on the US special watch list. A recent UK legal opinion has affirmed the Kabyle people's right to self-determination under international law. However, this House has not addressed the Kabylia region since 1902. I do not think anyone in this House would remember that. Will the Leader of the House please urge the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on this matter urgently?

Lucy Powell: As usual, the hon. Member raises an important issue, this time in relation to Algeria. I am sure he will be reassured to know that the British ambassador regularly raises these matters with his counterparts in Algeria, including having recently met the Minister of Religious Affairs on 10 February.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Last week, Redditch lost a giant. Arriving from Jamaica in the 1950s, Madge Tillsley MBE was a true pillar of the Redditch community. She was a trailblazer, a campaigning councillor and a source of joy to all who knew her. She made history as the first black mayor in Worcestershire in 1991 and is an incredibly hard act to follow in representing our town. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Madge's dedication to public service and our town and send condolences to her family?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I have read the tributes to Auntie Madge, as I think she was known, and I absolutely support my hon. Friend in sending our condolences, best wishes and thanks to her and her family for all her dedicated work.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It was fantastic to be able to observe the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland resilience forum exercise

Operation Mercury, a live emergency services exercise at our local barracks to test the response to a major incident on the M1. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Leicestershire Police, Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service, East Midlands Ambulance Service and local authorities, as well as all the volunteers involved in the operation? Will she also thank our emergency services for the work that they do every day to keep us safe?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. We all support the amazing work of our emergency services—fire, police, ambulance and many others—and I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking them.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Last year, Simone White, the daughter of one of my constituents, was travelling with her friend in Laos. Like many young people, they had chosen to go travelling in south-east Asia on what is a very popular tourist route. Tragically, after drinking shots in a Vang Vieng resort, she was taken ill and died of suspected methanol poisoning, becoming the sixth person who is believed to have died in this way at the resort. Unfortunately, young people's awareness of the risks of methanol poisoning is very low. Will the Leader of the House commit House time for a debate on how we can increase awareness of methanol poisoning and ensure that no more families have to go through the pain that Simone's family is currently experiencing?

Lucy Powell: I think we were all touched by this tragic case last November. Following it, we updated our travel advice, and we continue to press the local authorities for a full investigation so that we can prevent contaminated alcohol from being sold in this way in the future. Since November, the Foreign Office has been communicating the risks of methanol poisoning to people travelling abroad. I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our best wishes to Simone's family.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Cumbernauld theatre is a long-standing and vital cultural cornerstone, but it now faces the possibility of closure following a cut to its funding by Creative Scotland. Its work extends beyond performance, with an extensive outreach programme in the local community, and the petition to save it has now reached 10,000 signatures. May we please have a debate in Government time on the importance of local theatres and their role in increasing access to culture?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has previously raised with me the importance of Cumbernauld theatre, which obviously is truly loved by her community. She will know that Creative Scotland and the cultural funds that it deploys are a devolved matter, and this is a shocking decision by the Scottish Government, for which they should be accountable. They have now had a huge increase in their budget, they have the powers, and they need to make better decisions in the interests of her community.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): During the holy month of Ramadan, will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the Almanaar Muslim cultural centre in north Kensington, which played such a pivotal role after Grenfell and throughout the pandemic, and which is now inspiring as a place of worship, a

community kitchen, a nursery and so much more? Will she join me in wishing all Muslims in Britain Ramadan Mubarak?

Lucy Powell: I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in wishing all Muslims in Britain Ramadan Mubarak. I think every single one of us remembers the incredible work that the Almanaar Muslim cultural centre did in the wake of the Grenfell fire. When many others stepped aside, it filled the space, and we pay tribute to it for its continued work.

NHS England Update

11.44 am

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the future of NHS England.

Since coming into office, this Government have made big strides in fixing our broken NHS. Under the Conservatives, the NHS suffered years of industrial action, costing taxpayers billions and costing patients more than 1 million cancelled operations and appointments. We negotiated an end to the resident doctors strike within three weeks. We have delivered the 2 million extra appointments we promised in our first year, and we did it seven months early. After 14 years of rising waiting lists under the Conservatives, we are finally turning the tide, cutting waiting lists for five months in a row, cutting waiting lists through the winter pressures and cutting waiting lists by 193,000 so far and counting. We have agreed the GP contract with GPs for the first time since the pandemic—our first step to bringing back the family doctor—and we have delivered the biggest uplift in hospice funding for a generation.

However, there should be no doubt about the scale of the challenge ahead. We inherited an NHS going through the worst crisis in its history, so there is no time to waste. We inherited public finances with a £22 billion black hole, so there is no money to waste. The urgency of the crisis means we have to go further and faster to deliver better value for taxpayers and better services for patients—something the Conservative party cannot even begin to speak to a record on.

Lord Darzi's independent investigation into the national health service traced the current crisis back to the 2012 top-down reorganisation of the NHS by the right hon. Lord Lansley. The Darzi investigation said the reorganisation was "disastrous" and a "calamity without international precedent" that "scorched the earth" for health reform, "the effects of which are still felt to this day."

The Health and Social Care Act 2012 established more than 300 new NHS organisations, created a complex and fragmented web of bureaucracy and, to quote the Darzi investigation,

"imprisoned more than a million NHS staff in a broken system".

Today, we are putting the final nail in the coffin of the Conservatives' disastrous top-down reorganisation of the NHS.

There are more than twice as many staff working in NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care today than there were in 2010—twice as many staff as when the NHS delivered the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history. Today, the NHS delivers worse care for patients, but is more expensive than ever before. The budget for NHS England staff and admin alone has soared to £2 billion. Taxpayers are paying more, but getting less. We have been left with two large organisations doing the same roles, with an enormous amount of duplication.

It is especially in times like these, when money is tight, that such bloated and inefficient bureaucracy cannot be justified. However, even if the Conservatives had not left a £22 billion black hole in the public finances, the Prime Minister would still be announcing the changes he is today, because every £1 that is wasted

[*Wes Streeting*]

on inefficient bureaucracy—in good times or bad—is £1 that cannot be spent on treating patients faster, nor can it be spent on fixing our crumbling schools, lifting children out of poverty or putting money back into people’s pockets. There is always a duty on Ministers to get as much value for taxpayers’ money as is possible, and I cannot honestly say that it is achievable with the way that my Department and NHS England are set up today, nor can I say that the current set-up is getting the best out of the NHS.

I am sure Members will have heard their local NHS leaders complain about the top-down way in which the NHS is run. It is something I have heard for years. Now that I find myself at the peak of this enormous mountain of accountability, I do not just recognise the complaint; I agree with it. Frontline NHS staff are drowning in the micromanagement they are subjected to by the various and vast layers of bureaucracy.

In the Hewitt review, the former Health Secretary my right hon. Friend Dame Patricia Hewitt reported that one local service was required to send 250 reports and forms to NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care in a single month. That is time and energy that is not being spent delivering care for patients. The review also concluded that having two organisations doing the same jobs has led to

“tensions, wasted time and needless frictional costs”.

Since coming into office I have sought to correct that, by building a one-team approach between my Department and NHS England, working towards our shared mission of building an NHS fit for the future. Today, the Prime Minister has announced that we are turning one team into one organisation.

I acknowledge that there are talented, committed public servants working at every level of the NHS and my Department, including at NHS England, who I have had the privilege of working with over the past eight months. The reforms we are announcing today are not a reflection on them. They have been set up to fail by a fragmented system that holds them back. The actions we are taking today will change that.

Work has already begun to strip out the duplication between the two organisations, and bring many of NHS England’s functions into the Department. NHS England will have a much clearer focus over this transformation period. It will be in charge of holding local providers to account for the outcomes that really matter: cutting waiting times, and managing their finances responsibly. And it is tasked with realising the untapped potential of our national health service as a single-payer public service: getting a better deal for taxpayers through central procurement; being a better customer to medical technology innovators, to get the latest cutting-edge tech into the hands of staff and patients much faster; and being a better partner to the life sciences sector, to develop the medicines of the future.

Over the next two years, NHS England will be brought into the Department entirely. These reforms will deliver a much leaner top of the NHS, making significant savings of hundreds of millions of pounds a year. That money will flow down to the frontline, to cut waiting times faster and deliver our plan for change. By slashing through the layers of red tape and ending the infantilisation

of frontline NHS leaders, we will set local NHS providers free to innovate, develop new productive ways of working, and focus on what matters most: delivering better care for patients.

I cannot count the number of Conservatives who have told me in private that they regret the 2012 reorganisation and wish they had reversed it when in office. But none of them acted. They put it in the “too difficult” box while patients and taxpayers paid the price, because only Labour can reform the NHS. And this Government are proving that only Labour can be trusted to reform the state. The Prime Minister has committed to cutting the number of quangos. Today, we are abolishing the biggest quango in the world.

I am delighted that Sir James Mackey will be leading the transformation team, as the Chief Executive of NHS England. Jim has an outstanding track record of turning around organisations, balancing the books, driving up productivity, and driving down waiting times. He is putting in place a new transformation team to drive change, and alongside Dr Penny Dash as the incoming chair, I am delighted to have such a capable leadership team of radical reformers to lead NHS England with me through this transformation.

I also take this opportunity to place on record my heartfelt thanks to Amanda Pritchard, who has shown an outstanding commitment to our national health service over her decades of service—which I know remains undiminished. She has also been a rock of enormous support, not only in the past eight months, but also in the past few weeks as we have worked together with Jim preparing for this change. I also place on record my thanks to her deputy Julian Kelly, who is one of the most outstanding public servants of his generation, along with the rest of the leadership team departing at the end of the month. They deserve our thanks and best wishes for the future.

Change is hard. There will always be cautious voices warning you to slow down. However broken the status quo is, there will be those who resist any change away from it. But we should be in no doubt: we inherited a national health service going through the worst crisis in its history. Patients are waiting unacceptable lengths of time for an operation, a GP appointment or an ambulance. This Labour Government will never duck the hard yards of reform. We will take on vested interests and change the status quo, so the NHS can once again be there for us when we need it.

The Prime Minister has set an enormously ambitious target for the NHS: to cut waiting times for operations from up to 18 months to a maximum of 18 weeks by the end of this Parliament. That will require us to go further and faster than even the last Labour Government achieved, but patients in our country deserve nothing less. The reform the Prime Minister is setting out today will mean fewer checkers and more doers. It will cut through the complex web of bureaucracy, and devolve more resources and responsibility to the frontline, to deliver better value for taxpayers’ money and a better service for patients. It will set the NHS up to deliver on the three big shifts needed to make the service fit for the future: from hospital to community, analogue to digital, and sickness to prevention.

The NHS is broken, but it is not beaten. Together, we will turn it around. I commend this statement to the House.

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

11.56 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. It is disappointing, once again, that it was not made to the House first; in recent days, there have been numerous media briefings about this potential restructure.

Under new leadership on the Conservative Benches, we believe in a leaner and more efficient state. That means using resources effectively, reducing waste and preventing duplication, spending money where it is most beneficial. After all, the public understandably want to see the focus on patient care and not on backroom managers. Therefore, we are supportive of measures to streamline management, and we do not oppose the principle of taking direct control, but we need to know what steps will be taken to meet targets while all the upheaval happens. We need to know the specifics of what is being planned.

What are the timeframes for the abolition of NHS England? By what date will it be completed? How many people will be moved into different roles? How many people will lose their jobs altogether? How much money is that expected to save? Labour runs the NHS in Wales, which has the highest waiting lists and the longest waiting times in Great Britain. What lessons has Labour learnt from its failure in Wales?

NHS England, as the Secretary of State said, has just lost much of its leadership. Is that because they no longer had confidence in the Secretary of State, or because he did not have confidence in them? Perhaps he can tell the House whether Alan Milburn will keep his job in the upheaval. We also need to be clear that moving people into different roles will not fix the challenges that face the NHS.

The Secretary of State has spoken about taking direct control. That may help him ensure that the NHS stops wasting money on expensive diversity, equity and inclusion staff, and ensures that it provides dignity and privacy for female staff and patients, but what does it mean for clinical prioritisation? Will conditions that are less common and have less glitzy campaigns and fewer celebrity backers suffer because the Secretary of State now has political considerations? Does the Secretary of State have the bandwidth for this, given he has such a busy role already? How does the centralisation of power measure up with the commitment to give more powers to regional bodies and local integrated care boards?

In the first six months after entering office, the Government announced 14 reviews, consultations and calls for evidence, all of which require more staff. Are those jobs at risk, or are other pre-existing roles set to be cut? This announcement comes the same week as Labour's Employment Rights Bill passes through the Commons. Is the Secretary of State getting a move on because he knows that red tape and bureaucracy will dramatically increase afterwards and make the decisions he has to take more difficult to deliver?

A drive to improve efficiency in the civil service and the management of the health service is welcome, but what about the NHS itself? The Government slimmed down our productivity plan and delivered a 22% pay rise in return for no modernisation or reform. How will those decisions improve efficiency? I asked the Department

what proportion of people with a nursing qualification working in the NHS are in patient-facing roles, but the Minister said that they did not know. How can he use the skills and resources effectively if he does not know where those skills and resources are?

The Prime Minister is making a lot of noise about productivity and cutting waste, but he still refuses to set a target for cutting the civil service headcount. Thanks to the decisions he and the Chancellor took at the Budget, the size of the state is growing rapidly, not shrinking, while changes to national insurance contributions have diverted funding away from the frontline into compensating the Treasury. Ultimately, any restructure will be challenged by the Government's continued failure to tackle immigration. While steps to improve efficiency in the healthcare service are welcome, these words ring hollow across Government.

Wes Streeting: I will take the more serious questions from the shadow Minister first. On timeframes, we will work immediately to start bringing teams together, as we have done with the one-team culture we have been building over the past eight months. I want the integration of NHS England into the Department to be complete in two years.

The shadow Minister asks about the reduction in the number of officials. NHS England has 15,300 staff; the Department of Health and Social Care has 3,300. We are looking to reduce the overall headcount across both by 50%, which will deliver hundreds of millions of pounds of savings. The exact figures will be determined by the precise configuration of staff, and we will obviously keep the House updated on that.

The shadow Minister asks about clinical leadership. One change we will be making with the transformation team is to have two medical directors succeeding Professor Sir Stephen Powis, whose departure from NHS England was planned long before these changes. There will be one medical director for primary care and one for secondary care, underpinning our commitment to the shifts we have described. I must say, there are enormous improvements to be made in clinical leadership for patient outcomes, patient safety and productivity, and I am demanding stronger clinical leadership to drive those improvements to productivity. Frankly, many consultants and clinical teams on the frontline will welcome that liberation—they are hungry for change.

The shadow Minister asks about the workforce data and complains that we have not been able to give her the precise answers. I agree: it is frustrating not having that precise information at my fingertips. I would gently remind her, though, on this as on so many things, that her party was in power for 14 years. She cannot very well complain eight months in given that they left us a woeful, embarrassing data architecture and infrastructure.

The shadow Minister asks about efficiency. Once again, she refers to the resident doctors deal as if it was a failure. The actual failure was leaving doctors on the picket line, not on the frontline, and wasting huge amounts of taxpayers' money, with cancellations and delays to patients' appointments, operations and procedures. We stopped that within weeks of coming into office. The deal does include reforms to improve productivity—if she is any doubt about the results, she should look at the fact that despite winter pressures, NHS waiting lists have fallen five months in a row.

[*Wes Streeting*]

Once again, we get the facile points about my right hon. Friend Alan Milburn, who is the lead non-executive board member for my Department. I honestly do not know why he bothers to pay for a mortgage; he lives rent-free in the Conservatives' heads. They need to move on. By the way, just for the record: Alan Milburn has a record on the NHS that the Conservatives cannot even begin to touch.

The shadow Minister asks about confidence. I am delighted to be introducing a new transformation team. Different leadership challenges require different leadership skills. As I say, I have been really pleased to work with Amanda Pritchard for the past eight months, including on this transition; people should have no doubt about the confidence I have in her skills, talents and abilities, and I think she has a lot still to contribute to our NHS. We do not need to ask about confidence in the Conservative party; it is reflected in the scarce numbers on the Opposition Benches.

What is the lesson from Wales? The lesson is that when there is a Conservative Government in Westminster, the national health service suffers in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. That is why we are creating a rising tide to lift all ships. I am sure we will see improvements across the United Kingdom. SNP Members, who are not in their place, do not have any excuses now. As I said before the election, all roads lead to Westminster, and the biggest funding settlement since devolution began is going down the road to Holyrood. There are no hiding places there for the SNP. If people want real reform of the NHS in Scotland, they should vote for Scottish Labour under Anas Sarwar and Jackie Baillie.

People can see here in Westminster the difference that new leadership provides. The shadow Minister laughably referred to new leadership in the Conservative party. Well, it is certainly leaner and meaner, but it is the same old Conservative party. The only thing that the Conservatives have shrunk is their own party. The only jobs that they have laid off are those of their poor party staff. The only thing that they are capable of changing—[*Interruption.*] Well, come to think of it, I do not think that there is anything they are capable of changing. Instead they look over their shoulder at a party leader who cannot even manage a five-aside team, let alone a country. The Conservatives are just so diminished as a party. I appreciate that it must be so painful for them to watch a Labour Government doing the things that they only ever talked about: reducing bloated state bureaucracy; investing in defence; reforming our public services; and bringing down the welfare bill. The public are asking: “What is the point of the Conservative party?” I bet they are glad that they chose change with Labour.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I applaud my right hon. Friend for his leadership and for the reduction in waiting lists, which we so desperately need. We all know that there is still a struggle with budgets in the health service—my excellently run Honiton hospital is facing a deficit for the first time in its history—so can he give more detail about how he will reform NHS procurement, so that we can use the purchasing power of the NHS to get more bang for our buck?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the need to improve procurement. One thing that Attlee and Bevan could not have predicted in 1948 is that the single-payer model of the national health service makes it ideally placed for this world of artificial intelligence, genomics, machine learning and big data. We must unlock that potential so that we have new treatments, new technology, productivity gains and efficiencies, but we also have to get the basics right on procurement. We have to change the culture of profligacy, routine deficits and routine over-spending. That is why, today, the leadership of NHS England has summoned to London chairs and chief executives from across the country to get an immediate grip on the £5 billion to £6 billion deficit that was already being baked in for the 2025-26 financial year. Those chairs and chief executives have just become so accustomed to the idea that Governments will just come in and bail them out.

I said before the election that there would be no release of money in winter, because winter is predictable. The NHS was given additional resources and it must learn to live within its means. Despite howls of outrage before and since the election, I have kept to my word. I said that there would be accountability for people who think that the Government are there to bail them out. Having come from local government, where that culture would never be tolerated, I and this Government are bringing that same financial discipline to the NHS. We will not tolerate deficits. It is important that we get better value for money, while also making sure that, nationally, we are providing support through the procurement platform. That is how we will help the system deliver better value, and we will liberate frontline leaders to focus on the things that really matter, which are services for patients.

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

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The Secretary of State's NHS shake-up is well under way. Many Members would agree that the NHS used to be the envy of the world, but years of Conservative failure have left patients suffering and unable to get the care that they desperately need. I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues therefore welcome steps to reform the NHS.

The new leadership of the NHS has much to do, but can the Secretary of State advise the House whether new legislation will be needed to scrap NHS England given that he told the shadow Minister that it will take two years to complete this merger? When will that new legislation, if it is required, be brought forward?

Any attempt to fix the NHS will ultimately fail if we also do not address the crisis in social care. The Secretary of State must show the same urgency in reforming social care as is being shown on the NHS. Where is that urgency? Long-promised cross-party talks have now been postponed indefinitely with no new date in sight. Care providers are hanging by a thread due to the rising cost of national insurance contributions. Does the Secretary of State agree that any attempt to fix the NHS will prove futile if we ignore the elephant in the NHS waiting room that is the crisis in social care? We will clear our diaries for cross-party talks, so will the Secretary of State give us a date today?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the Liberal Democrats for those questions. Much of the change needed can be delivered without the need for primary legislation, which

is a relief because, as right hon. and hon. Members will have noticed, this Government have come into office with the most ambitious legislative programme of any incoming Government. Time is at a premium, given the business of this House and the other place. We will work immediately to move forward without changes to primary legislation, but we will need to make them. I am working with the Leader of the House and business managers to ensure an appropriate timetable that enables us to do the things that we need to do in a timely way, but that also safeguards the ambitious legislative programme that has already been set out.

The hon. Lady is right to talk about the importance of social care. She asked where the urgency is. It was to be found in the immediate steps that the Chancellor took on coming into office to stabilise the finances of my Department, with an immediate release of funding. It came with the Budget, which delivered an extra £26 billion for the Department for Health and Social Care, protected funding specifically for social care and boosted spending power for local authorities. It came with the biggest expansion of carer's allowance since the 1970s, and an £86 million increase in the disabled facilities grant not just from next year but released in January for the remainder of this financial year. The urgency is reflected in the Employment Rights Bill, which makes provision for fair pay agreements to deal with the work-force crisis—work with employers and trade unions to prepare for that legislation and the introduction of fair pay agreements is already under way.

I regret that we have not convened cross-party talks. That is genuinely due to practicalities on the part of a number of parties involved. We will be in touch over the next week to make arrangements for Baroness Casey to engage with parties across the House.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent statement. As he knows, I am a working GP in Stroud. We clinicians are simply fed up with the micromanagement of our caring clinical role, and many hospital colleagues feel the same. We want to be free to deliver excellent clinical care. Does he think that the abolition of NHSE will reduce the admin task for doctors?

Wes Streeting: I do think that is the case. I also think that this is not just about form and function but about the opportunities for productivity gains through modern technology and practices. One of my frustrations is that whenever we talk about the exciting frontiers of life sciences and medical technology—this country's competitive advantage, and how we need to build on that position—I am greeted with a weary sigh from poor frontline NHS staff, and managers for that matter, who say, "That's lovely, and we agree with you, but we'd just like a machine that turns on reliably, and it would be nice to use systems that do not require seven passwords to deal with a single patient." I feel their pain. We will prioritise that investment in technology.

Finally, we do want to liberate the frontline, and I am grateful for the leadership that GPs have shown in agreeing a contract with the Government for the first time since the pandemic, which contains substantial reform to benefit them and, even more importantly, their patients. We also have to liberate management in the NHS. As Lord Darzi said, it is not the case that there are too many managers, but there are layers and

layers of bureaucracy between me as the Secretary of State and frontline staff. We have to liberate frontline staff and managers to help them be more effective, to manage their resources more efficiently and, most importantly, to deliver better and safer care.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): This is a bold change indeed. The job of my Committee is to help the Secretary of State to do it, so let me start by asking him to come in front of the Committee as quickly as possible—certainly before Easter—because there is a lot of detail that we need to drill down into.

On a more substantive point, the right hon. Member mentioned the financial reset that Sir Jim Mackey announced to integrated care boards just yesterday, which means that they need to cut their running costs by 50%. I am concerned that when my Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West ICB struggled with money, the first thing it cut were the place-based teams. If we are to deliver the neighbourhood NHS that the Secretary of State and I both want, those are not the teams to cut. Will he send a signal to ICBs that cost savings should not be at the expense of the broader shifts in the 10-year plan?

Wes Streeting: First, I give the Chair of the Select Committee my assurance that I would be delighted to appear in front of her Committee at the earliest opportunity—that means soon. I appreciate that it will want to scrutinise these changes in more detail, and I would welcome the constructive challenge that it offers. I also reassure her that the direction that we are giving to frontline leaders is to deliver the three big shifts in our 10-year plan, and to ensure that as we take immediate steps to bring the finances under control, we do so in a way that lays the firm foundations for the future of the NHS that we need to build.

My cautionary note to Members across the House is that when we ask frontline leaders to reform and to change ways of working, sometimes that requires not just changes to the bureaucracy as it were—the easier and lower hanging fruit—but service reconfiguration in the interests of patient outcomes and better use of taxpayers' money. Sometimes, they get those changes wrong. I have successfully campaigned against closures of services such as the King George accident and emergency department, which should not have closed and where we won the case on clinical grounds.

Sometimes, let us be honest, the public can get anxious, and Members of Parliament feel duty bound to act as megaphones and amplifiers for public concerns. It is important that we support and engage with local NHS leaders. By all means, we should scrutinise, challenge and ask questions, but we must give local leaders the support to do the task that we are asking of them on behalf of patients and taxpayers. The powers that I have to intervene in those frontline service reconfigurations are ones that I will use only in the most exceptional and necessary cases, and that is why I have not used them once in the past eight months.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): The crisis in our NHS goes deep. I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that it is an existential crisis that poses a threat to the

[Jen Craft]

future of the NHS if fundamental change does not happen. While I strongly welcome today's statement, what assurances can he give me and the House that the right people will be in the right place in leadership positions to drive the fundamental change that is necessary?

Wes Streeting: That is an excellent question. We are building an outstanding transformational team with Sir Jim Mackey, which will be announced very shortly. It will bring together some of the best leaders across the country, and expertise from outside the NHS, to drive the scale and pace of transformation that is necessary. My hon. Friend is right to say that it is existential, because we cannot allow the curve of cost and demand to continue to rise to the extent that it is. The NHS's long-term workforce plan has one in nine people in our country working for the NHS. On the current trajectory, in 50 years' time, 100% of the public would be working for the NHS. That is clearly not a sustainable position.

I tell people who resist this reform out of love for the NHS not to kill it with kindness. We have to bend the curve of cost and demand to ensure that our health services are sustainable for the long term on the equitable foundations of a public service, free at the point of use, that we will always defend. I also say to my hon. Friends on the Government Back Benches that if we do not get this right, goodness knows what will come next. The Leader of the Opposition says that she wants a debate on the funding model for the NHS. The leader of the Reform party—I am not sure whether he is the Leader of the Opposition yet—says that he is up for anything. I am sure he is. That should worry us.

To those who want to debate the funding model of our NHS and the equitable principle of it being a public service, free at the point of use, I say that we are happy to have that debate but the Government are unequivocal: under Labour, the NHS is not for sale. It will always be a public service, free at the point of use, so that when people fall ill, they never have to worry about the bill.

Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): May I commend the boldness of today's announcement? If the NHS is to be turned around, it will need radical reforms. If the result of today is to replace bureaucratic overcentralisation with political overcentralisation, it will fail. But if we move to the decentralised model that we have for the police and schools, it could be the start of a real transformation.

Will the Secretary of State give the House more detail about the changes he has in mind? Are we going to get rid of the central targets that make the NHS the most micromanaged system in the world and make it impossible for managers to deliver real change on the ground because they are working to about a hundred operational targets? If that is the case, and we are going to decentralise the NHS, does the Secretary of State agree that there remains a vital role for a reformed Care Quality Commission to call out poor care whenever it finds it?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that thoughtful question. Let me say two things to him. First, democratic accountability matters, both in terms of patient outcomes and value for taxpayers' money. One of the things that I, my Labour and many

of my Conservative predecessors have reflected on a lot over many years is what the role of the Secretary of State, and Government, is in a national health service where clinical decisions should always be clinically led. It is the Secretary of State's responsibility to be the champion for patients and for taxpayers and to ensure that the system as a whole delivers better outcomes for patients and better value for taxpayers.

The argument that I have started, however, which has ruffled some feathers within the NHS and even more so with some of our country's most loved charities in recent months, is the fallacy that the Secretary of State can or should just fire endless instructions into the system, as if a Secretary of State or, for that matter, an NHS England could just pull some big levers and drive change in such a vast and complex system. That is a falsehood. Of course, we should set national strategic priorities on behalf of the public. We should ensure that there is more transparency and information so that patients, communities and staff can hold the system and themselves to account to improve performance. However, the overcentralisation has to stop.

In future, it will be for the Department and the NHS nationally to do the things that only the national health service can do, providing the enablers for the system as a whole. What we are presiding over and embarking on, however, is the biggest decentralisation of power in the history of our national health service. That will put more power into the hands of frontline leaders and clinicians, but even more fundamental and transformational, more power into the hands of patients. If we get that right, we will have an NHS that can truly be the envy of the world. If people continue to indulge in the fallacy that more targets from the centre or more—or indeed, less—political control is the answer, we will fail.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the CQC. It has got itself into a terrible mess and I know that that is not what he intended when he rightly made the decision to create the Care Quality Commission. That is why Sir Julian Hartley knows that he has our full support, not just in turning around the CQC as it is, but in reforming it so that it can be the best guarantee and safeguard of quality that patients and the public deserve. Dr Penny Dash's forthcoming review findings will also help to drive that reform agenda at pace.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for making the statement today. I want to echo the thoughts of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) that it would be helpful to see him in front of the Select Committee to outline his vision for NHS England. Will he tell us today how the new structure of the NHS will help us deliver truly excellent social care and also primary care, and what drivers he can use to make that happen?

Wes Streeting: It always worries me when my hon. Friend says he wants to see me in front of the Select Committee because he does not pull his punches, despite being on the Government side of the House. Let me reassure him that on primary care, I hope that we are beginning to turn what I think has been a deep anger, frustration and anxiety among primary care leaders about the state of the system as it is and a pessimism about its future into increasing amounts of quiet optimism and hope. I think GPs can see we are walking the talk, with the biggest funding uplift in a generation and the

fact that we have worked constructively with GP leaders to reform the contract and agree that further, more radical reform is needed together. We will be embarking on that under the auspices of the 10-year plan. As well as delivering that significant achievement with GPs, the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), is also in the very final stages of work with pharmacists to stabilise the community pharmacy sector, which is vital for the NHS's future as a neighbourhood service.

May I also reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) that under the auspices of the 10-year plan for health, notwithstanding Baroness Casey's work on the long-term future of social care, we have an eye on social care and the relationship between health and social care? People will not, therefore, be waiting until next year for the first Casey report or, indeed, later for the final Casey report on the longer term to see action from this Government on social care, particularly as it relates to the NHS.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the ambition of the Secretary of State. One area that I ask him to focus on is the future of the UK Health Security Agency. Over the last 15 years, it has evolved from the Health Protection Agency to Public Health England and now to the UKHSA. I found it impossible, both as a Treasury Minister and as a constituency MP, to penetrate the decision-making process around resource allocation, which I now believe is duplicative, as a move to a new site in Essex is being contemplated. That is an area where the Secretary of State can demonstrate to my constituents in Salisbury and at Porton Down that he means business and can resolve the future of UKHSA once and for all.

Wes Streeting: I would be delighted to speak further with the right hon. Gentleman, drawing on that valuable experience both as a constituency MP and as a Treasury Minister—always, for the record, my favourite people to work with—

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): What's wrong with DCMS?

Wes Streeting: And my friends at DCMS with their considerable spending power. No, I will stick with the Treasury in my order of favourites, thank you very much. I know where my bread is buttered.

To return to the point made by the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), I thank Dame Jenny Harries for her leadership of UKHSA. We are recruiting for an outstanding replacement and successor, and that is an opportunity to look in the wider context at some of the first principles. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the specific, traditional Porton Down versus Harlow decision, which has been running around the system so long that is now used in a case study for senior civil servant recruitment. The worst decision is indecision. It has plagued us for too long and I hope we can soon report back to the House with a decision on that for everyone's benefit.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I welcome the statement today from the Secretary of State. Clearly, there is massive duplication of functions across the many regulatory, national, local and regional NHS bodies and huge room for efficiency.

I want to press the Secretary of State on two points. First, will he assure me that the bonfire of bureaucracy will not stop effective local management of NHS trusts and community settings, as IPPR has found that locally the NHS is poorly and under-managed and clinical staff are backfilling admin and management roles? Secondly, as he mentioned, the roll-out of digital technology has been far too slow, with NHS Digital's move into NHS England not directing change fast enough, so how will the change ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care grips the digital roll-out, accelerates it and ensures the proper integration of NHS digital functions?

Wes Streeting: That is a great question from my hon. Friend. We have to give people the tools to do the job. The Prime Minister set me and my hon. Friends in the Department an enormous challenge on behalf of the public. In turn, I am setting an enormous challenge for NHS leaders at every level, but particularly for frontline NHS leaders. We have to give them the tools to do the job in terms of data platforms and the technology that they are given to work with, ensuring that they have access not just to cutting-edge treatments and medical technology, but to the back-office productivity support that can drive efficiency and improvement and, frankly, liberate managers and frontline staff from the arcane systems they are working with.

Some of the very best people I have met in the last few years, shadowing this portfolio and now holding it in government, are NHS leaders, especially on the frontline. It is my responsibility to give them the tools to do the job. That is not just about financial resources; it means bulldozing through some of the regulatory barriers and overcentralised instructions that stop them making decisions in the best interests of patients, in terms of clinical pathways and value for taxpayers. I have given them an undertaking that I will have their backs, both on the decisions that they will have to take on the frontline and on bulldozing through the national bureaucracy that is tying them up in knots when we need to set them free.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the changes announced today to cut unnecessary waste and bureaucracy. We all know and agree that healthcare should remain free at the point of delivery and, of course, that the NHS needs reform. Just last Saturday, I was in a care home in Boston with a lady—an expert—who knows NHS England on the frontline that constrain good care in care homes, impose unnecessary constraints on ambulances and block A&E wards. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the changes and reforms will include unnecessary processes on the frontline in care homes?

Wes Streeting: I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. We have to cut through the unnecessary red tape that ties leaders and frontline staff up in knots, and we are absolutely determined to do that. Regulatory reform will form a big part of this Department's agenda and the wider Government's agenda. As to an NHS free at the point of use, he almost said it with a straight face. I am sure that he meant every word he said. I think he might want to have a word with his party leader, who is his successor and—who knows?—perhaps his predecessor.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We must remember that NHS England came out of the Tory Government's reforms that were intended to privatise the NHS. I want to thank NHS England staff for their work. I am sorry about the way in which they have heard this announcement, because it is their jobs that are being put at risk. We have to ensure, however, that we are not replicating NHS England across the ICBs of our country, and that ICBs are also reformed to transform the NHS through the three shifts that will be placed on them with the publication of the 10-year plan. How will my right hon. Friend ensure that we have the machinery to hold the system to account, but also to put those reforms in place?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: if we just replicate NHS England as it is with all the challenges in its set-up in ICBs across the land, we will have failed. Frankly, if we replicate NHS England and the Department as they are today just in one organisation, we will have failed to meet the challenge of change. It needs to feel and act like a completely new organisation, culture and way of working to modernise the state, so that if Disraeli, Gladstone, Churchill or Attlee walked into Whitehall at the end of this Government, it would not look so much like the Government they worked in during the 19th and 20th centuries. That is the reality of Whitehall today; it is not a reflection on the people who work in it, but it shows why it needs to change, and that is also true of the NHS. I look forward to working with ICB leaders to reform their ways of working, clarify their priorities, give them clearer marching orders and ensure that they can deliver.

Finally, my hon. Friend mentions the staff of NHS England—indeed, this affects staff in my Department, too—and I thank her for the care she has shown. Change is always disruptive and it can be scary, and of course that is particularly the case when job losses are involved. I want to acknowledge that on the Floor of the House, as I have to staff across both organisations this morning. I know that the Permanent Secretary and the chief executive of NHS England have done so in recent days, and I will be holding a town hall with staff next week. This really is not a reflection on them. In fact, I think they will recognise in my description of our ways of working the many things that frustrate them. None the less, they are dedicated and talented people, and some of the best people I have ever worked with in any walk of life or career work in this system. I look forward to working with them in the coming weeks and months with the same dedication and professionalism they have always shown, so that we can all look back on this time with pride, knowing that we were part of the team that took the NHS from the worst crisis in its history to getting it back on its feet and making it fit for the future.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the worst and most intractable problems that the founders of the NHS had to deal with was the involvement of medical practitioners and consultants who were used to receiving a private income in a national service where they would not receive anything like the same remuneration? If he agrees, would he accept that there is a similar situation with NHS dentistry today? The Darzi report said:

“There are enough dentists in England, just not enough dentists willing to do enough NHS work, which impacts provision for the poorest in society.”

How does he think his reforms will help address that particular crisis, on which Members like myself and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) are being consistently and rightly lobbied by such formidable organisations as the New Forest branch of the women's institute?

Wes Streeting: NHS dentistry is in a terrible state and, in fact, in many parts of the country it barely exists. There are lots of reasons for that, and it is a source of constant astonishment to me that the dentistry budget was underspent year after year despite that situation. The Minister for Care is working with the British Dental Association to reform the contract. I know that Members are frustrated at the pace, and so am I. We are trying to clear an enormous challenge; it is not going to be easy, but we are committed to working with the profession. We are rolling out the 700,000 urgent dentist appointments and supervised toothbrushing, as we promised and as the BDA has welcomed, but we have a lot more to do. That requires working with the profession—not simply tinkering with the system as it is, but fundamentally rethinking it and how we rebuild it into an NHS dentistry service that we can be proud of.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I welcome the statement, particularly the commitment to ensure that as much money in the NHS as possible is spent on the frontline, where it can really affect patient outcomes. Nowhere is that more needed than in my constituency of Dartford, which is the fastest growing town in the UK. That extra population is imposing a huge strain on our local district general hospital at Darent Valley, despite the excellent efforts of the staff there. Could the Secretary of State outline how the changes will support the shift we need to see from services being delivered in the hospital to the community, thereby relieving the strain on hospitals like Darent Valley?

Wes Streeting: The frustrating thing is that we are delivering the wrong care in the wrong place at the wrong time, which is delivering poorer outcomes for patients and poorer value for taxpayers. People cannot get a GP appointment, for example, which might cost the NHS £40, and then they end up in accident and emergency, which could cost £400. If people cannot find a bed for a delayed discharge and rehabilitation outside of hospital, they end up stuck in a hospital bed, wasting away at greater cost. In fact, when I was up in Carlisle earlier this year, such intermediate care was being offered by a local social care provider, commissioned by the NHS, at half the cost and of a much better quality than the hospital bed that patients had been discharged from. That shift to the community is about delivering better outcomes for patients and better value for taxpayers, and that will be reflected in our 10-year plan.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I declare an interest as the vice-chair of the newly formed all-party parliamentary group on emergency care. A&E staffing across the country is dangerously low, especially at night, putting unacceptable pressure on staff, who warn persistently about the risks to patient safety. Hundreds of keen applicants are being turned away from emergency medicine training. Last year, there were 359 places for 2,718 applicants. Following this announcement, how quickly

will emergency care and A&E departments see changes and have more permanent staff and consultancy places, but especially more training places?

Wes Streeting: We will shortly set out our emergency care improvement plan so that we can deliver the year-on-year improvements that people deserve. The long waiting times, not just in emergency departments but in ambulance response times and across the entire system, are completely unacceptable. I refuse to use terms such as “temporary escalation spaces” to describe the true grim reality of corridor care. That is a shameful situation, and I am genuinely sorry that patients are being treated in those conditions and that staff have to suffer the moral injury of working in those conditions. From the moment we came into government, we have worked to ensure that we got through the winter as well as we could. That is reflected in the fact that, despite the winter pressures, waiting lists fell five months in a row throughout the winter.

On the targets and standards challenge set out by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, ahead of the winter I was very clear with frontline leaders that patient safety must come ahead of performance targets—particularly the four-hour target—but the 12-hour target is absolutely related to patient safety, as I think the royal college would agree. We must work together to get waits of longer than 12 hours down as a priority, because those waits are directly linked to safety and patient outcomes.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I gently ask right hon. and hon. Members, and indeed the Secretary of State, to keep their questions and answers short so that I can get everyone in.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Two GP practices have told me that they are waiting for section 106 money to be released so that they can improve their facilities, but that it has been stuck between decision-makers. Will the Secretary of State outline how the changes will help to release those kinds of delays and finally allow North West Leicestershire residents to get the facilities that they deserve?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that example. She is welcome to contact my office to see if we can expedite that kind of decision-making. In fact, Members will have seen the work that the Deputy Prime Minister is doing to speed up decision-making in local government, which has an impact and a bearing on the NHS. We will work together to speed that up, so that where resources are available, we get them out and deliver change as quickly as possible.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): My constituents are particularly concerned about the very bureaucratic approvals process for the new hospitals programme—through investment committees, then the regional NHSE team, the a department, then NHS capital assurance, then a joint investment committee, then the Treasury and then, finally, Ministers. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that this decision, which I welcome, will speed up that process, and that the business case for the multi-storey car park at the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King’s Lynn will be approved so that work starts this year?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair challenge on the bureaucratic nature of decision-making. We are working with Treasury Ministers and colleagues across Government to take an axe to that unnecessary bureaucracy. He will be absolutely fuming when he finds out who was responsible for it.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I am conscious that my former colleagues at NHS England will be concerned about today’s announcement, but I am very confident that the Secretary of State will do all he can to support them. It is an inescapable fact that the 2012 reorganisation led to inefficient layers of management in the NHS, delivering poorer care and greater costs to the taxpayer. How does he plan to cut excessive layers of bureaucracy, get resources to the frontline and, crucially, deliver better care for the people of this country?

Wes Streeting: That is a brilliant question. We have put in place a transformation team, led by Sir Jim Mackey, which we will work with to start fundamentally changing the way the NHS works, by shifting more power, resources and responsibility out of Whitehall and closer to the frontline and the communities where decisions are made, and by getting rid of the unnecessary bureaucracy that drives patients and staff to distraction.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We all want to see a well-run NHS that delivers for patients, but as he knows, patients are being treated in corridors, staff are severely overstretched and too many people cannot get access to a GP or a dentist when they need one. In that context, I was concerned to read in the media last week that there are plans for £7 billion of cuts to services, and for ICBs to be asked to cut costs by 50%. Can he reassure us that, as we go into the new financial year, we will not see cuts to frontline services? When I meet the chief executive of Norfolk and Waveney ICB next week, will I hear that cuts to frontline services are being considered as a result of Government budgets?

Wes Streeting: The reports relate to the deficits sent into NHS England ahead of the 2025-26 financial year. Those are completely unaffordable for the NHS and completely unrealistic. Those financial plans are being revised as we speak, which is why leaders have gathered in London today to receive that message and that set of instructions. I am asking frontline leaders to improve services and reform ways of working, and they will have my support in doing that. As for the resources that are going in, I gently point out that the investment that the Chancellor unlocked for the NHS and social care in her Budget dwarfs that which was promised in the Green party’s manifesto.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I held a public consultation in my constituency on the future of the NHS. Participants were crystal clear that we need to cut bureaucracy and get resources to the frontline. When they talk about the frontline, they mean not just hospitals but people out in the community, and, crucially for my constituency, GP practices. Will the Secretary of State share more about how he intends to make that shift?

Wes Streeting: There are 889 million reasons for GPs to be cheerful. That amount was the allocation for general practice before Christmas, and it has resulted in fruitful negotiations with GP leaders that will deliver the necessary reforms and better access for patients, particularly through online access to modern appointment booking. That is something to which we have become accustomed in every other aspect of our lives, and the NHS should be no different.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is an inescapable fact that one top-down reform is being fixed by another—one that will last about two years, according to the statement. Although I wish the reform every success, we must recognise that the experience of the NHS in Wales shows that reform on its own is no guarantee of success. The Secretary of State rightly said that change is hard, and it is inescapable, I am afraid, that while this reform is ongoing, the NHS leadership will be hugely distracted by turf wars, redundancies and the development of new working practices. What steps will he take to prevent that distraction from having a negative effect on frontline services?

Wes Streeting: The Government have come in with an ambitious reform agenda. As we embark on that reform, we are cutting NHS waiting lists—we have done that five months in a row. We are reforming the GP contract—those negotiations have successfully concluded. We are about to conclude community pharmacy, too. We have put in place a transformation team who are experienced frontline leaders with demonstrable track records—particularly in the case of Sir Jim Mackey—of delivering those changed outcomes. There will always be people who say that it is too hard, too difficult or a distraction, but that is how we have ended up with this status quo; that is how the Conservative party presided over the longest waiting lists and the lowest patient satisfaction on record while spending staggering amounts of public money. More money and no reform is not the answer; the lesson of the previous Labour Government is that investment plus reform delivers results. That is what this Labour Government are doing.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and pay tribute to NHS professionals in Harlow, particularly those at the Princess Alexandra hospital, for their incredible hard work every single day. Does he agree that NHS staff, who work incredibly hard, are failed by an overly bureaucratic and fragmented system, and that spiralling staff costs are partly a result of the need for additional agency staff?

Wes Streeting: We absolutely need to reduce the cost of agency staff in the NHS. That costs the taxpayer billions, and that money could be better spent on ensuring that we have the right staff in the right place, on better terms and conditions, and with permanent contracts. Where we do need flexibility, we should drive it through the NHS bank. We are determined to reform the way that works and deliver better staffing, better outcomes for patients and better value for taxpayers.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome any measures to reduce the bureaucratic overload in the NHS, so I congratulate the Secretary of State on coming forward with his bold plan. We must also take a

sledgehammer to the business case process, which frustrates the delivery of services and new buildings for the NHS. Will he consider bringing NHS-owned land into use for new care facilities and step-down hospitals, for example, so that we can free up hospital beds and get people into the care they need at a much lower cost?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member is absolutely right: the estate is vast, it is underutilised, and we need to sweat our assets more effectively. We also need to reform bureaucratic processes. There are lots of reasons why we need to have tough controls on things such as spending, procurement and value for money, to ensure that there is appropriate and effective use of public money. But businesses do not operate in this way; they are able to counter fraud, waste and poor value for money, and they do it much faster. That is what the NHS needs to do. Across the public sector, we need to use our estate far more effectively to deliver better value and better services for the public.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Health Secretary for the announcement he has made. As he rightly says, staff work incredibly hard and deserve our thanks, but we all recognise the huge strain that they and the organisation have been under. The health service is consistently raised as one of the top concerns by residents in my constituency. Can he share how today's announcement, along with other measures he has previously announced, will build an NHS that is there when people across Cramlington and Killingworth need it?

Wes Streeting: We have to deliver improved services for patients in every part of the country. Her constituency and mine, which is on the London-Essex border, will have different needs, contexts and set-ups, and services may need to be shaped differently in order to meet those needs, but the standards should be consistent, the quality should be good and the safety should be guaranteed at all times. That is a far cry from where we are, and I genuinely think that decisions about services for her constituents will be far better taken much closer to her constituents and her community than here in Whitehall. That is why, as we are delivering month by month and year by year improvements in services for patients in every part of the country, we will also deliver the biggest devolution of power in the history of the national health service.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I really welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and I am particularly keen that he looks at the multiple layers of sign-off and the bureaucracy that sometimes forgets patients are at the other end of it. Hospitals in England have had to rely on charitable fundraising to buy some of the most cutting-edge radiotherapy machines because of NHS England's policies and bureaucracy. This year, highly advanced machines such as the CyberKnife, which have treated thousands of NHS cancer patients over the past 10 years, will need upgrading, but NHS England is refusing to include them in this year's funding because they were all bought by charities. The Secretary of State talked about giving people the tools to do the job. Could he change that policy, so that our hospitals do not have to continue relying on charities for the latest technology?

Wes Streeting: This Government committed in our manifesto to doubling the number of diagnostic scanners, and we will deliver that over the course of this Parliament. NHS charities have a valuable role to play. Philanthropy has a valuable role to play as an additional source of support to the NHS. When public funding is as tight as it is, we need to look at how we can maximise the benefits and the impact of bringing together sources of public investment, private investment, voluntary sector and philanthropic investment to deliver the most bang for the buck. Without knowing the details of the specific case the hon. Lady mentions, I would not want to comment too strongly, except to say that we are committed to doubling diagnostic scanners through public funds, but I am not sure I necessarily share the view that NHS charities do not have a role to play.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I know from my experience of working on the NHS frontline how hard it has become over the years to get basic things done. Nurses and matrons spend hours and hours getting basic changes made to their workplace on the frontline. I therefore welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement. Will he ensure that by cutting bureaucracy, we can get more resources to where direct patient care takes place, which will help with the retention of nurses and healthcare assistants and see more patients being treated quicker and getting the care they need?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Some of the best innovation and improvements for patients I have seen has been led by frontline clinical teams that have had great executive leaders behind them, giving them the freedom and the tools to do the job. I hope that, as a result of these reforms, not only will we see the results for patients in the data, but staff and patients will feel the outcome and the difference in their experience of working in or being treated by the NHS.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for his positivity on getting waiting lists down and making the change that is needed. He referred to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. He will know that we in Northern Ireland are having the very same problems that he is sorting out today for England. I know that he is always keen to see the positivity that comes out of this place being shared right across this nation. Will he have discussions with the relevant Northern Ireland Minister, Mike Nesbitt, in relation to health back home, to ensure that we can follow the directives here, to make our health service in Northern Ireland every bit as good as this one will be?

Wes Streeting: I was recently in contact with Mike Nesbitt, offering some of that support and offering to work together to help improve the quality of health services in Northern Ireland, recognising that we have advantages of scale here in England. While recognising the devolution settlement, we want to work closely, just as we are working closely with our friends in the Labour Government in Wales to help them improve their services, and also learning from some of the things that the Welsh NHS does better than England.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I commend this statement and thank the Secretary of State and his Department for the excellent work they are doing. It is

not a moment too soon in Norfolk, because we have failing access to dentistry, it is difficult to get a GP appointment, and both the hospitals that serve my constituents have RAAC—reinforced aerated autoclaved concrete. With that in mind, may I invite the Health Secretary to Norfolk to meet healthcare professionals, to discuss the cumulative impact of so many challenges and to discuss how these reforms can help improve patient care?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question; that was a very kind way of reminding me that I had already made such a commitment and have not followed through, so let me rectify that immediately.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the boldness of his statement. It will take courage to bring about the change that my constituents desperately want, and it is great that Labour is showing that courage. My constituents, particularly those in Killamarsh, really struggle with access to GPs. Could the Secretary of State assure me that this will redirect vital resources from bureaucracy to serving those in need on the frontline?

Wes Streeting: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. That is the objective of what we are doing: to make better use of taxpayers' money so that we can deliver better care for patients. That is not through bloated central bureaucracy, but through more frontline capability and services.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Of the more than 26 years that I worked in the NHS, six and a half were in NHS England, in its brilliant strategy team and with brilliant people. That is why my heart goes out to so many people who will have insecurity about their jobs following this announcement, even though I believe it to be the right one. This comes after years and years of chopping and changing at NHS Improvement and NHS England, as political leadership has switched from one person to another.

One of the things I am concerned about is the need to ensure that clinical leadership is still heard at the centre. As a nurse, I found it harder to get into NHS England. Doctors find it easier in their career structures. Moving NHS England functions into the Department, and moving off NHS terms and conditions, will make it harder for nurses, allied health professionals and other clinicians working in the NHS. What will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that the clinical voice comes right into the centre of Whitehall, along with the patient voice?

Wes Streeting: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, and I echo what he said about the talents of people at NHS England. I did not take this decision with the Prime Minister lightly. Indeed, it was not my instinct coming into government, but it has been shaped by what I have seen and experienced over the past eight months. Clinical leadership is vital, and that is not just doctors; it is also nurses and other clinical leadership. We have a brilliant chief nursing officer, who remains in place and will be part of that clinical leadership team. I can assure my hon. Friend that we do not want any political interference in what should be decisions for clinicians. What we need is the right political leadership

[*Wes Streeting*]

to give that clinical leadership the tools, power and freedom to do the job that only they can do, and that they do best.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): This welcome reform cannot come quickly enough in Warwickshire where councillors, local health campaigners, I and others have been making the case for a doctor-led urgent treatment centre at our local hospital, the Hospital of St Cross, to complement the excellent nurse-led and GP out of hours service, but many of my constituents are concerned about having to travel to the larger hospital in Coventry and the long waiting times they find there. The integrated care board has a review of urgent care under way in Warwickshire, but I still do not know when it will be completed and my constituents want to know when urgent care at our local hospital will be upgraded. Does my right hon. Friend agree that his reforms to NHS England should equip ICBs more effectively to respond to local needs?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his perseverance in bobbing for so long; they should prescribe it on the NHS. I say to my hon. Friend that this is why I strongly believe in local decision making to make sure services are configured and designed to meet the differing needs of local communities while providing the same standard and quality of care in every part of the country. He also described the frustration of people who will often, including in the future, necessarily be living some distance from their general hospitals; that is why we have to shift out of hospital with the NHS being not just the national health service but a neighbourhood health service, with as many services as possible closer to people's homes and indeed in people's homes. That is the exciting future that is up for grabs, and that is the future we will realise thanks to the reforms we are making today. I am delighted they have been greeted with such support right across the House.

Victory in Europe and Japan: 80th Anniversaries

1.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement about the Government's plans to mark the 80th anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day.

This year, 2025, marks 80 years since the end of the second world war—80 years since victory in Europe on 8 May 1945 and since victory over Japan on 15 August.

"In all our long history we have never seen a greater day than this,"

were the words of Winston Churchill when he marked the end of fighting in Europe on VE Day. Huge crowds gathered outside to celebrate, with thousands flocking to Buckingham Palace and spontaneous street parties erupting across the nation. Our late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II joined in the celebrations, a princess at the time, tiptoeing out of the palace with her sister Princess Margaret to join the celebrations on the streets of London. "All of us" she said,

"were swept along by tides of happiness and relief."

The sacrifices made over the war were great. Without the combined efforts of the allied forces from Britain, the Commonwealth and beyond, the way of life we enjoy today and the values we hold dear would not have been possible. The total number of allied deaths, injuries and captures exceeds millions, and thousands of civilians lost their lives here at home. We are proud to remember the lasting legacy of peace they fought so hard to secure.

Each of us, in every community, has a direct connection to those who served in the second world war. Those service personnel who were called up and asked to risk their lives for our freedoms are not strangers: they are our parents, grandparents and the ancestors of our neighbours. I have always been very proud of my grandad, who served in the RAF, and I know the country feels equally proud of every veteran who risked, and often tragically paid, the ultimate sacrifice as part of that terrible conflict. It is the ancestors of our neighbourhoods and communities who led the effort on the home front, children who were evacuated, women who stepped into essential roles, and of course the Bevin boys, many from Barnsley, who worked down the pit to power the war effort.

As time passes and we approach 80 years between life today and the end of the second world war, the living memory of those who experienced the war fades further into history. This year's commemorations of VE Day may well be the last where veterans who served their country during the second world war can be in attendance, and my generation will be among the last to have the experience of speaking directly to family members who fought for their country or contributed to the effort at home. It is up to all of us, here today and across the country, to keep their stories alive.

Just as people took to the streets in 1945, it is with great pride that I can announce the measures this Government will take to mark the anniversary in 2025. All of us have memories of how national moments of celebration can bring us together, from the Olympic opening ceremony in London 2012 to the Queen's jubilee celebrations. These events unite us in our history, our story, and our common values. This year's anniversary will be no exception. Clement Attlee said in 1943:

“Here in this country, although our political divisions were deep, in time of need we were able to transcend them in the interests of the whole community.”

The events this year will be a timely opportunity to remember those communal values: pulling together, a fighting spirit in the face of adversity, and compassion for our neighbours.

I am delighted to confirm that the Government have announced a programme of activities up and down the UK. Celebrations will start on the early May bank holiday, Monday 5 May, with the Cenotaph draped in flags overnight followed by a military procession and flypast. Street parties will be held across the country, echoing the celebrations of 80 years ago. As part of this, we all know the power of food to bring people together, and we will be working with partners including the Big Lunch to make sure as many parts of the UK as possible can celebrate. We are launching our new initiative, tip top towns, a call to action for community and volunteering groups to come together to get their town or village ready for the day, whether through bunting, litter picking or crocheted bonnets for post boxes.

The next day, iconic buildings will light up in commemoration, and 25,000 ceramic poppies will cascade from the Tower of London, recreating the beautiful installation from 2014. On 7 May there will be a special performance from the Parliament choir, with tickets available to the general public. And on VE Day itself, Thursday 8 May, there will be a service at Westminster Abbey, where we will come together to reflect on the values the second world war generation fought to protect. Celebrations will then conclude with a VE Day concert delivered by the BBC, mirroring the spontaneous celebrations that took place in 1945 and featuring a mix of music, poetry and spoken word. On VJ Day, Friday 15 August, the Royal British Legion will lead the nation in honouring those who fought and died during the war in the far east, with a service at the National Memorial Arboretum.

Veterans will rightly be at the heart of our commemorations and the Government are honoured to be working with the Royal British Legion and other partners to bring this to life. Indeed, to prepare for these events we are launching our “letters to loved ones” initiative to encourage schoolchildren and family members to explore their family histories, looking for old letters and artefacts to help them learn about life during wartime and share them on our website. This will come together at a joint event at the Imperial War Museum North with the National Theatre. To inspire young people to learn about what life was like during wartime Britain, we are announcing “Our Shared Story”, bringing together a range of educational resources, including materials for schools from the Royal British Legion, called “I’ll Remember.” “The Next Morning” will be a brand new National Theatre production written by award-winning screen writer and playwright James Graham, which will focus on the hopes, dreams and ambitions of young people after the second world war. And an immersive augmented reality experience will bring moments from VE Day to life.

We want the whole UK to feel included and involved in VE and VJ Day celebrations, wherever they live and whoever they are. I know events and services are happening across the devolved nations, including community initiatives in support of VE/VJ Day activity. In Wales, a VE Day event will take place at the Senedd on 8 May, and Scotland’s Salute concert, organised by Royal British

Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland at Usher Hall in Edinburgh, will take place on 6 May. In Northern Ireland, grants have been made available by a number of councils to fund community initiatives in support of VE/VJ Day activity. Special exhibitions, talks and lectures will take place in museums across VE Week in all parts of the UK.

I thank my counterparts in the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments for their support and engagement, which will ensure all parts of the United Kingdom will mark this 80th anniversary. We will be working with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on the “For Evermore Tour”, which will focus on the stories and experiences of Commonwealth soldiers, many of whom continued to fight in the Pacific after the war on the European front had come to an end.

Together, we will make sure the legacies of those who gave their lives will continue to be told for generations to come. I am sure the House will join me in looking forward to these commemorations as an opportunity to come together as a nation, as Britain did 80 years ago, to honour veterans and reflect on the freedom and values that the second world war generation fought so hard to protect. I commend this statement to the House.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I thank the Minister for her excellent statement and for advance sight of it. As we approach the anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day, we look forward to the whole nation coming together to celebrate the end of the fighting in Europe, the surrender of Japan, victory over our adversaries and the end of the second world war. At times like this, we see Britain at its best, when the whole nation comes together to pay tribute to a generation who made unimaginable sacrifices, often laying down their lives in the service of this country and in the service of good over evil.

Both Victory in Europe Day and Victory over Japan Day should forever be etched in our memories. On VE Day, millions rejoiced across the western world, relieved that the years of conflict and immense hardship were finally coming to an end. Millions of people up and down the country, including our late Queen Elizabeth II, came together to celebrate the end of fighting in Europe. For a long time, Britain stood alone as it stood up to evil, but with support from our allies, we defeated Nazi Germany and liberated Europe from fascism. But while the celebrations on the streets went on, thousands of British, Commonwealth and allied armed forces were still involved in brutal fighting in the far east. We are forever in debt to those brave souls who fought to defend this country.

I pay tribute to all those who are currently serving in our armed forces. From putting themselves in harm’s way to spending time away from their families, their service and sacrifice deserves our deep gratitude. I reflect on those who continue to give their lives for our country, including individuals like Rifleman Joseph Murphy, previously of my constituency, who lost his life in Afghanistan while trying to carry a fallen comrade to safety, and my old school friend, Flight Lieutenant Rakesh Chauhan, an RAF officer who also lost his life in Afghanistan.

One of the hardest decisions we will ever have to make in this House is the decision to send our brave men and women to war. I reflect on the cries of anguish

[Saqib Bhatti]

from Rakesh's parents, which still reverberate within my heart. I also reflect on the difficult decisions that we will have to make, the sacrifices of our brave soldiers, from today and yesteryear, and the pain of the loved ones who are left behind. To all those serving, those who have served and those who have sacrificed, we say thank you.

We also remember the sacrifice of soldiers from the Commonwealth. When I walk down Whitehall, I often take a moment to look at the statue of Field Marshal Sir William Slim, the commander of the Fourteenth Army—the “forgotten Army”. The sacrifice of his troops at crucial battles like Imphal and Kohima can never be forgotten, and I hope events like the commemoration of VJ Day will help to reinforce our remembrance of the sacrifice of British and Commonwealth troops in defeating Japan.

By the end of the second world war, over 2.5 million soldiers from India had volunteered in the fight against evil. These celebrations must mark the heroic contribution of soldiers from modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, Africa and Canada. Those troops, who were from Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and other faiths and backgrounds, fought side by side, irrespective of race or religion, to stand up for the values that we all hold dear: freedom, liberty and the rule of law, so I welcome the Minister's announcement on our shared story. The stories of the second world war should be passed from generation to generation, and our young people must know about the sacrifices that were made in generations past, as they will have to face the challenges of tomorrow.

As we celebrate the conclusion of the second world war, it is right that we focus our minds on Europe's first major conflict since 1945. It is hard to recall in recent memory a time of such danger and uncertainty. Our world has profoundly changed, and because of the tyranny of Vladimir Putin and his unjustified barbaric invasion of Ukraine, the spectre of war looms over Europe once again. The forces shaping our world—a warmonger in the Kremlin, conflict in the middle east and extremism poisoning young minds—mean that we must value our armed forces today, now more than ever. When we have these celebrations, I hope we can also celebrate peace in Ukraine.

I put on record the Opposition's wholehearted support for the Government's plans, as outlined by the Minister. We want the event to be a day of joy, reflection and celebration. Will the Minister join me in encouraging as many people as possible to take the opportunity to reflect on and mark this important anniversary in our history? Will she work with local government and local councils to ensure that those who need support with planning and want to celebrate can do exactly that? With the spectre of war looming over Europe, does she agree that we must value the contribution of our armed forces, now more than ever?

The 80th anniversaries are an opportunity to remember the sacrifice and sheer determination of the people who saw us through that dark period, and it is right that their service is properly commemorated. I pay tribute to organisations like the Royal British Legion and Troop Aid, who serve my constituency, which will help these events to take place. I look forward to working with the Government to ensure that we do right by our brave men and women in the armed forces.

Stephanie Peacock: I am incredibly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the tone of his response. He is absolutely right that VE Day and VJ Day should be etched on our collective memory. I join him in paying tribute to our armed services personnel who are serving today, and I echo his comments on Ukraine. He is right to pay tribute to the sacrifice of British and Commonwealth soldiers and to outline how young people can get involved. It is important that young people can explore their connections and, of course, we want to encourage as many people to get involved as possible. In response to his specific question, we wrote to local government leads on 5 March. I am very happy to meet with them or any Member of the House to discuss our plans further.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly welcome the Minister's statement. It will be a true day of national unity. Last week, I presented a long overdue official armed forces badge to 100-year-old veteran Eric Radcliffe. Will the Minister thank Eric for his service, and will she inform the House and my constituents in Leigh and Atherton about what is being done to ensure that the stories and experiences of brave veterans like Eric are not lost to time?

Stephanie Peacock: I am sure the whole House will want to join me in thanking and paying tribute to Eric. As I said in my statement, veterans are at the heart of the celebrations. We are working closely with the Royal British Legion to ensure that they are central to the plans, so they can get involved and we can hear their stories.

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

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I associate my party with what is being planned—it is a great idea. I crave the indulgence of the House to mention my parents, both of whom served in the second world war. My father served in the aforementioned Fourteenth Army, led by Bill Slim, and was part of the second wave through Kohima. When I asked him what it was like, all he described to me was the terrible smell of corpses—that is what stayed with him. Completely to my family's surprise, we discovered that my mother had worked at Bletchley Park. She was shocked and horrified when that came out, and she spluttered, “But I signed the Official Secrets Act.” My mother could never do a crossword, so we do not know how earth she got there. [Laughter.]

When we think about the period before the second world war, the word “appeasement” comes to mind. I am sure that the same word comes to the minds of all of us who have witnessed what has happened in these past months. We pray for peace, but it has to be a peace that works with allies and, above all, it has to be a just peace. The events of 1940 were a very, very close run thing. Had Hitler come across the channel, which he might have done had he not decided to turn east and head towards Russia, we might still be in a German state today—who knows? It was miraculous that we got through and won that war.

I close with a final suggestion to Ministers. There are precious few veterans, all over the UK, who still with us today. I am not sure whether I picked up what the Minister said correctly, but I suggest that we try to

collate their memories, perhaps through local government culture departments, and they can be encouraged to write things down or make a recording. It might be interesting to publish a book of their reminiscences and memories while they are still here, because from history we learn for the future, and their accounts will be crucial to the generations ahead of us.

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman paid a heartfelt tribute to his parents. The commemorations I have announced today acknowledge the value of lasting peace and how it can sometimes be difficult to achieve. In response to his suggestion, our “Letters to Loved Ones” encourages people to look into their own family history and to explore what life was like, and the Royal British Legion is leading on remembrance resources that will allow people to hear testimony direct from veterans.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, which will be welcomed by the good and patriotic people of Newcastle-under-Lyme. The bravery, valour and sacrifice of those who defended our shores in the fight against fascism made them the heroes we remember today and every day. The Minister will know—she has touched on this already—that the war was won thanks to the service and commitment of people from across the then empire, now Commonwealth. What discussions has she had with the Commonwealth secretariat in relation to these commemorations to ensure that they pay due tribute to all those who made the ultimate sacrifice?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend rightly makes the point that we pay tribute to all those who served from the Commonwealth. As part of a stakeholder roundtable, I met the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. We are working in my Department and across Government with the Ministry of Defence, which we meet regularly, and we continue to work together.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I thank the Government for these excellent plans. The ghosts of men who went to liberate Europe and never came back are all over Wiltshire—the county that I represent part of. Lord Alanbrooke’s diaries are full of the villages and towns that he visited during the war while supporting our troops who were preparing to go and fight in Europe, and Wiltshire was very much the launching pad for Operation Overlord. In addition to the plans that the Minister has set out, may I encourage her to consider ensuring that there is proper, senior representation from a national level in Wiltshire around D-day?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point on behalf of his constituents. I am very happy to meet him to discuss the events taking place in his constituency and the ways in which the Government can potentially support them.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): The people of Aldershot and Farnborough have contributed in every major conflict for over 100 years, including the second world war. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the contribution of my community in that conflict? Will she also join me in congratulating Councillor Sophie Porter, deputy leader of our council, and Councillor Nadia Martin, our armed forces champion, who are part of our community’s

plans to deliver a new beacon in Manor Park in Aldershot, which will be lit for the first time on 8 May? How can people from my community get involved in the national plans?

Stephanie Peacock: Having visited my hon. Friend’s constituency, I know how much it has contributed—Aldershot is of course the home of the British Army. She makes an important point about armed forces champions in councils across the country, who will play an important role. We wrote to local authorities last week, and we are keen to continue to work with them.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I commend the Minister for her statement, which will be truly welcomed by the people of Romford, many of whom served in His Majesty’s and Her Majesty’s armed forces—including my own father, Frederick William Rosindell, who served in the Royal Air Force in the second world war.

A part of the British isles was liberated in May 1945, which was described by Sir Winston Churchill as “our dear Channel Islands”. I did not hear any mention today of the Channel Islands in the Minister’s statement. Some 66,000 British subjects were liberated in Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark, and 6,000 members of the British forces landed there as part of Operation Nest Egg—taskforce 135. There is no actual commemoration for those people who liberated those cherished British islands in the English channel. Will she ensure that the reunion of the Channel Islands with the United Kingdom and the wonderful liberation of those islands is also commemorated as part of VE 80 this year?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman pays an important tribute to his father, who served in the Royal Air Force. He makes an incredibly important point about the Channel Islands, and I would be really pleased to meet him to discuss that further to see how we can pay a fitting tribute to and commemorate the role that they played.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the work of the Government to remember the greatest of all generations. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Telford and Wrekin council on launching a £50,000 community fund to mark this event? In particular, will she thank parish and town councils, the Royal British Legion, Telford and Wrekin Interfaith Council and veterans’ groups for grabbing the opportunity to apply to that fund? Does she agree that our allies then and our allies now are very welcome to join us in marking this very special occasion?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. It is fantastic to hear about the £50,000 community fund. There are lots of ways in which community groups can get involved, whether it be decorating their villages or towns or organising a street party. As I say, we will work with local councils to support local communities to do that.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement and for mentioning the Parliament choir, of which I am a trustee, and the concert we are planning as part of Parliament’s celebration of victory and VE 80. I note that though this Chamber

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

was shattered by a Nazi bomb, the scarred arch at the entrance to it remains as a memorial to this House's defiance throughout the war. I assure the Minister that our programme is a celebration, a commemoration and a noting of the international effort. We will be singing music by not just British composers, but those from the countries we liberated, such as Czechoslovakia and France, those from our allies, such as America, and those from countries we vanquished. We are doing "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" by J. S. Bach to include Germany in the celebration—the music played regularly by Myra Hess throughout the war at the National Gallery. We will be singing some Russian music too, as a memory that Russia was once our ally. We hope that one day Russia will be our ally again, but certainly under a different leader from the present one.

Stephanie Peacock: I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman was able to outline the important contribution that the Parliament choir will make. He is absolutely right to speak about how it is Parliament's opportunity to both celebrate and commemorate. My hon. Friend the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism reminds me that we are watched over by the plaques for Members of Parliament who lost their lives during war.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister and the Government for announcing these fitting tributes to VE and VJ Day and to all those who fought and died for our country. The West Bromwich Royal Naval Association club and the Oldbury Royal British Legion do really important work locally supporting and providing companionship for local veterans. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to them and in encouraging everyone to get involved in the celebrations that they will be organising?

Stephanie Peacock: I am absolutely delighted to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the West Bromwich Royal Naval Association club and the Oldbury Royal British Legion. I know from my experience in my own constituency of Barnsley just how important organisations such as those are at moments like this, and all year round, in supporting veterans.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for her statement. The second world war had a profound effect on so many lives. I think of my father's two brothers, my uncle Anthony and my uncle James—my namesake—who fought in the Pacific in the US navy. Some 50,000 Scots lost their lives in combat, while around 6,000 civilians in Scotland were killed, many in bombing raids. In my own constituency, Peterhead and Fraserburgh were subject to heavy bombing raids, with Fraserburgh suffering the same casualty rate as London during the blitz. Can the Minister assure the House that all Government Departments will work to uphold the legacy of VE Day and look after all our veterans, especially those who find themselves homeless?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman rightly outlines Scotland's huge contribution. I am visiting Edinburgh next week, and I look forward to meeting my counterpart there. He is absolutely right that supporting our veterans today is incredibly important, and we work across

Government on that. We are joined in the Gallery by Lord Coaker; we speak very regularly. This falls to not just DCMS and the MOD, but Departments across Government.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Can I say how very welcome the Government's announcement on the VE and VJ Day celebrations will be in Dartford? My constituency was very much on the frontline during world war two. The town and surrounding villages were a target for air raids by German bombers that could not reach central London, which often deposited their bomb loads on Dartford. Only today, part of Kirby Road and Hillhouse Road has had to be cordoned off due to a suspected unexploded world war two bomb. I pay tribute to the emergency services, which, even as we speak, are dealing with that situation. Many brave Dartford men and women fought and died in the war, and their memories are still strong. How can people use the VE and VJ Day celebrations to uncover wartime histories in their families?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend has outlined the huge impact that the war had. I said in my statement that my generation would be the last to grow up with family members and friends who fought or contributed; I remember on my first day at school, or certainly not long after I joined school, my first teacher talking about her experience during an air raid. That was really important to me growing up—it was part of my childhood that people talked about the second world war. That is not the case for today's generation, which is why we have launched our "Letters to Loved Ones" initiative. That initiative encourages people to explore their family history—to look for letters and artefacts so that they can understand what life was like during wartime. We are encouraging people to share those letters and artefacts on our website, so that we can all learn from them.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My father served on HMS Fearless, which was sunk, and although he survived, many of his comrades remain buried at sea. Will there be any initiative to address war graves at sea, given that there have been egregious examples of their being plundered for scrap and other things?

Stephanie Peacock: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about war graves at sea, and I would be very happy to meet him or write to him. I will certainly reach out to colleagues in the MOD to talk further about that issue.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement—it is so important that people across the country have the opportunity to celebrate VE Day and VJ Day. I was really pleased to hear that the UK Government are working with the Welsh Government. How can the Government ensure that veterans are at the heart of our celebrations in constituencies such as mine in north Wales?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. Once again, I met the Royal British Legion this week to talk about how veterans can take part. The Royal British Legion has put a call out to all second world war veterans, who can express an interest.

There will be activity, not just in London but in our devolved nations and across the country, and we want to ensure that we support veterans to get involved in whatever way they want .

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I congratulate all three Front- Bench spokesmen on their excellent contributions. Does the Minister know whether the BBC will be broadcasting some of the films—not jingoistic, but thoughtful and realistic—that were made and broadcast in cinemas during the war years? Will there be any reminder of the fact that the end of the war, though joyous for the liberated nations, did not mean the same thing for those countries in central and eastern Europe—including Poland, for which we went to war—that were left occupied by the Soviet Union, and that at the start of the cold war, only our alliance with America prevented a further conflict following? I hope some of those lessons will be carried forward in the commemorations that the Minister has outlined.

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words, and he makes an important point about taking lessons forward. That is something I will take away. He has asked about the BBC; as I mentioned in my statement, the BBC is working with us to deliver the concert on 8 May. Although it will be a commercial decision that I do not want to anticipate, I understand that there will be old films. I also mentioned the augmented reality experience, which will bring to life four well known VE Day photographs so that people can see them in colour and listen to an audio history that will go with them.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement. Northern Ireland played a pivotal role in the wartime effort, with 38,000 enlisting and our manufacturing industry shifting to produce warships, tanks, munitions, aircraft parts and so on. In my constituency, Lurgan's stunning Brownlow castle served as headquarters for American troops and as the planning site for the D-day landings, and even hosted Eisenhower himself. Today, it continues to welcome Government Ministers, including the Secretary of State—I extend that invitation to the Minister. As we approach the 80th anniversary of VE Day, does the Minister agree that Brownlow House should be recognised and promoted nationally for its historic role, and that the Government should deliver on the promise of financial support for the restoration of its family wing, ensuring that its full history can be preserved and shared with the world?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Lady has rightly outlined the huge contribution that people across Northern Ireland made, and as I outlined in my statement, a number of commemorations are taking place across Northern Ireland. I am due to visit Northern Ireland in April; perhaps I can reach out to the hon. Lady to take her up on her kind invitation. While I am not in a position to commit financial support today, I would be delighted to visit if the diary allows.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): As a veteran myself—albeit of a much later conflict—I welcome the commitment to commemorate the 80th anniversary of VE Day and VJ Day. In my constituency, we had both

RAF Bomber Command's Pathfinder force and the US air force's 303rd Bomb Group, which flew the first US mission over Nazi-occupied Europe in 1942. The US air force is still at RAF Molesworth today.

My question is about the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In November, the Veterans Minister confirmed to me in a written answer that the CWGC's budget for financial year 2025-26 would not be known until the MOD's budget had been confirmed after the spending review. There are concerns about the increased level of activity this year, not only due to VE Day and VJ Day celebrations but the CWGC's work in expanding the Loos cemeteries—the world war one war graves—in northern France. The French are building a new hospital and a canal, and are anticipating exhuming more British soldiers there who will need to be buried, so those cemeteries will need to be expanded. Could the Minister make representations for the CWGC's budget to be uplifted for next year, so that we can ensure that work is done?

Stephanie Peacock: Of course, the whole House thanks the hon. Gentleman for his service as a veteran. He has outlined the importance of VE Day and VJ Day to his constituency of Huntingdon. His specific question about funding is of course one for the MOD, but I will write to the Department to relay his question.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. As a former member of staff for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and commemoration, I welcome the Minister's statement. Does she agree that the integration of the CWGC's "For Evermore" project into the VE Day and VJ Day celebrations is a wonderful opportunity to draw the public's attention to the CWGC's relatively new online portal, through which descendants of the men and women of the Commonwealth whom it commemorates can now share in perpetuity their stories of the loved ones they lost? The CWGC is therefore connecting burial records with the life stories and photographs of those who are commemorated for future generations.

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Lady makes an important point, which I echo—the "For Evermore" project is a fantastic initiative. As she says, people can reach it online, and I understand that there will also be 150 mobile exhibitions, not just across the UK but across the world.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Our local Noak Bridge and Billericay councils have already signed up to the beacon lighting for VE Day. Will the Minister encourage all local councils across the country, including district, county and parish councils, as well as community groups to come together and do everything they can to make these celebrations something for their whole community? As I have been listening to other hon. Members, I have also been reflecting on our recent Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visit to Singapore and Malaysia, during which we visited the Commonwealth war graves there. Perhaps the Minister could write to those organising all the international visits that Parliament is undertaking to ensure that parliamentarians visit war graves around the world as part of the celebrations, particularly this year.

Stephanie Peacock: The right hon. Gentleman makes a number of valid and important points. In my statement, I talked a little bit about how councils and local councillors can get involved. We are keen that street parties can take place, and we hope that local councils can be as flexible as possible when it comes to rules and regulations. We are also launching our new initiative, “Tip Top Towns”, to encourage people to decorate their local areas, whether that is with bunting or letterbox toppers. I should also say that grants are available for local communities for things like street parties and decorations; if they want to access those grants, they can make an application to the National Lottery Community Fund. I will also take the right hon. Gentleman up on his suggestion that I write that letter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement, and for the energy and enthusiasm that she shows on behalf of this great nation. Over the years, my constituency has had a great history of service in the Army, RAF and Royal Navy—in the second world war, in every war since, and indeed during the troubles we have had.

The victory in Europe and the victory in Japan are significant milestones in British history, marking the end of the second world war and Germany’s surrender. It is crucial that we do all we can to remember and celebrate those events, so will the Minister consider allocating additional funds to devolved nations? I say that for a reason: my local council, Ards and North Down, is oversubscribed by a long shot when it comes to applications. We need to ensure that local councils have the capacity to fund the services and events that will celebrate those milestones, so that generations to come will not forget and, importantly, will be able to learn from the past.

I also extend an invitation to the Minister to come to Strangford—there is no better place. If she has the time, I have the time for her.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. It is a huge privilege to make this statement on behalf of the Government, and I am proud to be announcing our activity on VE and VJ Days. It is hugely important to our whole United Kingdom, as he rightly says. We are working closely with the devolved nations, and I will certainly reach out to him when I am in Northern Ireland.

Backbench Business

Farming

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 14 January 2025 and 11 December 2024, on The future of farming, HC 527; Correspondence between the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, on inheritance tax relief reforms contained within the Autumn Budget, reported to the House on 11 February and 28 January 2025; Correspondence between the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on strategy and vision for farming, reported to the House on 11 February and 21 January 2025.]

1.40 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of farming.

First, I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and place on record my appreciation for the Backbench Business Committee in allowing us this time in the Chamber. It might be helpful first just to explain to the House why I thought this was an important time to have a debate of this sort, and that was before I knew anything about what happened earlier in the week. The Select Committee that I chair has an inquiry titled “The future of farming”, and I had thought that this would be an opportunity for Members and others to shape the course of that debate and to contribute to the work of the inquiry. I still very much hope that is the case. I had also privately hoped that this might be an occasion when we could look beyond some of the changes that have occupied so much of the bandwidth in our political debate since the Budget, including the removal of the basic payment scheme and the changes to inheritance tax, double cab pick-ups and the ringfencing of agricultural budgets for devolved nations.

This debate is an opportunity for us to remind people just what we have got going with British farming, because there are some tremendous positives. We have the farmers here again today in Westminster, demonstrating how much they care about their industry and their community. For those who see this debate, whether in the Gallery or outside, I hope the message will go to them loud and clear that there are those of us in this House who want to see them stick at their efforts, because we are on their side, and it is worth it. Agriculture has one of the most resilient and resourceful workforces to be found anywhere. There is apparently an active debate within Government on how we make work pay and what the value of work is. If anybody wants to see the work ethic in action, they should go and spend a few days on a farm, because that is where they will see it clearer than anything.

We have heard a lot of concern in recent years about the balance to be struck between imported food and food produced domestically. Some of the trade deals were apparently underpinned by a thinking or an agenda that we did not need to produce as much or indeed any of our food domestically, and that we could rely on imports. Then, of course, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine

and we had a rather rude wake-up call. Since then, we have seen Donald Trump back in the White House talking about trade and tariff changes. Surely those things alone should make us understand the importance of a healthy, home-grown agricultural sector. We should not be offshoring to other parts of the world our standards of animal welfare or environmental protection.

Climate change is so often held up as some sort of stick with which to beat our farmers, but there is a real opportunity. Those areas of the world from which we are importing food are also undergoing the changes that come from climate change, and they will not be as able to produce the food that they would wish to export to us in years to come. In this country, we still have a good temperate climate, which is absolutely suited to that.

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): Farmers in Ely and East Cambridgeshire face the threats of flood and drought, which are made infinitely worse by the climate change that my right hon. Friend is talking about, in addition to all the other challenges that farmers are facing. Does he agree that the Government should invest in rural flood management and water storage, and work with farmers to help them manage water on their farms?

Mr Carmichael: I absolutely do, and my hon. Friend puts it perfectly when she talks about working with farmers. It seems that—this is as true for Governments north of the border as it is for those south of it—so much of what passes for agricultural policy is something that is done to farmers, rather than in partnership with them.

To get to the bright future that I believe farming can have, we have to get past the present. The decision to close the sustainable farming incentive scheme on Tuesday without any notice has provoked predictable and justifiable fury, but doing it with a press release that sought to present it as some sort of triumph added insult to injury. It was almost like a return to the glory days of the Soviet Union, when the Politburo would boast about their advances in meeting their targets in the five-year plan for tractor production. The Government have pulled the rug out from under farmers across England, and that comes on the back of the accelerated removal of the basic payment scheme in the Budget.

I am afraid that the Minister's defence in the House yesterday around an uncapped budget is not adequate and does not tell the whole story. On 14 January this year, the director general for food, biosecurity and trade told the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that they had had almost 11,000 applications to the SFI, with 7,000 contracts offered. She said:

“If that continues at that scale there may come a point where the budget comes under pressure and we have to consider taking action.”

What has been happening in DEFRA since that time? The permanent secretary was open with the Select Committee. She said that future funding hinged on the spending review. How did we get from that point, where officials seemed to be warning us, to the point we got to on Tuesday, when we saw the scheme closed without notice?

The press notice announcing the closure of the SFI specified the budget as £1.05 billion capped. That is the first time I have been able to discover that that figure has been put into the public domain. Without that transparency,

how on earth can farmers and their representatives possibly hope to regulate their behaviour, or know when the money will be running down and when they should be getting their applications in?

The frustration is that for some, this situation did not come out of a clear blue sky. It had been rumoured for some time, and it is well known that land agents, consultants and others had been quietly advising clients to get applications in to beat the deadline and the exhaustion of the pot. That is fine if a farm is big enough to employ a land agent or a consultant, but this is a busy time of year for small family farms, upland farmers and others. Those are the people who deserve and need the assistance more than ever, and they are the ones who have again been left behind.

Tom Bradshaw described DEFRA as “a failing Department”. That is strong language from a man not given to hyperbole, but the Minister would do well to take heed. In that evidence session on 14 January, we heard evidence from the permanent secretary, the director general for food, biosecurity and trade and the deputy director of policy, engagement and strategy. The Committee has not formally expressed an opinion, but it is fair to say from the informal discussions that followed that that session left few of us, if any, with the impression that it was an impressive leadership team entirely in command of their brief.

It was clear that the team understood the target and where they wanted to get to, but it was unclear how they would achieve their targets. We saw that with the various false starts and missteps on the road to the environmental land management schemes, although I acknowledge that much of the responsibility for that lies with Ministers from the previous Government. The permanent secretary called it an iterative process, which to my mind just seems to be another way for people to say that it is okay to get things wrong and to make it up as they go along. I am afraid that in the minds and eyes of farmers across the country, Tuesday's announcement on the SFI simply reinforces that impression.

The future of farming could be bright, but we have to give farmers the confidence to invest and banks the confidence to lend. The Government have to acknowledge the damage that was done to that confidence by the Budget changes, especially in relation to agricultural property relief and business property relief. Anecdotal evidence has been growing for months. We have seen the closure of agricultural merchants and machinery dealers, and we have seen the number of first registrations of tractors fall. This week, we have the publication of the National Farmers Union's confidence survey.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his excellent contribution to this debate. Do the points that he is making not underline the issue that is faced in my constituency? Given the value of land, it is being bought up by private equity firms and pension funds for use in industrial tree production or solar farms. Land is lost to food production as a result of such developments.

Mr Carmichael: What the right hon. Gentleman refers to is the consequence of an agricultural policy that, despite aiming to do many worthy and worthwhile things, no longer has the concept of food production at its heart. Across this House and the different parties, we

[Mr Carmichael]

need to rebuild a consensus around getting food production back into agriculture. Climate change mitigation, nature restoration and the rest of it are all important parts of the context, but without food production at the heart of it, we will have the unintended consequences that he outlines.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I would like to take the right hon. Gentleman back to the point that he was making before he was interrupted. Earlier today, at Business and Trade questions, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) asked what the Government are doing to assist the rural economy, but answer came there none. Is it not the case that the rural economy is interlinked and that if we damage one part of that economy—farming—we damage all of it? On the right hon. Gentleman's point about the supply of goods and equipment to farmers, there will be so many other industries affected if this persecution is allowed to continue.

Mr Carmichael: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It has to be properly understood that farming underpins everything in rural communities. To take the example of agricultural merchants and machinery dealers, these are successful businesspeople. They will be people who are part of the local Rotary club. They will have children in schools. They will be people who take on all sorts of leadership responsibilities within the community. If they cannot make their living in the countryside, we should not expect them just to sit around and wait for something to come along. Of course they will leave and the population will decrease, and we will be in a vicious downward cycle, which is the very opposite of what we need. It is also the very opposite of what a good, well-resourced and valued farming industry can provide for the country as a whole. If we are serious about the mission for growth, as the Government tell us, it has to be growth for everyone. It has to be growth across every sector and every part of the country, including rural areas and farming.

That allows me to come back to the point that I was about to make about the NFU's confidence survey, which was published just this week. I am afraid it makes grim reading for anybody who cares about the countryside and agriculture. It tells us that 85% of landowners believe that the reforms to APR and BPR will increase their inheritance tax liability. Of those, 32% say they plan to reduce investment to mitigate the increase. The figure increases to 42% for mixed arable and livestock businesses, and to 49% for arable farms. Some 75% of employers expect to be impacted by the increase in employer national insurance contributions, 65% say they expect a reduction in profits because of the increase, and 43% expect to reduce investment to offset the additional costs. Again, that is on top of this week's changes to the SFI and the basic payment scheme.

I would like to say quite a lot more about other aspects of the Budget, particularly the removal of the ringfence for devolved budgets, but I am reluctant to do so, given the pressure on our time this afternoon and the number of people who want to contribute to the debate. However, I have spoken about those issues before, so those who are interested in my views can refer to my previous contributions.

A small silver lining is to be found in the debate on APR and BPR, because it has forced us to think about the extent to which farming produces such a spectacularly poor return on capital. This is something we have all known for years, but now we have been forced to ask ourselves why it is the case. The hard fact of the matter is that 80 years of Government interference in the food market through agricultural subsidies has had the unintended consequence of keeping farmers poor and making supermarkets rich. I have a ten-minute rule motion next week to encourage the Government to introduce meaningful regulation in the food supply chain, and the Minister and his colleagues have recently spoken about their intention to see farm incomes increase. That is to be welcomed, but it will need a much more comprehensive and coherent strategy than we have seen thus far.

Not all confidence is about finances. We have seen a lot of doubt thrown into every sector of agricultural production in recent months because of the biosecurity threats that face this country. The poultry sector has been hit hard as a consequence of avian influenza. We have seen foot and mouth outbreaks on the continent. We see African swine fever moving across the continent, and it seems likely that we will see bluetongue disease back in this country soon. The vets on the frontline—those in the Animal and Plant Health Agency—do a remarkable job, and we owe them all a debt of gratitude, but so much more needs to be done.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has heard evidence on this issue from port health authorities, local authorities and the APHA itself. We have asked the Department about the point at which Government software systems were updated to stop animal products coming from Germany, following the identification of a foot and mouth outbreak there. Despite getting answers to our letters, we have still not been told by the Department whether IPAFFS—the import of products, animals, food and feed system—was updated on 10 or 16 January. That is something that the Government should be able to tell us.

I have sympathy for the Government, because they are dealing with a brand new system. Essentially, we should be able to see this as a pressure test on it. If the system did not work perfectly everywhere, let us identify those parts where the pressure escaped. But in order to do that, we need more transparency and more candour from Government Departments. If the Minister can answer that question when he responds to the debate, I will be enormously grateful. If he cannot, it would assist the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee greatly if we were able to get that answer in correspondence.

Time really is against us this afternoon. I would have loved to have the rest of the afternoon, but we do not. I will conclude my remarks, but let me say on behalf of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that I very much hope that Members from across the House will continue to engage with our inquiry, because if food security is national security, as the Prime Minister keeps telling us, then our Committee is one of the most important Committees in this House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. After the next speech, I will be imposing a four-minute time limit, with the exception of Front-Bench speeches.

1.59 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): As the representative for North Somerset, I, like many in this debate, represent a rural constituency, and thus a great number of farmers, whom I have had the privilege of meeting on a number of occasions since July. The farmers of North Somerset have not shied away from expressing to me their wide range of concerns, going far beyond merely changes to the inheritance tax regime. From those meetings, I have grown increasingly concerned that the outcry over changes to inheritance tax in this House, and the time subsequently given to the topic, have distracted us from the more fundamental questions about the future of farming. That is why I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this debate, and for making it clear in his application that he wished to debate farming more widely than merely a discussion of the merits of the inheritance tax changes.

I start by recognising that farming is an issue that arouses great passion. We have seen that in our own constituencies during visits in the past six months, and even on the very roads that surround this building with the protests that seem to occur every other week. From conversations with farmers in my constituency, I have quickly gained an appreciation that we are talking about not just a profession, but a lifestyle and often a calling. The constituents I have met are often working the soil that their fathers, their grandfathers and the generations before them worked—in some cases, back even beyond the creation of this Chamber. It is thus understandable why there is a widespread feeling among farmers that too often this place, so distant to so many, does not listen to their needs, does not discuss the issues so pertinent to their livelihoods, and too often imposes its will arbitrarily on them. If we are being fair, I think all of us would admit that this is not a new sentiment since the autumn Budget; this goes back decades and has been directed at all parties in turn.

I want to use my speech to talk about an issue that may not be grabbing the headlines currently, but which, from discussions with farmers in my constituency, I believe constitutes the greatest impediment to a thriving farming sector. A concern I hear again and again, no matter the product a farmer may choose to specialise in, is the excessive power of supermarkets in contract negotiations and the raw deal farmers get as a consequence. Too often, farmers I have spoken to have been subject to a “take it or leave it” negotiating position from these mega-corporations, which are able to dictate price and impose unfair conditions on farmers. Many farmers I have spoken to have had perfectly edible crop rejected due to minor aesthetic defects, excessive delays in payments and indeed, as some have told me, even instances of entirely arbitrary cancellations of orders with no reason given. The fear of retaliation keeps many of these instances from seeing the light of day, and that fear has arisen due to the oligopolistic nature of the supermarket industry.

In the flow from farm to fork, the supermarkets act as a great gatekeeper, siphoning a cut from the passing traffic. While this issue is not unique to the UK—after all, a mere five companies control 80% of the global trade in grain—I think it fair to say that in recent years our constituents have become increasingly aware of the greedflation they see reflected every day in the increases in the prices they pay for food in supermarkets. These

increases in prices are not benefiting the hard-working farmers who produce that food, but rather the shareholders, which are often not even based in the UK. Last year alone, we saw the big four supermarkets increase their profits by 97%, while farmers felt the continued squeeze from rising energy prices, rising fertiliser costs and rising labour costs—to name but a few things. If we are serious about improving the lot of farmers in this country, I think this is where we need to focus our attention and our efforts.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that not only do the big six supermarkets not have the interests of farmers at heart, but two of them did not even pay corporation tax last year? It is critical to address that in this wider discussion.

Sadik Al-Hassan: I thank my hon. Friend for a worthy contribution to the debate, and I completely agree. It is fundamental that we fix some of the problems in the supermarket supply chain that are affecting farmers, and that companies pay their fair share to this country.

Farmers continue to feel the squeeze from rising prices, and I think we must strengthen the Groceries Code Adjudicator and give it real teeth, and thus empower farmers to fight back and get the fair deal they deserve. To do this, it will need to be properly resourced, and to that end I suggest that we look again at the levy supermarkets pay, which has not increased since 2018, despite a dramatic rise in prices and profits.

The farmers I have met do not shy away from telling me how much they love their profession, and how sad they are that their children do not see it as a viable future career. If we are to secure the future of farming, we must secure the future workforce, and to do that we must make farming a profitable business. Without fundamentally rebalancing the scales of power between those who grow our food and those who sell it, farming will continue to be an unprofitable venture and an unattractive career for young people. I note that the next review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator will start after this month, and like the farmers of North Somerset, I eagerly await to hear how my hon. Friends in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs intend to ensure that it is fit for the future.

2.6 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The importance of farming cannot be overstated. It is vital not only for farmers, but for all our communities, our economy and our national security. Farming allows us to keep food prices as low as possible in shops and supermarkets. Farming is the foundation of the rural economy. It supports tens of thousands of jobs not only on farms, but all along the supply chain. There is no national security without the food security that home-grown farming provides.

I have known this for all my years because I grew up on a farm. I saw my family and friends work extremely hard to earn a living—getting up before dawn and sometimes working until after the sun went down—and toiling in difficult conditions away from the limelight in protecting the environment and the countryside, often with little thanks or reward. That is the story of so many family-run farms across our country. It is a story of the Borders, of Scotland and of British businesses up and down the United Kingdom.

[John Lamont]

The Labour Government are putting the huge benefits that farmers deliver at risk. The future of farming is under threat because of Labour's family farm tax, which will only compound the damage that the SNP has already done to rural areas across Scotland. Family businesses, which have often been passed down from generation to generation, will be hit hardest by Labour's vindictive family farm tax. These small family businesses are the lifeblood of entire communities. They support jobs in local shops, the workers who rely on their trade for their own business to survive, and the businesses that maintain their equipment and supply their farms. They are more than family farms; they are community farms, because they benefit everyone in the local area. These facts have been ignored by the SNP during its 18 years in power, and they have already been ignored by Labour within a year of its being in power.

What does the future of farming look like once Labour brings in its family farm tax? The National Farmers Union estimates that hundreds of farms will face collapse because of this tax, and future generations will be denied the chance to farm their family's land. If their farms do not need to be sold, farmers will still be discouraged from investing in their properties because that would only increase the tax their children will have to pay, and they may feel the need to save cash to cover future tax bills.

What will happen is that Labour will force farmers to sell their family businesses, our countryside will not be maintained to the same standards, the same volumes of high-quality food will not be produced, our environment will suffer as more foreign food has to be imported, other rural businesses in the supply chain will suffer from the decline in investment and ongoing trade, and food prices in shops and supermarkets will rise. In the end, Labour's family farm tax will not just harm the future of farming, but the future of the economy and the cost of living for us all.

In conclusion, if the Labour Government were serious about supporting farms, they would listen properly to farming communities. They would listen to the single biggest thing that farmers in our country are demanding, which is to scrap the family farm tax, and restore the exemptions of APR and BPR. That is the only way to secure the future of farming. The Government should do the right thing, and scrap the family farm tax.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I have to introduce an immediate three-minute time limit, because I want to get everybody in on this important subject.

2.9 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I am grateful to be able to contribute to this debate, given that I have 350 farmers in my constituency of Shrewsbury, which is famous for its food and drink sector, and not least for the nation's favourite market. Shropshire overall has more farm holdings than any other county in the UK. I am very proud of some of our produce, and in particular I am proud of a new technology that is being used in our area of outstanding natural beauty, which is unlocking hilly and rocky terrain for new productive land use.

I have had the privilege to be invited to visit so many of our farms, and work alongside local support networks such as the Shropshire NFU, the Country Land and Business Association and our farmers support fund locally. Overwhelmingly, my farmers tell me one key message: farming is tough. Profit margins are so tight and they have struggled for years with high input costs—such as energy, fertiliser and animal feed, up by 44% since 2019—while food prices from the big six supermarkets have been decreasing since Brexit, leaving us with some of the lowest prices in Europe, further compounded by terrible trade deals with New Zealand and Australia.

Low productivity in farming is not just an academic description; it is a harsh reality for the 12,000 farm livelihoods that were forced out of business since 2010. To help us comprehend the scale of sectoral collapse under the previous Government: that means that more than 850 farms went under every year of their Government—16 farms closing every week. It has left farming with the lowest profitability of any sector in the UK. This has to change. For the sake of our hard-working farmers, and for the sake of our vital food security, we must revitalise farming with productivity, new technology and sustainability.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Given what the hon. Lady just said about the number of farm holdings, would she regard it as a sign of failure of this Government if that number is lower at the time of the next election?

Julia Buckley: I have just explained that it was 12,000 lower since the start of the previous Government, so by the hon. Gentleman's own admission, presumably that is a catastrophic failure.

So let us support our farmers to deliver their high-quality food to high environmental and welfare standards into more markets, such as by the Government's new procurement policy—

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that given some of the challenges that we have discussed today, university research farms like Henfaes in my constituency will play a vital role in the future of farming? Does she welcome some of the grants announced by the Secretary of State for farming innovation and technology?

Julia Buckley: That is most interesting. That is exactly the direction of travel—to make farming more productive and profitable, we must embrace innovation.

Let us take support measures, such as the Government's new procurement policy to "back British farming" from DEFRA, which will promise that 50% of public-funded catering must come from local farms that meet our high welfare standards. That means that every meal in every hospital, on every Army camp and in every prison will be supplied with at least 50% local produce from British farmers. I cannot wait to see the impact that will have at Royal Shrewsbury hospital and Nesscliffe Army camp in my constituency.

I am sure that Opposition Members have questions about yesterday, because following yesterday's announcement from DEFRA, several farmers got in touch with me with questions about the proposed changes to the SFI schemes. I was glad to reassure any farmer who has

applied that their grant will be forthcoming, as all submissions will be honoured from the budget, which has now been completely maximised—in contrast to last year, when the previous Government were unable to distribute the funds to desperate farmers, wasting £350 million. Under this Government, the entire budget has been committed three weeks before the end of the financial year, helping over 57,000 farmers. Ministers have clearly set out their approach, which will take on board feedback from farmers on the complexity and inconsistency of the previous schemes, and aim to provide a more carefully managed programme.

The new, improved SFI scheme will reopen this summer with a larger budget and a more targeted approach, delivered in a fair and more orderly way, ensuring value for money for taxpayers and investing in food production and nature recovery projects.

In my professional career before coming to this place, I worked for over 20 years to design, develop and deliver EU grant funding schemes such as these. In my professional experience, the most impactful schemes are those with a robust strategic objective, that are multi-annual in nature and take regular opportunities to review and improve technical specifications with feedback from applicants. I welcome this review and launch—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order.

2.15 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this afternoon's debate. I want to make three points.

Salisbury, my rural constituency, has farming at its heart. The universal feedback that we have had from farmers is that since this Government have come in they have been very, very disappointed. The changes to the APR and BPR have catastrophic implications for succession planning, and despite making really sensible suggestions the NFU has been completely rebuffed. Farmers are in absolute despair. That came before we had all the changes to national insurance and to the national living wage. The overall context for operating small businesses, which is what farms are, has been transformed. The level of exposure that farmers feel to these combined pressures is enormous.

Then yesterday we had the announcement of the suspension of the SFI—a key part of the environmental land management scheme. A number of farmers rang me up yesterday and said, “This is the end. What are we going to do?” One farmer I spoke to yesterday afternoon, who operates 27 farms, works with an agent to prepare documents to apply for grants, but those had not quite gone in, so he now faces grave uncertainty—a real black hole. This needs to be addressed urgently. The combined effect of the changes in the Budget and last night's announcement has had a massive impact on the industry across the United Kingdom.

I want to use my remaining time to focus on where we need to go now. This is a debate about the future of farming, after all. I recognise that, post Brexit, we need serious thinking and leadership about reconciling food production incentives, environmental management and getting in place the right arrangements for trade. Transitioning from where we were before 2016 is not straightforward. But I urge the Minister to put some defined objectives into the public domain and make his

officials accountable for delivering on them. That would help the Government to set a clear road map going forward and help farmers know what food security really means from his perspective.

2.18 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): Farming is the lifeblood of our local communities in my constituency. I recognise that farmers are often the guardians of the countryside and our natural heritage—farmers like Richard Evans in my constituency, a brilliant sheep farmer at Larling whom I met earlier this year and a leading voice in the Breckland Farmers Wildlife Network. That network is a farmer-led group collaborating to support farming and the environment. With 52 members covering more than 44,000 hectares of farmland in the Brecks, they recognise not only that they are custodians of a very special area for agriculture and food production, but that it is home to a huge range of species, many of which are found nowhere else in the UK.

On my visit with Richard, I was joined by representatives from Norfolk Rivers Trust to talk about how we can work together to support our rivers locally, including rare chalk streams, because farming has a significant impact on our waterways. However, for farmers such as Richard to continue their excellent work, we must move towards a future for farming that prioritises such farms. We cannot allow megafarms to dominate the industry and the landscape. A Compassion in World Farming study showed that there are more than 1,000 large intensive pig and poultry farms across the UK, a 20% increase since 2016. Norfolk has, sadly, been dubbed the megafarm capital of Europe. Residents in my constituency are very concerned about the increasing number of intensive farms and how they are contributing to biodiversity loss, as well as climate change, and air and water pollution. Very often such farming practices adversely affect people living nearby, especially because of the health hazard posed by ammonia.

We have a further proposed megafarm to be built in my constituency at Methwold. If approved on 3 April, it would become one of the largest in Europe. That application has received over 15,000 objections, including from all local parish councils nearby, as well as the World Wide Fund for Nature and Compassion in World Farming. If the council were to make that decision early next month, it would be a disaster. As I have said: no ifs, no buts, it cannot be allowed to proceed. This is not farming, this is industrialisation.

I also want to make reference to our county farms estate in Norfolk, which I am particularly passionate about. Once a mighty holding of more than 30,000 acres, it is now sitting at around 16,000 acres, which still makes it one of the largest council-owned farming estates in the country. I recently met Richard and Danielle Gott at their farm in Nordelph in my constituency, who have successfully farmed the land there for 26 years. We need to support farmers like Richard and Danielle and the next generation of farmers, such as their daughters Emma and Jessica. It is highly likely that with devolution the existing governance model will go. We need to give priority to entry-level farming as we move toward farming's future.

2.21 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing the debate.

[Seamus Logan]

“The future of farming” seems an apt title for this debate, given the grave concerns held by the farming community the length and breadth of Scotland and beyond over the Government’s proposed tax reforms to APR and BPR, and the inheritance tax coming in next year. The arguments against the proposals have been well rehearsed in this place. They have been put to Ministers time and time again, here and in other forums. A consistent theme, however, seems to be their complete inability to listen to, hear and act on those concerns. I do not blame the Minister in his place today; I blame Treasury officials. I think the Minister is an honourable man who is trying to do a good job for farmers, but I do not think he is being listened to by others. Even on the Government Benches, I understand that around 40 MPs representing rural areas have made their concerns known to the Treasury, and are calling for the £1 million threshold to be raised to protect smaller family farms, and for an amnesty for older farmers and those with serious health problems. That seems a reasoned and reasonable approach to me. But as I say, I do not blame the Minister for any of those things.

Research by farming associations has already called into question the accuracy of the data from which the £1 million threshold was chosen. Surely it is not outwith the wit of Treasury officials to return to their numbers and think again. But rather than back the Treasury into a corner here, let me offer the Government a very sensible and reasonable way out of this impasse.

Farming representatives, including NFU Scotland, which I met recently, are suggesting a clawback mechanism as an alternative approach to generating the required tax revenue. The mechanism would allow 100% relief on qualifying assets, but suggests charging IHT on all those assets if subsequently sold by the beneficiary within an agreed timeframe—they suggest seven years. The NFU says the proposal will meet the UK Government’s aims of raising revenue; avoid penalising elderly farm owners and risking breaking up family farms; prevent stifling investment in food production and environmental stewardship; and take away the incentive to use APR and BPR solely as a way of avoiding tax liabilities. It would also target individuals and corporations who are gaming the tax system by using the land to shelter from their liabilities. The Government do not have to cave in on this—there is time. They should simply agree to enter a new round of consultation aimed at honing their proposals, engage with industry representatives and consider how there might be some compromise.

Finally, I want to finish by referencing a discussion I had with the Minister recently on the need to kick-start the trade in seed potatoes, which has been so damaged by Brexit. The Government are making positive moves in the reset with the European Union. I hope the issue will be high on their priority list, to revive Scotland’s important seed potato industry.

2.24 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I want to start my contribution today by picking up where I left off this morning in my question to the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders). At the heart of the problem facing farming and profitability is an unfair supply chain. As we heard

earlier, the big six supermarkets are in effect acting like a cartel, forcing unfair prices on farmers and pursuing unfair practices towards family farms. Last year alone, the big six made a combined pre-tax profit of more than £5 billion. Of those big six, two—Asda and Morrisons—did not pay a penny of corporation tax.

As we know, supermarkets are price setters seeking maximum profits to drive down on the cost they are prepared to pay for home-grown, quality produce. At the same time, the costs of running a farm continue to rise, with soaring fuel, fertiliser and equipment prices. In a world where farmers and producers are struggling to make a living, and are relying on Government grants and subsidies so that they can survive from one year to the next, that cannot be seen to be fair or right.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I will continue, if I may.

We need to look properly, and with real scrutiny, at the supermarkets. Those practices need to change. We cannot allow farmers to bear the brunt of this system, while others in the supply chain benefit so disproportionately.

I want to address the issue of APR. Many, many farmers have raised their concerns with me directly. I have listened to those concerns in Suffolk Coastal and raised them directly with the Treasury and DEFRA. I remain committed to continuing to advocate for farmers in Suffolk Coastal over the months ahead.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I will continue.

However, it is important to reiterate that while the changes to APR are significant, they are not the root problem facing the farming industry. If farming was profitable, farmers would be less worried about paying a new tax bill. The focus must be on making farming more profitable. Without profitability, tax reliefs or Government support will provide only limited help. That includes ensuring fair prices for quality produce, protecting farmers from unfair competition and addressing rising costs, from fuel to fertilisers to equipment. I do not doubt that that will be a tough battle to fight when society often prioritises price over quality—people will happily spend more on a cappuccino than they will on a locally produced chicken—but if we want to protect British farming, we must change our approach.

The future of farming is essential, not only for the economy but for the very fabric of rural society itself. We must continue to put farmers first, ensuring they continue to feed and sustain us for generations to come.

2.27 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I rise as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, the deputy Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, and a former Minister for agritech and UK trade envoy. I am also from a farming family and I have no interests to declare other than a deep interest in my family’s ability to continue farming their farm in Suffolk.

Most of all, I am the Member of Parliament for Mid Norfolk, a fabulously rural constituency. I do not need to tell the Minister that, because he had the privilege of

being the Labour party's parliamentary candidate there three times. He knows what the House needs to know, which is that it is magnificently rural, with 130 villages and three towns. It is the absolute engine room of food, farming and food processing. From Banham Poultry to Cranswick, right through to the Goat Shed, Rosie and Alex Begg growing blackcurrants for Ribena, Carrick Farms, which supplies all the food to Darbys pub, and Novo Farina developing gluten-free flour, it is an engine of some of the most exciting activities and technologies in UK agriculture. It is that engine because for 50 or 60 years it has enjoyed a relatively stable framework of support. But history shows us, friends and colleagues, that if agriculture does not have that support, it is vulnerable. We had agricultural depressions at the end of the 19th century, in the 1920s and 1930s, and in the 1940s and 1950s.

We are at a most extraordinary moment for UK agriculture. We could be incubating a fabulous agritech industry. Across the world, there is a wall of money to invest in agricultural science and research. The world has to double food production in the next 25 years on the same land area, with half as much water and energy. We are home to 10 of the world's top 30 research institutes—we are an engine room for those technologies. I say to the Minister that current policy will, overnight, massively reduce the market in the UK for those innovations. It will remove a great industry which is beginning to get off its feet and tackle the opportunity it has to be a global engine of innovation. If we are not careful, we will sleepwalk into it, despite the warnings of the pandemic, global supply chain shocks, the Ukraine war and now President Trump's trade wars, as others have said. In the interests of food security, affordability and sustainability, we need to support our UK agricultural industry and show the world how to deliver more from less. That is why the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, of which I am chair, has called for a tyre-screeching 180° U-turn to support the sustainable intensification of agricultural productivity. We need to produce more.

I can tell the Minister that in my beloved constituency, which he knows well, with the impact of the farm tax, the small business attack, the abolition of SFI and the massive subsidies for solar farms, it is beginning to look as though the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, with its 50% increase in housing targets, are trying to get farmers off the land to make way for solar farms and badly designed housing. This is a disaster for one of our most exciting industries—UK agritech—and I beg the Minister to take a stand for it.

2.30 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate as a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. I thank our Chair, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), for securing the debate.

The future of farming is not simply about keeping our fields green, livestock sheds full or supermarket shelves stocked, but about securing the future of our rural communities, protecting the environment and supporting the farmers who are the backbone of our nation's food system. This Government inherited underspent farming schemes, resulting in hundreds of millions of

pounds not reaching farmers' pockets. A record 50,000 farms now use these schemes, and more money than ever before is being spent through the sustainable farming incentive and countryside stewardship.

The recent publication of the land use framework set out the changes and complementary use of land needed to achieve our environmental targets. Alongside support for the environmental land management schemes, the framework will help to drive improvements on food security, biodiversity, carbon emissions, water and air quality, and flood resilience. The Scottish land use strategy has shown that we also need clear policies to give certainty on how to deal with directly competing interests on land.

As we know, England is in the midst of a transition. If we are to make this transition successful, we must ensure that farmers are supported in this shift, ensuring new schemes are accessible, flexible and equitable. I welcome the progress the Government have made on freeing up bottlenecks in applications; as the MP for most of the Cannock Chase national landscape, I also welcome the extension of the farming in protected landscapes programme.

We know that any sector that does not have certainty in its workforce lacks certainty for the future. I commend the strides the Government have made on expanding apprenticeships across the UK, but our agricultural and land management sectors need to share in the benefits of that. Figures show that only 5% of the 285,000 people working in agriculture are under 35, and, with the twin pressures of climate change and global food insecurity, the next generation of farmers need to be equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Automation is another way of addressing these challenges, but the harsh reality is that smaller farms cannot shoulder the burden of the risk of investing in expensive new tech. There is good work being done on this, with 20 and 25-year agreements being signed with farmers to unlock long-term investment, which I hope will become the new normal. Without that certainty, farmers will not be able to do everything we want to see.

Lastly, I want to raise the long-term plight of abattoirs. It is not frequently spoken about, but while there were 2,500 abattoirs in the 1970s, there are now just 200, making it far harder for many farmers to keep their supply chains small and local, from farm to fork.

To bring my remarks to a conclusion, the reality is that for many, many years, our farmers have been worried about their future and the future of their sector. We need to ensure they feel confident that their concerns are being heard and addressed so that we and our farmers can achieve the world-leading ambitions we have for our agricultural sector.

2.33 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Farming is the backbone of this country, not only providing us with the food we need to feed our families, but acting as a steward of the land that we hold dear. Farmers do so much more than grow our food: they protect the countryside, create jobs and contribute immensely to rural economies.

My constituency may not have as large a farming population as some others, but believe you me, Madam Deputy Speaker: the farmers we do have are vital to the national picture, as the shadow Farming Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), recognised during his recent visit to some of

[Wendy Morton]

my local farmers. Their efforts support local communities, provide employment and contribute to food security, and I pay tribute to each and every one of them. I also pay tribute to the farmers who took valuable time off the land today to bring their tractors down to Parliament and support us here in this debate. I suspect there may even be some sitting in the Gallery upstairs.

Changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief from April 2026 will have a profound consequence for family farms, including those in my constituency. The removal of the 100% relief above the first £1 million in agricultural and business property could mean farmers are forced to pay inheritance tax at 20% on the value of their property above the threshold, which will push many of them out of business.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the changes to agricultural property relief are completely contrary to what the Prime Minister outlined in his initial speech on Downing Street, where he said he wanted the Government to tread more lightly on people's lives? Does she also agree that this policy is a false economy and that it ultimately risks concentrating farming assets in the hands of very few, which will make the market much worse for British consumers, society and food security?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. I know he speaks and stands up for his local farmers very powerfully. Far from treading lightly, this Government are trampling over our farmers. This policy will lead to the break-up of long-established farms, with land being sold off to meet tax liabilities, which will, I fear, lead to the concreting over of our beautiful countryside.

Another topic that demands our attention is the use of agricultural land for the siting of battery energy storage systems. While I am fully supportive of the move to renewable energy, just as with solar farms, we must ensure that the siting of BESS, which are often large in scale, is done with care and consideration. In my constituency, a planning inspector has approved one of these battery storage facilities on green-belt agricultural land at Chapel Lane in Pheasey Park Farm ward against the will of the local council and the community.

Our land is finite, and we must balance the need for renewable energy with the need to safeguard land for agricultural use and food production. I urge the Government to take a more balanced approach to land use, ensuring that agricultural land remains available for farming and food production. I fear that the changes to the national planning policy framework and the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will simply drive a coach and horses through our arable and green-belt land, disrespecting the views of local residents and risking our food security.

We can no longer take food security for granted. The war in Ukraine, global inflation, supply chain disruptions and extreme weather events are all contributing to rising food prices and shortages in some areas. Here in the UK, we currently produce just 61% of the food we need. We can no longer be complacent. It is time to stand up for our farmers. Just this week, the Government announced the closure of the SFI scheme—another kick to our farmers, who are leading the way on change.

Let me conclude—I could say more, and I would love to say more—by saying that farming is not just a job, but a way of life. No farmers means no food. It is time this Government axed the family farm tax.

2.37 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): The economic fundamentals of farming must be a priority, and I call on the Government to focus on the key determinants of farm operating profitability. There are many drivers of what makes a British farm successful, but structural pressures—buyer oligopolies, price input volatility, international trade challenges, differentials in welfare and environmental standards and even our consumer culture—continue to threaten their viability. As a result, we have seen increasing consolidation, with many farmers shifting to larger, more arable-focused operations.

When it comes to trade, livestock farming has been hit particularly hard. The deeply flawed trade deal with New Zealand was a hammer blow to sheep farmers and our great British land industry, undermining domestic producers and putting British farmers at a competitive disadvantage.

Then there are the standards themselves. Our farmers operate to world-leading standards of animal welfare, food safety and environmental sustainability—standards of which we are rightly proud. Yet there is little recognition of the additional costs that those standards impose. Instead, we allow products from other countries with lower standards to flood our shelves, undercutting the British farmers who are doing the right thing. If we value high-quality British food, we must ensure that our policies reflect that through, for example, fairer trade deals, better labelling, financial support that compensates for those higher costs and being honest about the onshoring of emissions, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) outlined at the start of the debate.

Some farms are more profitable than others not just because of their scale and type of agriculture, but because of their operating environment—an operating environment that the Government play a crucial role in shaping. Access to targeted support for innovation and environmental land management can empower farms to thrive, yet, too often, the support fails to reach the farms that need it the most.

I welcome this Government's successful deployment of SFI, which is something that the previous Government failed to do, but immediate visibility is needed for farms looking to implement the next wave of those initiatives. The power of supermarkets must also be addressed to ensure that farmers receive a fair return. Again, I must say that this is a massive cultural challenge and a shift that needs to take place regarding the value that we place on our food.

Consider, too, the geographical disparities. Farmers in Cornwall, for example, face unique challenges: smaller fields, which take great, often generational knowledge to manage; higher transportation costs; and greater exposure to extreme weather. Yet they receive the same market prices as larger, lowland farms with fewer overheads. Government policy must acknowledge that uneven playing field and ensure that support reaches those most challenging farms and geographies, which are essential to navigating our rural landscapes such as that in Cornwall.

2.41 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate.

I wish to follow on from what the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) said about trade deals. We know that trade deals, particularly the potential ones with the US, threaten to undermine our high animal welfare standards that we have spent years working so hard to establish. If we allow products that are produced to lower standards—such as hormone-treated beef or chlorine-washed chicken—to become the norm, that will undercut our farmers. This is not about protectionism, but about fairness. Not only are vets and farmers proud of our high animal welfare standards, but the British public are, too. We should not in any way be looking to compromise those.

The UK has already made significant strides in reducing antibiotic use in livestock without compromising animal welfare. Our veterinary and farming sectors have worked together to promote the responsible use of antibiotics. We are setting an example for the rest of the world to follow.

As the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance report in 2024 highlighted, sales and usage of antibiotics in food-producing animals remain low. In fact, the past 10 years has seen a 59% decrease in the use of antibiotics in animals and livestock. Long-term antimicrobial resistance surveillance carried out by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate shows that multi-drug resistance in animals is at its lowest level in a decade. Such encouraging statistics are a product of years of work and dedication between scientists and the farming community. This is a huge public health issue, and we should be ensuring that trade deals do not force our farmers to compete with countries that do not have the same judicious use of antibiotics as we do.

On Saturday, I visited the NFU in Hampshire at Ben Robinson's farm where, like many lowland farmers, they are about to start lambing. This is the hardest time of the year for sheep farms—I grew up on a sheep farm. Those farmers will be working all day and all night. In farming, the amount of effort, time and work that farmers put in does not always result in profit, because so many factors are out of their control—international disease outbreaks, geopolitical events that put up fertiliser prices, poor weather, changing Government policy, and potential trade deals. I pay tribute to the Farming Community Network, which works so hard to support the mental health of farmers.

2.44 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): On Friday, I found myself more than 1,000 metres under the North sea. I will explain why in just a moment, but before I do so, let me acknowledge the hard work that our farmers do across the country and acknowledge a point that hon. Members across the House have made, which is that, in recent years, farmers across Britain have faced a serious squeeze.

I have met local farmers and the NFU in my constituency and they put that squeeze down to a range of reasons, ranging from poor trade deals to poor policy. But one factor that I wish to focus on is the soaring cost of fertiliser, which is driven by global supply chain shocks, price volatility and an over-reliance on imports. These

pressures are not just hitting farmers in their pockets, but threatening our food security and the resilience of our agricultural sector. But deep underground in North Yorkshire, there lies a potential solution.

Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting the ICL Boulby facility in my constituency, which produces the crop nutrient fertiliser, polyhalite, and exports it around the world. Polyhalite contains four essential nutrients—potassium, calcium, magnesium and sulphur—which are vital for plant growth. Not only that, but it is super low carbon. It requires minimal processing and zero chemical additives, meaning that it leads to healthier, more resilient soils. In fact, studies have shown that it can boost crop yields by 3% to 5% compared with standard fertilisers.

If we are serious about supporting British agriculture, we must back British solutions. That means a clear strategy on fertiliser security, investment in research, and support for innovation that reduces costs for farmers while strengthening our food system.

The ICL Boulby facility is currently the only operational polyhalite mine in the world, although a second—the landmark Anglo American Woodsmith project, also in North Yorkshire—is on its way and has a strong future ahead. I have been down both facilities and am struck by their ingenuity. Above, the wild, unbroken heather of the North York moors and the beauty of the North sea coastline are untouched by the operations in the depths of the earth below. I pay tribute to those skilled teams working underground in tough conditions to produce these exports, which are boosting our food security.

Britain cannot afford to be at the mercy of volatile global markets when we have the resources, the expertise and the ambition to build a more resilient, productive and sustainable farming sector right here at home. It is clear that polyhalite can play a significant role in supporting the Government's goal to strengthen British food security. I hope the Minister will agree to meet me and representatives of the sector to discuss the challenges they face and the value of this export. I urge the Government to recognise the potential of polyhalite to support farmers in adopting British-made, British-mined solutions. Doing so would unlock further private investment, safeguard jobs and secure the UK's position as a global leader in sustainable fertiliser production.

2.47 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Decisions made in London are risking the future of farming in Wales. Changing the funding model for agriculture from one that is needs-based to one based on the Barnett formula could lead to a cut in funding for Welsh farming of about 40%. That is despite Wales having a higher proportion of farmers than other parts of the UK. The changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief will have a dramatic impact on the future of farming.

How can the UK Government justify those changes when they have no concrete data on their impact in Wales? That is why we need a Wales-specific impact assessment. It is crucial that the Government have accurate data to understand the real impact of the changes. How does this help economic growth in Wales? Ninety per cent of our land area is given over to farming. In 2020, gross agriculture output was worth £1.7 billion to the economy. The wider food foundation sector in Wales—businesses that produce, process, manufacture and wholesale food

[*Llinos Medi*]

and drinks goods—turned over £9.3 billion in 2023, never mind the wider supply chain of agricultural mechanics, vets and animal feed producers.

Why are the UK Government undermining rather than supporting this industry and its growth potential? A Government who do not understand the agricultural economy risk the future of rural communities, too. Westminster policies that do not consider the particularities of the Welsh agriculture industry, in which 43% speak Welsh, trample over the future that we fought so hard for in Wales. Threatening the future of agricultural and food production further threatens the ability of families and young people to stay and work in their communities.

It is crucial that good-quality, fruitful farmland continues to be used for food security as land demand for non-agricultural purposes increases. The transfer of Welsh land to companies that do not have to worry about inheritance taxes is likely, if not inevitable. In my constituency of Ynys Môn, we are battling to keep valuable, fertile land away from developers' plans for 3,700 acres of solar farm, which would have a negative impact on the local economy. This land has sustained us for generations in Ynys Môn, across Wales and further afield. There is a reason we are named Môn Mam Cymru—Môn, the mother of Wales.

Undermining Welsh farmers and agricultural producers risks missing a critical opportunity to shorten our food supply chains and improve our resilience. The Labour UK Government's decisions show a significant lack of understanding of the importance of farming in Wales. Their inability to distinguish between tax-avoiding millionaires and corporations and hard-working people making a living from the land speaks volumes. The UK Government made the wrong decision. Now is the time to show that they truly support hard-working people, by listening to our farmers and reversing these ill-thought-out plans.

2.50 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome this timely debate on the future of farming, in the week in which the SFI rug was pulled out from underneath farmers.

Surely the future of farming has to be young farmers. I have been in touch with some young farmers in my constituency to ask what they think I should talk about in this debate. I was sent a screenshot by Beth, who was partway through her SFI application. It said, "Thank you for doing your application. When you are ready, submit it. If we need to close applications, we will give you six weeks' notice. We will publicise this on gov.uk and we will email you." If that is not a broken promise, I do not know what is.

Louise, another farmer in my constituency, said that she was

"angry, disappointed, upset and exasperated...we have followed the Government's advice to the letter, and been kicked in the teeth".

Another farmer said:

"Pulling SFI is absolutely criminal—just more short-term thinking that forces us into decisions we don't want to make."

Ben said:

"yet another nail in the coffin for...family farms...with no warning environmental projects that had been in planning for months on our farm will have to be stopped...We cannot plan for the future when the rules keep changing."

The future of farming needs to be S, F and I: S for sustainable, F for fair and I for in partnership.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I think the hon. Member will agree that the shutting down of the SFI with no notice on Tuesday night is an awful situation. DEFRA has been either disorganised or sneaky, but either way it diminishes the trust of our farming communities in the Government.

Ellie Chowns: I could not agree more. This has diminished trust. It is vital to rebuild that trust because we need that sustainable, fair and in-partnership future for farming. It needs to be sustainable in environmental terms—we need to recognise the reality of the climate crisis and the nature crisis. We need to support our farmers to make the vital transition to nature-friendly farming. Farmers in North Herefordshire are at the forefront of that, but they need the Government to back them, not knock them off their feet with policy changes with zero notice.

We need farming to be sustainable environmentally, and sustainable economically. It is not acceptable that the rates of return on farming are so low for so many. The Government have a crucial role to play in tackling that. The Green party has long called for a doubling of the nature-friendly farming budget, because of all the extra benefits that farming provides socially, economically and environmentally. We need the Government to step up on that.

Farming needs to be fair, both internationally and locally. Internationally, our farmers must not be undercut by trade deals that let in products that undermine our animal welfare and environmental standards. We need to ensure that the Government stand firm on that. Farming needs to be fair locally, because access to farming support schemes has not been equal. It is hard for many farmers to access those schemes. Whatever replaces the SFI, I hope that the Minister will ensure that farmers have equal access, and the support that they need to access those schemes. [*Interruption.*] I see that the Minister is nodding.

Finally, the future of farming has to happen in partnership with farmers themselves—their voices have to be heard—and with the rest of Government. We need a fully joined-up approach to land use, food, farming and sustainability. It also needs to happen in partnership with nature, because without a thriving natural world, there is no sustainable future for farming.

2.54 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I have often spoken about my deep connection to farming; it is in my DNA. I love the rural way of life and for 40 years, I have been part of a local farming community that values hard work, resilience and responsibility for the land. My granda always said,

"If the farmer isn't doing well in this country, no one is."

He is not a prophet, nor does he hold any of the grand titles or credentials so often revered in this place. What he is, is a farmer—one who understands all too well that agriculture is the cornerstone of our economy, and that when that cornerstone is broken, removed or chipped away at, the consequences are dire: our economy weakens, our rural communities suffer and our food security is placed at risk.

Trust in politics is hard-earned but easily broken, so when our farming community heard promises from the now Prime Minister at the National Farmers Union conference in 2023, they could have been forgiven for placing a certain degree of trust in this Government. Farmers could relate to the Prime Minister when he said, “losing a farm is not like losing any other business—it can’t come back... You deserve better”.

He went on to say,

“We can’t have farmers struggling”

and he claimed that farmers

“deserve a government that listens”.

He talked about stability and certainty. Well, those words ring hollow, do they not?

The October Budget was a defining moment in this Parliament’s history, delivering the biggest hammer blow to farmers in a generation. The family farm tax grab, as it is now known, is an existential threat to the future of farming, and those who survive that blow will be strangled by the Government’s other disastrous policies. Let us consider the closure of the sustainable farming incentive this week and a new tax on double-cab pick-ups, which are a lifeline vehicle for many farmers. We can add to those a tax increase on fertilisers, a hike in national insurance contributions, cuts to business property relief and an ever-growing burden of environmental rules, regulations and requirements. To add insult to injury, while the Government speak about those things being needed to fill the black hole and rebalance the books, £536 million is going in UK aid to foreign farmers.

What good is so-called environmental progress if we end up importing more food from abroad—food produced to lower standards and with a far greater carbon footprint than what we can grow here at home?

This debate is rightly focused on the future of farming, but without urgent action there will be no future for many of our farming families. For generations, they have fed the nation and been stewards of our land, yet today they face relentless threats, and none more so than the family farm tax. I implore those across the way, on the Government Benches, who represent rural constituencies to rise up and fight back for UK farming, fight back for their rural constituents, and fight back for the men and women who feed us and for the circular economy that depends on farming.

2.57 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Our farmers find themselves in an increasingly precarious position. Politically, we see a drip-drip of punishing legislation eroding our agricultural sector. The family farms tax has seen regular protests here in Westminster and those farmers do not come here to pledge their fealty, much as the Government would like them to. I note that the hon. Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) mentioned how unprofitable farming is. I do not know how he hopes they will be able to square the inheritance tax issue with an unprofitable business.

We have recently seen the announcement of the suspension of the sustainable farming incentive with only 30 minutes’ notice and of new compulsory purchase powers that will see yet more farmland concreted over. Dozens and dozens of solar farms are in the pipeline, which will all be easily forced through as nationally significant infrastructure projects because of a laughably low qualifying threshold that is now nearly 20 years old.

The future of farming under this Government looks bleak. Diversification appears to be one of the few options available to farmers, and innovation is another.

I visited Vantage in Great Staughton in my constituency to discuss how advances in agricultural technology can have a positive impact on farming techniques, particularly as farms face manpower shortages, fewer resources and increasingly fewer available experienced farm workers. Will Mumford, a fifth-generation local farmer and the managing director, took the time last year to meet me and talk me through some of the local challenges faced by farmers and to highlight the opportunities presented by developments in agricultural technology. That gave me an opportunity to see a demonstration of Will’s robot tractor, the AgXeed AgBot 5.115T2—not a particularly snappy name, I grant you, and surely a missed opportunity to call it “RoboCrop”.

The AgXeed tractor is a remotely controlled robot tractor that ploughs a pre-programmed route. It is smaller than a conventional tractor and does not look recognisably like one, but there are multiple benefits to using such technology. Being remotely piloted, the tractor does not require a driver or, therefore, a cockpit, which makes it significantly lighter. The benefit of that is a smaller footprint and therefore reduced soil compaction, which in turn improves drainage and reduces flooding. A further benefit is how the tractor can be used day or night without the need for a human operator. At busy times of the year, it allows work to continue when resources are stretched. Many of our generational farmers increasingly see older family members unable to work the hours they once did, and automation within the industry can benefit those small family farms by reducing the need for reliance on additional farm workers, given the struggle to guarantee that resource.

RoboCrop is a clever and impressive piece of farm machinery, and though not commonly seen at present, it is now used in my constituency. That is just one example of forward-thinking sustainable technology that is making a difference for farmers like Will. We need the Government to take action to ensure that British farms can utilise groundbreaking technology like that to secure the future of British farms.

I want to see our farms, food security and rural way of life protected. I want to see the future of farming being able to display the innovation that has led the world in sustainable practices. For farms to succeed, we need farmers. Collectively, we must support and protect our vital farming sector.

3 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I declare an interest as the wife of a farmer and agricultural contractor. Farming is a difficult job—unbelievably long hours and physically hard work in all weathers every day of the year—but it is a true vocation and labour of love that farmers do to provide us with food eat and food security.

Lincolnshire farmers are particularly important for food security, providing 12% of the UK’s food, 30% of its veg, 18% of its poultry and 11% of its wheat. Jobs in the food chain make up 24% of jobs in the Greater Lincolnshire area, and farmers locally care for 13,500 acres of farmed woodland and 2,500 miles of public rights of way, but all that is under threat. Food production is less profitable and, in some cases, it is not profitable at all thanks to this Labour Government.

John Lamont: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Throughout the debate, I have struggled to understand the point put forward by Labour Members that while they rightly acknowledge that farming is not profitable, they support a policy that will take even more cash away from farming businesses. Does she, like me, find those two policies hard to reconcile?

Dr Johnson: I find them extremely difficult to reconcile. In early October, I went to the “Farmers Weekly” awards in London where the Minister, in his red bowtie, gave a speech in which he said that the Government would have the farmers’ backs. I am sure he believed it was true when he said it, but within a month, he was unfortunately proven wrong with this Government’s Budget.

Many Members have talked about the profitability of farming. How will the family farm tax make farms more profitable? How will the family business tax, the drastic drops in delinked payments, the rise in the minimum wage, rising national insurance contributions, or the tax on double cab pick-ups make farms more profitable? They will not. How will closing the SPI payment scheme early and without notice, despite having promised to give notice, make farms more profitable and businesses more secure? It will not. The Government now talk about taking land without proper due consideration. That has led many farmers in my constituency to ask, “Why does this Labour Government hate farmers so much?” Why do they want to hurt our farmers so much?

Noah Law: What does the hon. Member think that the largest farming budget in recent years will do if not make farming more profitable?

Dr Johnson: I do not support the hon. Gentleman’s figures or think the Government will make farming more profitable. It is the classic socialist trick of saying, “We’ll give you some money here, and we’ll take some money there.” We have seen it with hospices and the NHS, and we see it with farming as well. They are taking money away in taxes left, right and centre, then giving a few pence over there and saying, “Be grateful, why don’t you?” I am afraid that it does not wash with farmers. Farmers are clever people, and they can see straight through it.

The effects of the Government’s policy will be reduced food security, the collapse of small businesses and the purchase of that land by larger corporations, and an increase in food prices for consumers rich and poor across the country. This is a debate on the future of farming. Many farmers in my constituency feel that, thanks to this Labour Government, they have no future in farming.

3.4 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): We believe in a future in which farming thrives—one based on stability, growth and sustainability. Sadly, Labour’s policies jeopardise all three. Whether it is the disastrous last-minute overnight closure of the sustainable farming incentive, the relentless family death tax assault on family farms, or the negligence towards rural businesses, Labour’s agenda harms the heart of rural Britain, including my Kingswinford and South Staffordshire constituency.

Labour’s short-sightedness in deciding to stop accepting new applications for the sustainable farming incentive—with just half an hour’s notice given to the NFU despite the

promise of six weeks’ notice—is a clear sign of its failure to understand the long-term needs of our farmers. While thousands of farmers were looking to the SFI for support, Labour has chosen short-term political convenience over long-term sustainability. Our farmers deserve consistency and trust in the future, not abrupt cuts to vital programmes. We will continue to back farmers.

Labour’s inheritance tax policies are a direct attack on the heart of family farms. The planned cuts to agricultural property relief and business property relief will make it impossible for farmers to pass on their livelihoods and their businesses—the farms that they have been farming for generations—to their children without facing huge tax burdens. According to the NFU, someone who inherits an average cereal farm from their parents faces 10 inheritance tax payments, with each one representing 1.5 times what they can expect to make in annual profits. They are running at a loss to fund the Government. That is serfdom, not farming.

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend is making a great and impassioned speech. The Government are saying that one can avoid the tax, but one does not know who is going to die and when. In fact, the generations do not necessarily always occur 10 years apart, which could compound the tax even further, could it not?

Mike Wood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Clearly, the people who are best placed to avoid paying the tax are the very people who ought to be paying and contributing: the mega landowners. For the average cereal farmer, however, who could face inheritance tax bills of 1.5 times the value of their annual profits, the only recourse will be to sell land or machinery. That is so blatantly obvious that the fact that the Government do not see it makes it difficult to assume that the policy is down to incompetence rather than a deliberate strategy to dismantle family farms, particularly when combined with the compulsory purchase plans set out by the Deputy Prime Minister this week.

Labour’s policies threaten the future of farming, rural businesses and the communities that rely on them. The sustainable farming incentive, inheritance tax reliefs, biosecurity, and the damage caused to our high streets by Labour’s Budget—in each of those areas, Labour’s mismanagement is letting down farmers, their families and our rural communities. Rural Britain can thrive when farmers are supported, businesses are protected and communities grow stronger. We will continue to fight for that future, and I call on the Government to change course before it is too late for our rural way of life. We will continue to fight for our farming communities, including mine in Kingswinford and South Staffordshire.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for leading it. I am always so proud to stand up in this place and represent farmers in Strangford and across Northern Ireland, who are nothing but dedicated to their trade. I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union.

Farming is massively important in Northern Ireland, where it contributes £2.5 billion annually to the economy. Furthermore, we are pivotal to the agricultural output

of the United Kingdom, accounting for growth of 5.6%, which is more than any other nation that contributes to this great United Kingdom. Northern Ireland exports large amounts of beef, dairy and poultry to GB, the Republic of Ireland and further afield. Lakeland Dairies in my Strangford constituency sends its milk products all over the world. That creates a sense of just how important our farmers are.

To state the obvious, it is no secret that I, my party colleagues and other Members across the House were shocked and saddened by the Chancellor's decision in November to introduce inheritance tax for family-run farms. The fact is that 65% of farmers cannot and will not survive this. Living on a farm and having great relationships with my neighbours—every one of them spoke to me before this debate—and local farmers in my constituency, I know all too well the impact this will have.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is in fact my neighbour, for giving way. He talks about the number of farms that will be affected by this. It is far higher than the Treasury tells us. We know that the Scotland Office is compiling its own figures, to push back against the Treasury figures, which will no doubt be trotted out here again today. Is there not a fundamental problem here, as the vast majority of farms will be affected by this?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and he sums up our views.

The decision to introduce the farmers' inheritance tax will destroy the very essence of what so many farmers have worked hard to achieve. I have called on numerous occasions for the Minister to support us. He is an honourable man. He could be a friend of the farmers—we will see just how much of a friend he is—if he contacted the Chancellor and suggested to her that one solution is to increase the threshold from £1 million to £5 million. If that is done, farms will be saved, as will the future of family farms in Northern Ireland. Does he want to be the farmers' friend?

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (**Daniel Zeichner**): I am the farmers' friend.

Jim Shannon: When the Minister approaches the Chancellor and persuades her to increase the threshold from £1 million to £5 million, he will be my friend forever, and he will be the friend of all the farmers in my constituency. He needs to do that. The National Farmers Union and the Ulster Farmers' Union have the solution.

If I can digress slightly, Northern Ireland has one of the highest tuberculosis rates in Europe, with over 10% of our herds affected annually. What discussions has the Minister had with the farming Minister in Northern Ireland, Andrew Muir, in relation to TB and avian flu, to ensure that we can overcome these setbacks together?

Our food security and farming industry matter. It is the young farmers who we are fighting for—I am fighting for my neighbours' sons who want to have a farm for the future. There are so many expectations on farmers. I am pleased to see that there has been a boost in the conversations surrounding the declining mental health of our farmers, which is another massive issue. There is no doubt that our farmers need to be supported, not torn down by a Government who are meant to represent them.

To conclude, I am proud of our farming industry and grateful for it, and I want it to succeed. For those who represent rural constituencies or those who do not, the importance of agriculture cannot be disregarded, and we must make it a goal to preserve, protect and progress the success of farming across Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. We need the Minister to stand up for farming; we all look to him to do that. Go to the Chancellor, tell her what we need—to increase the threshold from £1 million to £5 million—and things will be better.

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

3.12 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on opening the debate and on the thoughtful and knowledgeable speech he made. I also compliment Members on both sides of the Chamber for what they have said.

I was brought up on a farm. I was the wee boy who shooed the cows home to the faraway field. I represent the biggest constituency in the UK. I have an awful lot of farms and crofts in my constituency. Farming is part of our way of life. It is about the food we eat. It is about the fight against climate change. It is about our heritage and, in constituencies such as mine, it is about the tourism economy. The change of Government has been difficult before. Brexit did not help—we all know that argument—and botched trade deals have not helped either.

Much has been said about the taxation, and I will not repeat it, but I will remark on one thing that has been said, which is that land prices in the Six Counties of Northern Ireland are much higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom, so the effect of the taxation will be rather larger there.

To compound this, cuts to DEFRA's day-to-day spending mean that many family farms and rural businesses will struggle. That is why my party is saying that we should raise the farming budget by £1 billion. If we can do that, perhaps we can help. We want to see a renegotiation of trade agreements to protect British farmers and a strengthening of the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): First, I should declare that my partner is a conservation farmer in Somerset.

Having been Parliamentary Private Secretary to Vince Cable, the then Business Secretary who set up the Groceries Code Adjudicator, I recall his frustrations that the then Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer refused to grant the adjudicator the power she needed. Does my hon. Friend agree that the adjudicator will never be able to exercise meaningful control over the big supermarkets, which fund its operations through a levy, if the cost of a single investigation is greater than its annual budget? May I ask the Minister through my hon. Friend to remedy this decade-old wrong?

Jamie Stone: My hon. Friend brings knowledge from the past, which is very valuable to the debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland is also a champion of this cause, and what he says strikes a chord among farmers in my constituency. Getting a fair

[*Jamie Stone*]

deal is fundamental to making farms viable for the long term. It is not that we want to do everything, but I hope that the Government will engage constructively with my right hon. Friend on this. It is too important to let this one go, and it could be an easy win for the Government and for all of us.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, but does he agree as a fellow Scottish MP that our farmers are facing a double whammy? Not only do we have to deal with the vindictive family farm tax being imposed by the Government opposite, but we face the hostile environment that the Scottish National party Government are creating towards our farming communities in Scotland.

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, and what a pity it is that our SNP colleagues are not with us at this point, because we both might have something to say about that. There has been a lack of knowledge north of the border—or a lack of understanding, I believe—of things that are fundamental to the way of life in the constituencies we represent at the different ends of Scotland.

Time is short, but I want to conclude by mentioning three things that are causing my constituents some anxiety. In particular, I spoke with farmers this week and there has been recent publicity about what is known as lab-grown meat, produced from cells in a laboratory environment. It is thought that this could be upon us within two years. Yes, it is a way of producing food, but what does that mean for our livestock farmers? That needs to be looked at very carefully indeed.

The second thing I am duty-bound to mention is the low price of malting barley. This is the highest-quality barley and is used to make whisky. It is low priced because not so much is being bought by the whisky distillers, a reflection of the fact that they are not selling so many bottles of whisky.

Mr Carmichael: I am doing my best.

Jamie Stone: My right hon. Friend is indeed doing his bit and never ceases to do so, but this again goes back to an earlier point: that farming is intermingled throughout the entire economy. If we can have measures from the Government to increase whisky sales and to encourage exports, such as getting good-quality Scotch whisky into the Indian market, that will in the long term benefit the growers of malting barley, which will make farms more viable again. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) is not with us, because, in all fairness, he did make that point.

The hon. Gentleman also made a point about seed potatoes. I welcomed the Windsor framework at the time and was thanked by the then Prime Minister for doing so. It meant we could get our seed potatoes into Northern Ireland, but I know from talking to seed potato farmers that there are markets in Europe crying out to get hold of high-quality Scottish seed potatoes. They are the best, because they are some of the safest from virus, eelworm or whatever. I will be extremely grateful to the Government if they use every measure at their disposal to try to improve sales.

Finally, I want to make rather a strange point. A number of farmers have told me that people who have worked on the farm, sometimes for decades, are now moving on to other jobs. People who drove tractors or used implements to cultivate fields are sometimes taking the option of going off to drive a digger for a builder, and a labour shortage is beginning to occur on some of our farms. That should be a worry not just for way farms are run presently but for finding new entrants into farming.

I again commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland for his speech and for bringing this debate before us. Farming is absolutely fundamental to the country and the way we feed ourselves, and in a world that, as we have seen, is quite dangerous to say the least, the more we feed ourselves and the less we rely on imports, the better.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

3.19 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. I thank him for bringing his expertise as Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee to the discussion. May I welcome, although I am not supposed to, the farmers in the Public Gallery who have been known making their views, not all of them terribly happy, about various contributions during the debate, and the tractors outside? We cannot hear the tractors in the Chamber, but they have been tooting as loudly as they possibly can. I am not sure the tooting is to welcome the SFI scandal that emerged on Tuesday, but no doubt the farming Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), will be able to help us with that.

This debate should have been filled with positivity and confidence about the future of British farming. Instead, it has been overshadowed by this Labour Government's farming fiasco. In just a few short months, this city-dwelling Government have destroyed families' ambitions for the future, put at risk generations of expertise and custodianship and, less than 48 hours ago, ripped the rug out from underneath businesses immediately. This Government have treated farmers and the countryside with unashamed contempt, and that contempt has consequences.

The NFU announced this week that farm business confidence has reached historically low levels, and that was before the SFI scandal on Tuesday night. New tractor registrations are at the lowest level since 1998. When I visited the Lincolnshire Agricultural Machinery Manufacturers Association in January—the farming Minister apparently could not make it—manufacturers were telling me how people are not investing in new machinery as a direct result of the Budget. I am afraid RoboCrop will have to wait for the next Conservative Government.

Just as the Chancellor inherited the fastest-growing economy in the G7 and has ground it down into stagflation, so too the Secretary of State inherited a growing farming sector that had gone through massive change since Brexit, but was seizing the new farming and environmental

opportunities available. After a few months of this city-centric Government, farming families are feeling “ignored, alienated and disrespected”, to use the Secretary of State’s own words. But where is the Secretary of State? I have been hunting high and low for him, but nowhere is he to be found. He had a major announcement yesterday, but he sent his poor junior Minister out to take the flak because the Secretary of State is missing in action.

Where are rural Labour MPs? [HON. MEMBERS: “Here!”] We have heard about a rebel force—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: Oh, I would not do that if I were you. We have heard about a rebel force of Labour MPs who are going to stand up to the Government on the family farm tax. This debate is their chance to show their support for their farmers, but where are they? A total of 10 Labour MPs have turned up and six have spoken—that is 1.4% of the parliamentary party.

The Labour Government’s farming fiasco policy can be summarised in three points: they will remove, without warning, farming and environmental schemes that help farms thrive and on which farms build their business cases; they will permit the state to seize farmland without consent or market value; and, if family farms manage to cling on despite that, Labour will tax farmers for dying.

Let us deal with the first point: the abrupt halting of the sustainable farming incentive and the massive cut to delinked payments. The Government sneaked the SFI decision out late on Tuesday night, before being dragged to the Dispatch Box by us yesterday. That is a chaotic and inept way for a Government to treat taxpayers, businesses and families. Yesterday, the Minister kept using the figure of £5 billion for farming over two years—2024-25 and 2025-26. Of course, the funding for the first year, 2024-25, was set by the previous Government, including the £300 million that was rolled over from the previous year. It is for Labour Ministers to set the budget for 2025-26 after the spending review. Will the Minister confirm that the DEFRA budget will not face substantial cuts in the spending review, given he has relied on that figure so much? If he cannot confirm that, then those figures are meaningless, as Ministers are counting money for 2025-26 that could be removed at a stroke by the Chancellor.

The decision on SFI has consequences, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) have made clear. David from Gloucestershire, a farmer, asks the Minister whether he should simply plough up his farm and turn his back on 25 years of farming with an environmental focus. He says:

“We are a small family farm...I won’t be able to afford environmental principles, everyone loses but the environment mostly.”

We have heard from hon. Members about how farmers have contacted them because they face a financial crisis as a result of this decision, yet the no-farming Minister told them that they should be celebrating—well, the tractors outside do not seem to be tooting in celebration at his announcement yesterday.

Let us move on to delinked payments, which were cut in the Budget. Tens of thousands of farmers who are not signed up to SFI in any of its iterations are still being subjected to a 76% cut in their delinked direct payments, leaving many in cash flow crisis, including tenant farmers. That was not mentioned at all by the hon. Members for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley), for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter), for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) or for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer).

An urgent issue facing the industry is the importance of biosecurity to the future of farming. The second case of foot and mouth disease in Europe is alarming, but we have heard nothing from the Government on that. Will the Minister confirm whether funding for Dover Port Health Authority has now been agreed, outline how he is preventing the rising trend of bushmeat being sold over social media platforms and explain why the Government continue to ignore our calls to increase funding for the redevelopment of Weybridge? I can reveal what the Secretary of State and the Farming Minister have been prioritising this week. They have issued a consultation not on SFI, the family farm tax or cuts to delinked payments, but on how to carry a chicken. I am sure everybody thinks that really is the national priority for farming at the moment.

Let us turn to the Government’s plans to undercut property rights and force farmers to sell their land at below market value. This is a policy that goes against the fundamental British principle of land ownership and puts food security and prices at risk—my hon. Friends set out the case on that.

We then move on to the points made about the family farm tax, which the hon. Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) criticised as being a distraction. The hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal seemed to be arguing for more taxes on farmers, but at least those Labour Members mentioned the family farm tax. The hon. Members for Shrewsbury, for South West Norfolk, for Cannock Chase, for St Austell and Newquay and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland did not see fit to mention it, because they are ignoring the facts of life on this.

As Conservative Members know, this policy is having a genuine emotional and economic toll on farmers throughout the United Kingdom. One farmer told me:

“I’ve stopped encouraging my daughter to spend time on the farm so I don’t have to have the conversation of why she can’t take over in the future.”

This Government are robbing the next generation of farmers of their future, and this is also having a devastating impact on elderly farmers. It was shared in the Senedd this week that a farmer declined cancer treatment months before his death as he wanted to make sure that he died before these changes came into effect. That is desperately harrowing, yet we are being told this week in, week out by farming organisations, all because the Chancellor—who, by the way, refuses to meet farmers—is destroying British farming with her taxation policy. This is not just about the family farm tax: it is about the family business tax, the national insurance hike, the fertiliser tax and the double cab pick-up tax, which were all set out by the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham. You name it, the Government will tax it. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford

[Victoria Atkins]

and North Hykeham said that farmers see no future in farming under this Government. In the words of one mid Devon farmer:

“At no time in all these years have I felt so deflated with the job.”

To the farmers despairing at this city-dwelling Government: please know that we Conservatives hear you, support you and will work with you to mend the outright assault on the countryside that this Labour Government are carrying out. Together, we will build a bright future for farming.

3.28 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and congratulate him on securing this very important debate on the future of farming. I will not say that I agreed with all his conclusions in his opening comments, although I listened to them closely, but I thank him and his fellow members of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for their continuing work. I look forward to meeting his Committee in time.

I am very grateful to have the opportunity to talk about the very important role that farming plays in this country, because food security is national security, and our commitment to farmers is absolutely steadfast. It is the hard work of the UK’s farmers that puts food on our tables and stewards our beautiful countryside.

As we all know, though, the sector is facing high costs and tight margins. Farmers have struggled to get enough workers to pick fruit and veg, and frankly, they have been sold out in past trade deals. Farmland is increasingly at risk from severe flooding and drought, and this all comes as we face the biggest transition for farming in generations, moving away from the basic payment scheme towards more sustainable methods of farming. The underlying problem in the sector is that farmers do not make enough money for the hard work and commitment that they put in. We are absolutely committed to making farming more profitable, and that approach will underpin our 25-year farming road map and our food strategy, through which we will work in partnership with farmers to make farming and food production sustainable and profitable.

That road map stands on three principles, the first of which is a sector that has food production at its core. The role of farming will always be to produce the food that feeds our nation. The instability that we have seen, both relating to Ukraine and during covid, shows that food security truly is national security. The second principle is a sector in which farm businesses are more resilient and able to withstand the shocks that disrupt farming from time to time, whether it be severe flooding, drought or disease. We will help farmers who want to diversify their income to put more money into their business, so that they can survive those more difficult times when they come.

Dr Johnson: Will the Minister give way?

Daniel Zeichner: I am going to make some progress, because I know that time is short. The third principle is a sector that recognises that restoring nature is not in competition with sustainable food production, but is essential to it.

On our first strand—food production—our new deal for farmers is supporting them to produce food sustainably and profitably, and we are making progress. Statistics released earlier this week show that average farm business incomes across the country are forecast to rise in the first year of this Government. That is welcome news, but we recognise that there is more to do. That certainly will not happen overnight, but over recent weeks, we have announced a series of new policies. We are extending the seasonal worker visas for five years, and we are making the supply chain fairer, an issue raised by my hon. Friends the Members for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) and for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter). In the next few weeks, we will see new regulations for the pig sector, making sure that contracts clearly set out expectations and only allow changes if they are agreed by all parties. Of course, we are also introducing a new regulator alongside the Groceries Code Adjudicator, building on the work of the existing regulator—the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator, which is already in place.

We are using the Government’s own purchasing power to back British produce, working with the Cabinet Office to create new requirements for Government catering contracts to favour high-quality, high-welfare products that British producers are well placed to provide, as was outlined very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley). That will mean that British farmers and producers can compete for a fairer share of the £5 billion a year that the public sector spends on food, with that money going straight into farmers’ bank accounts to boost turnover and profits. We will never lower our food standards in trade agreements, but will promote robust standards nationally and internationally, and will always consider whether overseas produce has an unfair advantage. That point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) and by others.

We are investing in the UK agri-technology sector, and I listened closely to the comments made by the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman)—there is always much that we agree on. As we announced last month, we are looking to put in a further £110 million in farming grants, and we are also strengthening the wider British tech sector, a point that was made well by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer). These reforms will support farmers to make more money from the food they produce.

On the second strand, diversification, farmers must be resilient against future challenges if they are to remain financially viable and strengthen food security. We know the threat from flooding, drought and animal disease, as well as the geopolitical tensions that increase demands on our land for energy generation. We are investing to help farm businesses build resilience against animal diseases that can devastate livelihoods and threaten our entire economy—we are all mindful of the issues with bluetongue and avian flu. On the recent case of foot and mouth that we saw in Germany and the one in Hungary, I spoke to the Hungarian Minister earlier this week, and we have put in place all the appropriate precautions. As ever, though, if the shadow Secretary of State wants a briefing with the chief vet, that is always available in these cases.

We are investing over £200 million to set up a new national biosecurity centre, modernising the Animal and Plant Health Agency facilities in Weybridge, which

will be vital for protecting farmers, food producers and exporters from disease outbreaks that we know can be devastating to businesses. We are helping keepers of cattle, sheep and pigs in England to improve the health, welfare and productivity of their animals by expanding the fully funded farm visits offer. We have also announced new ways to help farmers to remain profitable and viable, even in a challenging harvest.

We will consult on national planning reforms this spring to make it quicker for farmers to build new buildings, barns and other infrastructure to boost food production, and we will ensure that permitted development rights work for farms to convert larger barns into whatever is required or suits their business planning, whether that is a farm shop, a holiday let or a sports facility. We are working with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero so that more farm businesses can connect their own electricity generation to the grid more quickly, so that farmers can sell surplus energy and diversify income.

The third element is nature. Restoring nature is vital to food production; it is not in competition with it. Healthy soils, abundant pollinators and clean water are the foundations that farm businesses rely on to produce high crop yields and turn a profit. Without nature thriving, there can be no long-term food security. That point was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy). We now have more than half of all farmers in environmental schemes. That includes 37,000 live SFI agreements, meaning that 800,000 hectares of arable land is being farmed without insecticides, 300,000 hectares of low-impact grassland is managed sustainably and 75,000 km of hedgerows are being protected and restored. That is important for nature.

We have already had a discussion about the SFI cap. It is set at £1.05 billion for 2024-25 and 2025-26. As we discussed yesterday, that cap was reached this week with a record number of farmers in the scheme and 37,000 live agreements. Every penny is now paid to farmers or committed for payment through existing agreements or submitted applications. We will continue to support farmers to transition to more sustainable farming models, and we will announce details of the revised scheme after the spending review.

Victoria Atkins: The clarification that everybody wants is this: we saw the figures last night, and they cut across two years, so what is the money for this financial year—2024-25—that the Minister describes as a cap? What is the value that he reached on Tuesday night that led to that announcement?

Daniel Zeichner: We have been far more transparent in disclosing how the budgets work than the previous Government. The figure was disclosed last night, and the shadow Secretary of State can look closely at that. As she will know, we have to monitor things closely over

multiple years. What we cannot and will not do is play fast and loose with the nation's finances. We are taking no lessons from the Conservatives about how to manage public money in this country. This is about using public money in a way that supports food production, restores nature and respects farmers for the effective business people that they are, while ensuring that we stick to our budgets.

We are also improving other farming schemes. The Government have announced an increase in higher level stewardship payment rates across a range of options for this year. We will reopen the ELM capital grant scheme and open the rolling application window for the countryside stewardship higher tier later this year. We are continuing with the important landscape recovery projects that were awarded funding in rounds 1 and 2, as well as some of the other funds referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury).

It is those three strands that will create a resilient, profitable sector for decades to come. I look forward to continuing this important discussion with Members from all parts of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Alistair Carmichael to quickly wind up.

3.38 pm

Mr Carmichael: Since I opened this debate, Douglas Paterson, a seventh-generation farmer in my constituency, has sent me a copy of a letter addressed to his great-grandfather from 10 Downing Street, dated 5 March 1917. It states:

“Dear Sir,

We have now reached a crisis in the war when to ensure victory, the heroism of our armies at the Front must be backed by the self-sacrifice and tireless labour of everyone at home. To this end the production of each quarter of wheat and oats, and of each bushel of potatoes is of vital importance.”

The letter finishes by saying that

“the Government is confident that Farmers will at once step forward and do all in their power to utilise their services to the best advantage.

The farmers of this country can defeat the German submarine and when they do so they destroy the last hope of the Prussian.” It is signed “D. Lloyd George”.

The fact that we can stand in this Chamber today and debate this matter is a testament to the fact that Charles Paterson and his generation did step forward, and it is why we have a solemn and historic duty to ensure that his great-grandson can continue to do the same. I can think of no better definition of what is meant by “national interest”.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of farming.

Mental Health Support: Educational Settings

3.40 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered mental health support in educational settings.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and the MPs from across the House who supported its application. I also thank Emily Horsfall, my team and the staff at the Mental Health Foundation for their support in preparing for today's debate.

There should be no doubt that good mental health and wellbeing are as critical to the progression of our young people as physical health is. Protecting mental health at an early age can have a defining impact on lifelong resilience and ensure positive mental health outcomes. At a time when young people up and down the country—especially girls and young women—face a barrage of challenges from what feels like a never-ending conveyor belt of demeaning and misogynistic content on social media, the consequences of the covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis, this is a timely debate, and I thank hon. Members who have stayed in the Chamber to contribute to it.

Much of what I will say today reflects my conversations with young people, parents, teachers and professionals in my constituency of Redditch and the villages. When they approach me on a visit, when I am food shopping in Tesco or at one of my surgeries, they display courage and determination to build a system that is fit for purpose and which will ensure that all children get the support they need to have the most fulfilling lives possible. I hope this debate can be about how we can support our schools and education professionals, who are not trained mental health professionals but are so often on the frontline, to ensure that our children get the best support they can at the most appropriate time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this issue. I was just looking at some of the stats for Northern Ireland in order to support his argument. In 2023, pupils with disabilities reported lower levels of general wellbeing across all measures than those who are not disabled. Does he agree that access to pastoral care teams, who are equipped and trained to help those with declining mental health due to disabilities, would be one way of addressing this very issue?

Chris Bloore: I think that is the first time the hon. Gentleman has intervened on me, so I feel very honoured. I absolutely agree with him, and I will talk about other affected groups later in my remarks. I thank him for his intervention.

I hope this debate can be about how we support our schools and education professionals, but I also hope that the discussion raises awareness about the challenges facing young people. I know that some people like to hand-wave away any discussion about mental health problems among children and young people. Since the announcement of this debate, I have read previous debates elsewhere, and a few people have whispered in my ear that they do not believe that children are resilient enough these days. Well, I simply do not buy that

argument. I know it makes some uncomfortable when young people talk about their mental health challenges, but it can only be positive that awareness and the mainstreaming of mental health conditions have given so many across society the confidence to have honest conversations about how they are feeling and the impact that others' actions can have on their mental health.

What do the statistics tell us about the state of our young people's mental health? NHS statistics show us that about one in five children and young people aged eight to 25 had a probable mental disorder in 2023, and that the number of urgent referrals of children and young people to emergency mental health services has tripled since 2019. The uncomfortable truth is that waiting lists for children and adolescent mental health services can be a postcode lottery. For instance, in November last year, the average waiting time for a child to receive a referral for a first appointment in Hereford and Worcestershire was seven weeks, compared with the national average of five weeks. From freedom of information requests, we know that one child waited almost two years for an appointment. Referrals at the Hereford and Worcestershire health and care NHS trust have increased by 118% in the last five years—a trend that is reflected across the country.

Anna Dixon (ShIPLEY) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this Backbench Business debate. That statistic of one in five young people having a mental health condition must concern us all. I hear from my own constituents in Shipley that they are waiting a long time to get their children seen on the NHS—whether for an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessment or to get medication—and during that time the children are unable to participate in school. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that children and young people get access to mental health support and that we get waiting times down so that they can participate properly in school?

Chris Bloore: I absolutely agree. This is about parity between mental and physical health. We would move heaven and earth if those children had physical injuries, and we must do more to assess and treat the mental health conditions from which young people are suffering.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a valid point about the need for parity between mental health and physical health. Does he agree that there is actually a connection between the two? Quite often, poor physical health can impact the mental health of a young person, and vice versa.

Chris Bloore: I agree entirely. Many of the young people I have spoken to have suffered from long-term physical conditions or illnesses that have had a detrimental impact on their mental health.

There is evidence that the severity of mental distress has increased. Admissions to acute medical wards for children and young people with mental health concerns increased by 65% between 2012 and 2022. The mental health report by the Association of Colleges, published in September, found that 90% of respondents reported an increase in disclosure of mental health issues in 16 to 18-year-olds and 86% did so for those over 19. Most colleges are increasing their mental health resources, but the need for joined-up and well-resourced services is urgent. The report found that almost a third of colleges

reported at least one death by suicide in the previous year. It is distressing to consider that such an escalation can and does happen, and that is why this debate is so important.

Despite the expansion of children and young people's mental health services, increased demand means that the NHS estimates that less than half of those with such needs are being supported. The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition found that certain groups have an increased likelihood of being impacted by mental health challenges, such as children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, those from racialised and LGBTQ+ backgrounds, neuro-divergent young people, those with physical or long-term conditions, young carers, children in care, and refugee and migrant children.

Children in kinship care arrangements also have a high prevalence of social, emotional and mental health needs similar to those of looked-after children, but owing to their lesser entitlements and a lack of access to suitable support, their experience and needs should be considered when designing vital mental health support in education settings. The complexity of the issues that may impact on a child's mental health is the reason why mental health charities have been campaigning for a cross-Government mental health approach for such a long time, and I hope this Government will deliver on that.

Why are education establishments so crucial to this debate? The Centre for Mental Health has published research showing that 75% of lifetime mental health difficulties occur before the age of 24 and that 50% occur before the age of 14. That is why education settings are critical in addressing this national crisis. Of course, schools and colleges are seen as places where children learn academic skills, but they are also safe places for some to seek support.

Currently, mental health provision in education settings in England is varied. Mental health support teams can be found in almost 50% of schools, and they have proved highly effective. Research published by Barnardo's has demonstrated that for each £1 invested, the Government have saved £1.90. The education and health officials I have spoken to said that we must reach England-wide coverage of MHSTs as soon as possible. If this was done in combination with the Government's promise to deliver a school counsellor in every school, that would be a powerful indicator of their commitment to tackling the crisis.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way on this hugely important subject. As I am sure is the case for other Members across the House, I find that children's mental health is one of the subjects that comes up most frequently on the doorstep, with parents really struggling to get the mental health care that their children need. One of the questions that is asked most frequently is: how can we afford to increase mental health care? Does he agree with me that it is actually more cost-effective to provide timely mental health support than to end up treating people when they have been sicker for longer?

Chris Bloore: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I would argue that we cannot afford not to engage in early prevention and early intervention. It does save the Government money further down the line.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that suicide is the main cause of death for young people under the age of 35 in the UK. For those under 18, school is where they spend the majority of their life, and somewhere we have an opportunity to make change. Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the 3 Dads Walking, who have played a significant role in ensuring that this issue stays on the agenda and in tackling the assumption that talking about suicide makes it more likely to happen?

Chris Bloore: I thank my hon. Friend for that important contribution to this debate and I pay tribute to the group she mentioned. It is such a critical issue to the future of our young people. I congratulate anyone who comes into this space and makes a positive difference to the outcomes.

Despite the best efforts of many teachers, education settings are yet to have much of that dedicated support. The experience of some young people and their families shows that the support on offer in some schools is not sufficient. The Mental Health Foundation works with whole families to support them in developing their mental health together. Ahead of this debate, it asked two of the participants in one of its programmes in London, Bemmi and her daughter Ayo, to share their own experiences. Bemmi said that the Government "say are going to invest in children's mental health, but this isn't happening. There is a lot of pressure on children" these days. She said that

"it is having a toll on children's mental health, and as a parent, I am also feeling this strain of seeing the constant breakdowns" and the failure to access support. Her 13-year-old daughter Ayo suggested that schools needed to be much more proactive in asking about children's mental health:

"Nobody is asking how we feel and never attempting to get to the root cause of things; they only pick up on when you are behaving irrationally but never try to figure out why you feel this way."

School staff are often the first point of contact when a pupil struggles with their mental health, so they need to feel confident to support their pupils and be able to spot the signs of difficulties. Education Support, a charity supporting the mental health and wellbeing of teaching and education staff, found that 74% of staff often help pupils with personal matters beyond their academic work. Educators are filling in where there are gaps, further highlighting the need for joined-up and embedded services.

Anna Dixon: I totally agree with my hon. Friend that schools and teachers are at the forefront of the mental health crisis facing our children. I recently visited a local primary school, Burley and Woodhead Church of England primary, and I pay tribute to the staff there for the excellent work they do to support the young people with their mental health and to make it much easier for them to talk about it. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that schools have adequate resources to provide such support?

Chris Bloore: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention; I absolutely agree. It is not just young people who are struggling. The additional workload of carrying out wellbeing checks, sometimes in distressing situations, is taking its toll on staff: 78% of all staff are stressed in

[Chris Bloore]

education settings, rising to 84% among senior leaders. No one can do their best at work if they are mentally depleted, and healthy teachers can better provide high-quality support for their pupils.

What else can we do? We cannot ignore the other factors that have a significant impact on a young person's wellbeing, which is why we need a whole-of-Government approach. Children and young people might be experiencing poor-quality housing and overcrowding, family members in low-paid and insecure work, or the inability to get a GP or NHS dentist appointment when they need it—all challenges that I am glad this Government are taking action to remedy.

But we can go further. "A Mentally Healthier Nation", a report unanimously endorsed by mental health charities, calls for the roll-out of anti-bullying programmes across the country. Crucially, the evidence shows that these programmes work best when delivered in a "whole school" way. That is, rather than taking a narrow approach based on discipline, the student and staff body understands what constitutes bullying and its impacts, stands against it and has tactics to prevent it. These programmes have been tested and shown to be effective. They create healthier school environments, prevent mental health problems in the future and lead to economic gains. The costs of picking up the pieces of childhood bullying in later life are enormous, as are the losses to the labour market it can cause, as well as the toll of bullying in the here and now.

Young people can text Shout, a crisis line, for help when they are being bullied. Those who run the service report texters struggling with suicidal thoughts, urges to self-harm, insomnia and feelings of depression and anxiety. Some referred to the anger, shame, fear, confusion, vulnerability, hopelessness and frustration that resulted from being bullied. Others spoke about their lack of focus and poor performance at school as a result of their bullying.

We also need to look at innovative ways that have been developed to address the threats our young people are experiencing. In a world where so-called influencers like Andrew Tate can get their claws into our young men's minds, we need to look to at work such as the Mental Health Foundation's "Becoming a Man" programme. Currently operating in Lambeth and Islington, it works with young men aged 12 to 16 who face disadvantage and inequality that put them at greater risk of developing mental health problems. It creates a safe space for young men to come together and discuss issues about their lives, taking into account their lived experiences and the often difficult environments they navigate. It helps them to develop strengths such as integrity, self-determination, positive anger expression and respect for women. Early evaluations of this work are promising, and Government support is needed to grow the evidence base.

Schools have a vital role in understanding young people's online experiences and how they might impact their mental health. The Girlguiding girls' attitudes survey found that one in eight young people aged 13 to 18 had seen sexual threats directed at women and girls online, including those of rape. One in eight girls said that they had received sexual threats online from strangers or someone they knew.

Over a year after the passing of the Online Safety Act 2023, suicide, eating disorder, race hate and incel forums remain easily accessible, and it is not clear if and when action might be taken against them. Given Ofcom's permissive approach, it is likely that school staff will need to understand what sorts of communities pupils are involved in and the impact they are having on them. At a time when 36% of boys say they have had Andrew Tate content shown to them by a friend in school, the onslaught against young girls' self-confidence, value and worth goes further than being content on a screen; it is putting them at risk.

How do we pull all this together? Preventive mental health initiatives, perhaps overwhelmed by the complexity of the challenge, are scattered and rarely appropriately funded, and they often do not learn from each other. Sometimes, we even use localism as an excuse to neither fund systems nor hold them accountable. We must create a public mental health infrastructure. The Mental Health Foundation describes it as having a clear road map, led by evidence, in which every part of the system knows its own responsibility for reducing mental health problems, and is funded and held accountable for its delivery. That means re-examining the public health grant, which despite a welcome uplift this year is still well below 2015 levels. It means ringfenced funding for schools and the NHS tied to specific outcomes. It also means the roll-out of England-wide mental health support teams and counsellors in each school.

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition responded to the NHS 10-year plan consultation, calling for the plan to financially support integrated care systems to deliver a comprehensive road map for mental health for 0 to 25-year-olds. The Association of Colleges found that more than 30% of colleges are not involved in their local suicide prevention plan, and 65% stated that they do not have a joint provision with their local NHS trust. It is clear that to keep children well and safe, our NHS services and their commissioning bodies must be fully integrated into mental health support in educational settings. Schools, colleges and universities should be included in local mental health strategies, and data should be shared freely.

I am excited by the Government's pledge to roll out Young Futures hubs, which aim to bring local services together, deliver support for teenagers at risk of being drawn into crime or facing mental health challenges, and, where appropriate, deliver universal youth provision. These initiatives could represent the start of such an infrastructure and an implementation plan for a national network of these hubs. The Royal College of Psychiatrists states that the hubs have the potential to support some of the most minoritised children who might not be able to access CAMHS or school-based services consistently. I am pleased to see that the NHS remains committed to expanding access to children and young people's mental health services, and that the operational planning guidance recognises that early intervention improves outcomes for children throughout their lives, reduces long-term pressures on health services, and benefits the economy and wider society.

I urge the Government to seize this moment and see if they can create a true network of mental health support across the country by getting anti-bullying programmes in place, following the evidence and committing to relentlessly drive down levels of poor mental health, and thereby build mentally healthy communities in our

schools and beyond. Prevention, early help and treatment can help young people to deliver positive outcomes. Yes, many of the measures I have referred to today and those already announced by the Government will require significant investment, but the cost of inaction and the knock-on impacts on education and children's social care would far outweigh any initial outlay. Now is the time for action.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I think eight Members are hoping to contribute. We will calibrate again. There will be a time limit of four minutes, because I want to make sure they all get in.

3.59 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for securing this debate and for talking about the importance of these programmes, and for mentioning anti-bullying programmes as well. I also thank the other hon. Members who have spoken about the wider mental health crisis and the extent to which teachers are picking up the pieces—these are all vital issues to talk about.

I am proud to say there has been some groundbreaking work on mental health support in educational settings in my constituency. A campaign led by young people and backed by Citizens UK secured funding for more counselling capacity in local schools, and is a genuine cause of city-wide pride. The £200,000 of investment from Brighton and Hove city council will support hundreds of young people with counselling across the city, including many in my constituency. I was very inspired by the work of the students pressing the councils for this support—notably Fi Abou-Chanad and Tally Wilcox, who put their case directly to the council—and spoke about them in my maiden speech. I am grateful to Brighton and Hove city council, which backed up its words with funds to support this vital work, and I am pleased that, following the pilot, it will now fund 2025-56 as well.

The key request now from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and Citizens UK is for Government-funded school counselling provision delivered by specialist children and young people counsellors and psychotherapists on a statutory basis. I welcome the pledges from the Government to introduce a mental health professional accessible in every school, and I hope we will see real investment in a national school counselling programme promised by Ministers today.

To conclude, I once again thank the hon. Member for Redditch for securing this debate, and once again pay tribute to the courage and campaigning of the young people who I know are out there all around the country, in all our constituencies, demanding support. Nothing could be of more value or more importance than investing in the thriving of the mental health of our young people, and particularly in schools.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Thank you so much for keeping well within the time limit. I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

4.1 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) on securing this important debate and on his excellent speech.

The starting point for thinking about mental health services in educational settings must be an understanding of the foundational nature of good mental health and wellbeing in everything we seek to do in life. Challenges with mental health are corrosive in every aspect of our lives. Depression or anxiety can ruin the happiest of celebrations on the sunniest of days, prevent us from focusing on essential tasks, affect our relationships with friends, family members and colleagues and leave people feeling unable even to get out of bed in the morning. That is true for all of us as adults, and it is equally true for children and young people.

Good mental health and wellbeing is essential for accessing and getting the most out of education, yet our children and young people are suffering an epidemic of poor mental health and wellbeing, and it is holding them back. On visits to schools in our constituencies, I am sure all Members will have heard headteachers, senior leaders and teachers in our classrooms talking about the challenges the young people in their classes face with their mental health. That is borne out by the data, too. In 2023, one in five children aged eight to 16 had a probable mental health disorder such as depression or anxiety, while the rates of probable mental health disorder among young people aged 17 to 19 have increased over just five years from a tenth in 2017 to more than a quarter by 2022. In this context, I welcome the Government's commitment to place a mental health professional in every school across the country.

However, I wish to raise some additional points that will be relevant to the effectiveness of that roll-out. The first is clarity on the level of qualification that the mental health professional in every school will be required to have, which I hope the Minister can provide. The second is on their remit: in addition to delivering services to young people, will they be expected to drive a culture across the whole school that is conducive to good mental health and wellbeing? That, as we all know, will involve the buy-in of the most senior school leaders.

There are also other areas outside school that are relevant to children's mental health and wellbeing, including the crisis in our special educational needs and disability system, which is having a profound impact on children's mental health and wellbeing. My Committee heard this week from children who had been hospitalised and diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence not of their additional needs, but of being in schools that are unable to meet their needs. I know that the Minister is aware of the urgent need to reform our SEND system.

Mental health professionals in schools will also quickly be overwhelmed if we cannot get to grips with the crisis affecting our children and young people as a consequence of their addiction to smart phones and their access to social media, which we know is making them more anxious, less able to focus, more sleep deprived and more stressed out.

I welcome the measures that the Minister announced in response to the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), but I do believe that there is a need to go further with this urgent crisis, which is affecting the mental health and wellbeing of our children.

Finally, I wish to touch on the vital issue of CAMHS waiting times. We have GPs to prescribe antibiotics so that infections do not become sepsis, or blood pressure

[Helen Hayes]

medication to prevent a heart attack or stroke, but when an infection has become a critical illness, or a patient has suffered a heart attack or stroke, we would not think for one second that it was appropriate to send them back to their GP. Yet that is exactly what happens to far too many children and young people who are seriously mentally unwell.

It is an unacceptable situation and, as well as looking at mental health and wellbeing support in education settings, we also need to look at how our NHS can deliver much more quickly and effectively for children whose problems are much more serious than that.

4.5 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for securing this important debate.

It is time to acknowledge that special educational needs and mental health provision in schools is one of the great crises that we face today, although I do appreciate that there is a lot of competition for that particular accolade.

Financial pressures have significantly impacted CAMHS funding in my constituency of Horsham. Despite a modest 0.6% fee uplift for Sussex, the sector has faced a mandated 15% funding reduction—approximately £1.6 million—and that is coupled with rising staff costs due to higher national insurance contributions and an increase in the national living wage.

Meanwhile, demand just keeps on going up. Since September 2020, Sussex CAMHS has experienced a substantial rise in referrals, attributed to the pandemic and the easing of lockdown restrictions. This surge has adversely affected waiting times for initial assessments and treatment. The crisis is even sharper at the local education authority funding level. My local authority, West Sussex, has a dedicated schools grant deficit scheduled to go past £130 million by April. It is allowed to keep this off the balance sheet for another year, but there is only so long that we can maintain the fantasy that this service can be afforded without major central Government intervention.

Most of all, the pain is being felt at the school level, and by the children and families who experience the many failings and gaps in service. I have been contacted by no fewer than five schools in the past fortnight alone regarding this issue. Typical of their message is this from Holbrook primary school governing board:

“Schools, trusts and local authorities are overwhelmed by the rising number of pupils who are seeking additional support and the ever-increasing costs of providing assistance. Urgent action is required now to help solve the crisis in SEND, so the future of our children is not blighted by a system that is not fit for purpose.”

Having visited many schools recently, I noted that teachers are verging on desperation. I noted too their love for the children they are looking after. They desperately want to help them, but they are in an impossible situation. There is, I am afraid to say, an element of physical danger in some cases. This is not the children’s fault; this is our fault.

Horsham schools are asking for health services to take on more of the strain, because they are at breaking point. Although mental health provision in schools has clear benefits, we must ensure that this provision does

not fall on school budgets. Mental health support teams cover about 44% of schools in the UK, and come from NHS budgets, not school budgets. That should become 100% coverage.

The pressure on schools to cope with more and more SEN children, with little or no extra funding, is set to undo every gain we have made in educational standards over the past decades. I appreciate that the Government are taking at least some action to assist the situation now, but I urge them to use every lever at their disposal to avert this crisis before it spins entirely out of control.

4.9 pm

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) on securing this debate, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for it.

I know from experience that our mental health system is overstretched and under-resourced. In fact, there has never been so much demand for mental health support from children and young people. In June, the number of active CAMHS referrals in England was a record 840,000. It is clear that this Government inherited a crisis in children and young people’s mental health. We all want young people to be happy, healthy and safe, and to be equipped with everything that they need to achieve and thrive as adults. But with half of mental health issues developing by the time that young people reach the age of 14, and three quarters before the age of 24, early intervention in mental health support for children and young people is essential.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Last year, I met the parents of a young woman struggling with her mental health in my constituency. She was not in crisis, but she did need some additional support. Her school encouraged her parents to withdraw her because they could not provide the support, which her parents did because they did not know what else to do. That has left her out of education for over 18 months and severely in crisis. Does my hon. Friend agree that early intervention in schools is crucial for breaking down barriers?

Sojan Joseph: I agree, and I have many similar cases. I want to refer some real-life examples. There is an excellent exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall this week about the Mental Health Act, which has been put together by Mind. It features artwork and written pieces by people who have been detained under the current Act. I had the pleasure of meeting some of them on Monday, including a young lady called Afeefa. Afeefa is 19 but was first detained under the Act when she was 14. She spoke powerfully and movingly about the treatment that she endured while she was under section. When I asked her if there was one thing that could have helped her, she said without hesitation that if she had received mental health support at an earlier stage, her experience would have been very different.

I recall two examples from my experience of working in mental health system that demonstrate the difference that early intervention and support can make. They are of two young people of similar age: one is a teenage boy, who unfortunately has not been able to access the support he needs and, as a result, is struggling to cope. That is not only impacting on his mental health but is having a detrimental impact on his family, especially his parents.

By contrast, in the second case, the parents of a teenage girl who had been diagnosed with a mental health condition knew that I worked in mental health at the time and came to see me. I was able to ensure that she was referred to CAMHS at an early stage. As a result, both she and her parents are doing well. She is due to sit her A-levels in the summer. These examples underline how children who receive support quickly are less likely to develop long-term conditions that negatively affect their education, social development and health later in life.

I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education has been clear that children's wellbeing will be a priority for this Government. Research from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy indicates that children whose mental health difficulties are initially too complex for lower intensity interventions, but not complex enough to be referred to higher intensity interventions such as CAMHS, can easily miss out on the mental health support that they need. Ensuring enough mental health support for children and young people in educational settings will help to free up NHS time and resources, while making sure that we have a healthy and productive population in the future.

We should also make sure that support exists in the community. Can the Minister provide an update on the Government's plans for Young Futures hubs? Does he agree that open access drop-in hubs could be an important step in providing community-based mental health support for children and young people?

There is clear evidence that the places and circumstances in which people are born grow, study, live and work have a powerful influence on their mental health. As Place2Be has said, children and young people from low-income families are four times more likely to experience mental health problems than children from higher income families, while one in four children and young people with a diagnosed mental health condition live in a household that has experienced a reduction in household income. This is why I want reform of the way that we deal with mental health. From Westminster, I would like greater cross-Government working to address the social detriments of our mental health. At a local level, I believe that greater co-operation between schools, colleges and universities, along with local health providers and others in the local community, can help create education settings that are effective at protecting young people's mental health and general wellbeing. Taking that long-term approach will help create a society that prevents mental ill health for children and young people in the first place.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Due to the number of withdrawals, Members may have noticed that we have stopped the clocks timing speeches. There are two colleagues left, and I will allow you to police yourselves. Members on the Front Benches want to be up by 4.30 pm, so I will let you manage the time between yourselves.

4.15 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): I have just gone through my speech and scratched out quite a lot, but you will probably be pleased about that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for his efforts to secure this important debate. Being an MP is a difficult job to define. It is true that there are 650 ways to be an MP and we are all finding our way, but in choosing such a subject for his debate, my hon. Friend shows his humanity and the man that he is. I commend him for that.

With debates such as this one, we can do good in this place. We have a profound opportunity to profile issues we and our constituents care about and amplify the voices of those in our constituencies who might not otherwise get the attention they deserve. We can show them that they matter and restore their trust and faith bit by bit. I love this job because we get to do that. It is therefore an honour to speak in today's debate on a topic that is critical to the future of our young people.

Mental health in education settings is an issue that affects the entire country and one that demands urgent action. One in eight children and young people in the UK are living with a mental health condition, often left without the support, guidance and, critically, treatment they need to build resilience to thrive in our fast-changing world. For years, Governments failed our young people by not providing the certainty and the early interventions needed to support them mental wellness and the knowledge that when things go wrong, there is a safety net for them. The issue has only worsened since the pandemic, which amplified the strain on the mental health of young people, and too many students—we all see this across our families—are still not receiving the support they need. It is a crisis that we cannot afford to ignore. Too many young people are not in education, employment or training because they have been failed by a system so woefully unsupported during a time when anyone who has children or works with them knows that this is a crisis and has been for a long time.

Funding for mental health support teams represents a step forward in ensuring that young people receive the help they need, particularly at an early stage. However, we cannot overlook the fact that much more still needs to be done to ensure that children in towns such as Weston-super-Mare, Worle and beyond do not fall through the cracks any more. I welcome the Government's progress in a short time, yet the reality is that not all schools are currently able to access those services, and even when MHSTs are available, the support is often not enough. I know that everybody across the House is impatient for those much-needed improvements. As constituency MPs, we see the pain of the previous Government's failure on child mental health at surgery after surgery. We must ensure that the teams are expanded across the country, reaching every school and every student who needs help.

I pay tribute to all the teachers, support staff, volunteers and families across Weston, Worle and the villages for their crucial role in supporting the mental health of our young people. They are the ones who see students day in, day out, and the first ones to notice when something is wrong. Yet many teachers and teaching staff feel underprepared to deal with the mental health challenges in their classrooms. Staff should not feel that they are managing such challenges on their own, and it is vital that schools are supported not only with resource, but with ongoing professional development to help deal with the increasing prevalence of mental health challenges faced by their students.

[Dan Aldridge]

We must also recognise that the mental health of teaching staff is just as important. Teaching staff work under incredible pressure, and the emotional and psychological toll of supporting students, often with their own challenges, can be overwhelming. If we expect teaching staff to support the mental health of students, we must ensure that they receive appropriate support too. We cannot pour from an empty cup.

The evidence is clear. Investing in mental health support in schools not only helps students emotionally and physically, but boosts academic outcomes and overall school wellbeing. It cascades out to families and well beyond the school gates. We cannot and must not fail more children and families by not taking this issue seriously.

The young people of Weston-super-Mare, like those across the UK, are bursting with potential. But without the right support for their mental health to help them navigate the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities of our fast-changing society—that is important; we often talk down, not up, the nature of our fast-changing society—that potential will not be realised, and we must equip them with those tools.

I look forward to the Government's continued expansion of mental health support in schools, and I urge them to ensure that our teaching staff are given the tools and support they need to look after their own mental health, so they can continue to be the positive role models and carers that our students need. We trust them to look after our children every day. We owe it to them to ensure that they are looked after, too.

4.20 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I first want to say how incredible it is that Members are stood here in the Houses of Parliament discussing the mental health of our young people, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for bringing forward such a critical debate.

In a previous role on the health scrutiny committee for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, it was clear to me that young people are waiting too long for treatment, and that is having a long-term detrimental impact on them. That is in addition to the increasing number of young people on too-long CAMHS waiting lists. We also need to look at specialist services, such as for those suffering with disordered eating, which has doubled in just a couple of years. It is clear that we need to improve early intervention for our young people. We have to ensure that young people discuss mental health not only as part of the curriculum, but with their peers. We also need to ensure that young people reach out for support when they need it. Just as importantly, we need to listen to them and act when they do reach out—often, young people are ignored.

Our children and young adults have experienced a global pandemic. We cannot ignore this period in their lives and the impact it has had on some of them. I have two teenagers, so I have seen it at first hand. By increasing mental health support in educational settings, we know that we can provide the foundations that our young people will need for their future.

We are discussing something that cannot always be seen on the surface and that is often viewed as off-limits. I often think about a group of young people I visited in an alternative educational provision setting in Moira in

my constituency. From speaking to them, I know how difficult and tough life has already been for them at such a young age, but I also feel empowered by them—they were amazing young people. They knew the support they had received when they needed it had turned their lives around.

For some, school can be six hours of relentless bullying, abuse or loneliness. Sixty per cent of our 11 to 16-year-olds told Girlguiding that they had received negative comments about their appearance from other people, some of which were in a school setting. Nearly half of seven to 10-year-olds say they feel alone some or all of the time—seven to 10 is so little. Too often when we have conversations about mental health support, we just talk about teenagers. Mental health support needs to be available for young people of every age to help them build healthy habits, to help them talk about what they need from us, and to set out where they can go for support.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): That is a salient point. Before I became an MP, I worked with young people in youth work. Increasingly over the last few years, mental health issues that we normally saw in teenagers were affecting younger and younger children. One reason was younger and younger children having access to social media and not having the breaks we would have had as young people. My hon. Friend's point is valid—will she tell me more about that?

Amanda Hack: Absolutely. The sad fact is that we always talk about teenagers, but if we can give that resilience to children as young as seven to 10, we might be able to prevent them from becoming poorly when they get older. We have to start those conversations as early as possible to build resilience and confidence in our young people. Putting mental health support in educational settings will mean not only that we can change the culture in schools for children struggling with their mental health, but that we will be able to see how young people can be supported in the right place, at the right time and in the right setting.

John Milne: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my speech, I referred to West Sussex county council but neglected to mention that, as declared in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I am still a member of that council. I want to put that on the record—my apologies.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. Now that he has put it on the record, it will be recorded as such.

We come now to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.25 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) on securing this incredibly important debate. I have spent much of the past five and a bit years in this place talking about children's mental health, which, frankly, I do not think we can ever have enough debate about. It is so incredibly important.

We have heard many statistics from hon. Members today, to which I will add. OECD evidence, based on a survey of 15-year-olds, shows that UK students have

the lowest reported wellbeing in western Europe. In 2024, the Children's Society found that the happiness of UK children aged 10 to 15 was at its lowest since recording began in 2009-10. As we have heard, NHS reporting shows that a staggering one in five children—six in every classroom, on average—have a mental health disorder.

I would argue that it is not an exaggeration to say that we are heading towards a public health emergency as far as our children's mental health is concerned. Yet, as is so often the case, children and mental health are both overlooked and low down on the priority list. The Darzi report highlighted that children account for 24% of the population but only 11% of NHS expenditure. The latest evidence from Rethink Mental Illness states that people who need mental health are treatment eight times more likely to have to wait over 18 months than those seeking treatment for physical health. Despite that, the Government's targets to bring down NHS waiting times exclude mental health. Given that more than 100,000 children are waiting for over a year to be assessed for mental health treatment, it is clear that children have been deprioritised, but as I have said repeatedly in this place, putting money into services that support children is the greatest investment we can make as a country. When budgets are tight, support for child and adolescent mental health should not be pushed aside.

I do not think it an exaggeration to call the situation a public health emergency. In public health, prevention and early intervention are absolutely key. That is where the role of schools, colleges and universities comes in. As we have heard, half of lifetime mental health conditions arise before the age of 14, so ensuring that mental health support is available in schools, from primary upwards, is a critical intervention. The Liberal Democrats have long called for a mental health practitioner to be placed in every primary and secondary school. In the light of the impact of online harms on our children's mental health, we have made a strong case for the "polluter pays" principle, whereby big tech giants bear the cost burden of the measure. A trebling of the digital services tax would fund a practitioner in every primary and secondary school.

I am slightly confused because, as the Minister said during the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee, and as I have seen in Labour party material, the Government are committed to

"introducing specialist mental health support for children and young people in every school".

However, Labour had previously committed to having a counsellor in every secondary school, and indeed the hon. Member for Redditch talked about having a counsellor in every school. I hope that the Minister will clarify that point of policy when he speaks in a moment.

My impression during the Bill Committee was that the Government intended to build out from the mental health support teams that were established by the previous Government. The Minister confirmed in Committee that only 44% of children and young people have access to such teams, which will rise to 50% in April, but he did not set out a timeline or a plan for how or when the Government will meet their commitment by ensuring that every school has access to specialist support.

MHSTs are brilliant. I have spoken to staff who work in those teams, both in my own constituency and in Carshalton, with my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean). However, the reality is that MHSTs are spread far too thinly

across a number of primary and secondary schools, with some schools only getting half a day or a day of support. That is not enough. Last year, one teenager in a secondary school in my constituency took their own life. Another school in my constituency had three teenagers end up in A&E in the space of about two months, having attempted to take their own lives. Clearly, that level of mental ill health requires much more acute intervention than therapy in school, but the reality is that if we start early—if we start young—with proper support, some of these truly awful incidents might be prevented.

The MHST model may well be the best model for support in schools, but I urge the Government to be ambitious in the resourcing of those teams, so that every school has the full-time equivalent of one person in the provision of this support. I know that many schools are trying to top up the resource out of their own funds, but with budgets being stretched ever further, sadly, mental health support is one of the areas that headteachers and governors tell me they are having to start cutting back on.

We know that the epidemic of mental ill health is driving the crisis of persistent absence in our schools. As the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) said, we have heard a lot in recent days about the million or so young adults who are not in education, employment or training, often because of mental ill health. For the sake of those young people's futures, our economy and our society, we must do better, and we must do more.

I do not have time today to talk about school staff, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare, but we have a recruitment and retention crisis in our schools, and that is because many teachers see themselves as the fourth emergency service. We have to support them with their mental health if we want to stop that flow out of our schools. In higher education, I hope the Government will look at introducing a duty of care, because we have heard too many tragic stories of students taking their own lives and their loved ones knowing nothing about their mental health problems.

I pay tribute to the charities around the country that are plugging the gaps in mental health support. In my constituency, we have amazing charities such as the Purple Elephant Project and Off The Record working with children and their families. Anstee Bridge works across Richmond and Kingston with children who are no longer engaging with school. As I said, there have been a number of attempted suicide cases in my constituency, and when I have been to Anstee Bridge, I have heard many more stories of children attempting to take their own lives. These services are critical if we want to keep those children and young people safe and help them to recover.

I want to touch on two more points. Childhood bereavement is a really important and often overlooked issue. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who has long championed the need for a register of children who have been bereaved. We know that childhood bereavement has a terrible impact on children's wellbeing, potentially their mental health and their educational outcomes. I hope Ministers will look seriously at introducing a register, so that we know how many of these children there are, where they are and what support they need,

[*Munira Wilson*]

because that information is not available at the moment. Additionally, there is no national mandate from the Department for Education for schools to have a bereavement policy, nor is there any national policy to support schools with this. I hope that will be addressed.

The hon. Member for Redditch mentioned children growing up in kinship care. The Minister will know that I have long been campaigning cross-party on support for kinship carers and children growing up in kinship care. Like other Members, my inbox has been filled recently with emails from constituents who have either adopted children or are kinship carers for children whose parents can no longer look after them and have benefited from the adoption and special guardianship support fund. It is a critical fund that carers often access to provide therapeutic support for children who have experienced terrible trauma, loss and instability. However, there has been no reassurance from Government about the future of that fund. I think at the moment we only have funding confirmed until the end of this month. There is a huge amount of uncertainty, and hon. Members from across the House have tabled written questions but there has been no clear answer on the future of this fund. I hope that when the Minister rises at the Dispatch Box, he will put on record the plans for the adoption and special guardianship support fund as it is crucial and we cannot lose it.

Our children cannot thrive and cannot achieve their full potential if they are not happy and if they are not well, so I implore the Minister to work closely with his counterparts in the Department of Health and Social Care to treat this public health challenge as an emergency. Our children and young people are only young once; they deserve the best future they can get. They cannot afford to wait; we need to prioritise this.

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

4.35 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) on securing this important debate in the Chamber. I should also declare an interest: I am a consultant paediatrician and have worked throughout my career with children usually at the point of severe crisis when they have been admitted through A&E to hospital following episodes of deliberate self-harm, such as cutting themselves or taking overdoses, and I have clearly seen the heartbreak for families as they have struggled to understand what they can do to best help their young person get better.

Over recent years there has been a decline in the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people and an increasing demand for mental health services. This is perhaps one of the big challenges of our era. Currently around one fifth of children aged eight to 16 are said to have a probable mental health disorder, up from 12.5% in 2017. This figure is even higher, at 22%, for people aged 17 to 24. The consequences of mental health issues for students range from poor academic performance and dropping out of university or college to self-harm and suicide, and we must do all we can to help.

I want briefly to talk about university students because university is supposed to be one of the most enjoyable and formative periods of a person's life, but for many it is also when they leave home for the first time and when they are separated for the first time from their family and friends and their support networks. Data from the Office for National Statistics shows that during the covid-19 pandemic students reported higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of happiness than the general population. The number of students saying they have a mental health condition has increased sevenfold in the last decade. Even before the pandemic students consistently reported worse mental health than the rest of the adult population, but these trends were greatly exacerbated by the impact of lockdown. Will the Minister update the House on what steps he is taking to support young people with mental health problems as they go to university or who develop mental health problems at university?

Despite the unprecedented challenges the previous Government faced, not least the pandemic, we made important strides in improving mental health services, in increasing the recognition and discussion of mental health problems, in increasing investment and in reducing stigma. Between 2018-19 and 2023-24, spending on mental health services increased by £4.7 billion which gave an additional 345,000 young people access to the mental health support they needed, and the number of mental health nurses increased by 30% since 2010, yet still we see that demand is outstripping supply.

Prevention is better than cure and we need to understand why we have such high levels of mental health problems in children. Can the Minister update the House on how the Government are working to identify risk factors for poor mental health and how they will support children and families to prevent it?

The last Government tried to detect mental health problems early and stop them escalating, expanding mental health support teams in schools, committing almost £8 million of funding for 24 early support hubs in '24/25. These offered earlier open access mental health intervention without the need for a referral by a doctor or school. The drop-in centres offer vital advice to young people going through the trauma of stress and anxiety, giving them a space to go to when their problems first emerge. Can the Minister update us on what the Government are doing in terms of expanding the availability of these centres?

The Online Safety Act 2023 made very good progress in protecting children from harmful online content but there is much more to do on the topic of screen time, as has been mentioned by hon. Members this afternoon. Does the Minister agree that the mounting evidence we are hearing especially from health professionals about the impact of smartphones in particular on children's mental health is very concerning? If so, will he support the Conservative amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to ban smartphone use in schools?

However, there have been some concerns that in the desire to support and enable individuals to have positive mental wellbeing, there is a danger that the pendulum has swung a little far and the boundaries between distress and disorder have become blurred. That means that there is a risk that those who are most unwell may miss out on the treatment they deserve and need because of the volume of referrals, as well as a risk of burdening

others with unhelpful labels and prescriptions that could hold them back, without addressing the root cause of their very real need.

Some 84% of GPs are now said to believe that society's approach to mental health has led to medicalising the normal ups and downs of life. The terms "wellbeing", "mental health" and "mental illness" are often used interchangeably, so what steps is the Minister taking to distinguish between those terms in educational contexts, and to deliver public services to ensure that we can get the best outcomes for those affected, so people get the treatment they clinically require?

I pay tribute to the work that many charities do to support our young people with mental health problems. Will the Minister talk to the Chancellor about funding for those services? Dr Sarah Hughes, the chief executive of Mind, said that

"the implications of the NIC rise is eye-watering, at a time when we are trying to direct every penny towards delivering the best support."

Such charities do immense work to create a mentally healthy society, putting everything they have into it, and the Government should recognise that huge investment, not destabilise it by introducing mounting costs that charities simply cannot subsidise.

It is important to recognise the connection between physical and mental health, and that those with long-term physical conditions are considerably more likely to have poor mental health. What are the Government doing to support children who have chronic illness to help improve their mental health?

In 2023, the now Education Secretary said that Labour wanted a trained mental health counsellor available in every secondary school. What steps have the Government taken towards achieving that aim? More specifically, why have they focused on secondary schools? In April 2024, Dr Patrick Roach, the general secretary of NASUWT, said:

"We also need to see improved support for pupils in primary schools to secure wraparound care for pupils at all stages of their education."

What are the Government doing to support children in primary schools with their mental health?

Ahead of the last general election, the Labour party promised to establish Young Futures hubs, recruit 8,500 mental health staff and provide mental health support in schools. Why has so little progress been made on delivering those promises? When the Minister stood on a manifesto to establish the Young Futures hubs, which were said to have a cost of £95 million, and to provide mental health support in all schools, at a cost of £175 million, the Government said that they would fund that through revenue raised from applying VAT and business rates to private schools. Will the Minister confirm whether the revenue obtained from applying the VAT to private schools looks like it will be sufficient to expand the mental health support as described? If not, how do the Government intend to fund the measures they said they would implement?

In a speech to the Confederation of School Trusts on 7 November last year, the Education Secretary claimed that the Government would give

"every single child the very best life chances"

in

"a new era of child-centred government."

How does she justify the impact on the wellbeing of those children who are forced to move schools due to the imposition of VAT on the private sector? Numerous think-tanks and mental health charities have noted that being forced to move school at a non-standard time can have a significant and long-lasting impact on children's friendships, support networks and emotional development. What support is the Minister offering to those children?

Mental health issues among our young people are one of the defining issues of our time. As with so many other policy areas, the Government have promised a panacea, but so far they have delivered a sticking plaster.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister.

4.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for securing a debate on such an important subject, which rightly invites considerable cross-party support.

We know that one third of adult mental ill health originates before age 14, and six in 10 of those that suffer from mental ill health have their first onset by age 25, meaning that childhood and early adulthood is a critical period for early interventions and prevention. That is why this Government have set a bold new ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children in our history, which of course includes their mental health and wellbeing.

We have seen increases in mental health issues in children. NHS surveys suggest that around 20% of 8 to 16-year-olds had a probable mental health disorder in 2023, up from 13% in 2017. The wellbeing and life satisfaction of children and young people also show cause for concern. Long-term reductions in the wellbeing of children and young people are a common trend across countries, and we have to acknowledge that England and the UK report among the lowest levels of average life satisfaction among participating countries.

There is no one simple reason for that, and rising mental health challenges are an international phenomenon. The ongoing impacts of covid-19, brought about by school closures and reduced opportunities for social and emotional development, are a factor, as are changes in health behaviours, such as low physical activity, increased eating and sleeping problems and increased screen time and social media use—points made by a number of Members this afternoon. There is also a wider range of contributing societal factors and ongoing national and global issues, such as the economic outlook, international conflict and climate change. The relative influence of those different drivers is complex, and taken together they show the scale of the challenge that we face.

Helen Hayes: Among children and young people who suffer the most acute mental health challenges are looked-after children and young people, all of whom will have experienced some kind of adverse childhood experience or trauma resulting in their being taken into the care system. My Committee heard evidence a couple of weeks ago from children and young people who talked about the lack of adequate assessment of their mental health when they are taken into care and when they move placements. They called for a strengthening of the regulations around that so that their mental health and wellbeing are properly taken into account. I have tabled

[*Helen Hayes*]

an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which we will discuss early next week. Will the Minister give a commitment to look at that and see whether we can make the support better for children who are looked after?

Stephen Morgan: I know that my hon. Friend is a real champion of looked-after children. We will certainly look at those proposals and at all the work the Education Committee does to support the most vulnerable children in society.

Prevention is vital, and schools and colleges can naturally play a preventive role in what they do from day to day. Attainment is a vital factor in longer-term mental health, as it helps young people to access the things they want to do in life, in further study and in jobs. The best schools and colleges set high standards and expectations, and support children to overcome barriers to their learning, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. We also understand that a child's experience of school helps them to both achieve and thrive. Education settings also support the social and emotional development of their pupils through what is taught in lessons, extracurricular activity and pastoral support.

Pupils who are thriving, with positive subjective wellbeing and a strong sense of belonging, accomplishment, autonomy and good health, achieve better educational outcomes and are more likely to attend school. They are better equipped to face issues in their lives, which is important. Not every child facing mental health issues will need clinical interventions; the support that they get from their friends, families and school or college staff can be what they need. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), I acknowledge and recognise the many thousands of school leaders, teachers and staff who are committed to promoting and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils every day through the things that they do to make school a safe, supportive and inclusive place for children, by supporting their specific needs and by working with parents, families and other community services.

We know that as many as nine in 10 schools have a designated lead for students' mental health and that more than three quarters of them have benefited from DFE-funded training, helping leaders to embed effective whole-school or whole-college approaches to mental health and wellbeing. Nevertheless, schools and colleges themselves need support with what to do and cannot deal with every issue that pupils have.

That is why, as a Government, we have committed to provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, so that every young person has access to early support to address problems before they escalate. That commitment will be delivered through the expansion of NHS-funded mental health support teams, which will work in schools and colleges to offer early support through evidence-based one-to-one and group interventions. They will liaise with specialist services and support leads to develop their holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing. Those functions, supervised by a clinical professional, are what make mental health support teams such a valuable resource. I have seen that important work at first hand on visits to education settings in

Brighton, Manchester and Rugby. By April 2025, we expect those teams to cover over 50% of children and young people in schools and colleges, and plans for further expansion are being drawn up with the NHS to achieve 100% coverage as soon as is practically possible.

Munira Wilson: The Minister has referred to access to specialist mental health support. For the benefit of the House, could he clarify what level of resource he expects that to be—will it be half a day a week, a day a week, or full-time equivalent? The previous commitment had been a counsellor in every school.

Stephen Morgan: I can assure the hon. Member that there will be access to mental health professionals in every school. We are working on the detail of that as we speak, and will announce more in due course.

Siân Berry: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Morgan: I will make some progress, if I may. The pace of the roll-out of mental health support teams will be determined by local needs. It represents a substantial investment in workforce growth and training through this Parliament. Further announcements will be made in the spring.

Siân Berry: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Morgan: I am going to carry on.

We recognise that our pledge that every school will have access to specialist mental health professionals is not the whole answer. Schools are facing their own pressures, and rely on health professionals for diagnoses and treatment of their pupils' mental health needs. We all know from our own postbags and inboxes, as well as from the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch, that the waiting lists for those referred for specialist support are too high. The Department of Health and Social Care is working to bring waiting times down and intervene earlier. In addition, the Government will put in place the new Young Futures hubs, including access to mental health support workers, and recruit 8,500 new mental health staff to treat children and adults.

As well as targeted mental health support, we must tackle the wider drivers affecting children and young people's mental health. For instance, my Department's comprehensive child poverty strategy will be central to unlocking opportunity and giving every child the best start in life. In addition, we recognise the importance of monitoring and understanding trends in the wellbeing of children and young people, and are already closely monitoring national data and research on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and encouraging schools to measure pupils' wellbeing.

Since becoming the Minister for early education, I have seen and heard about incredible work going on in schools and colleges across the country, and have listened to the issues education staff continue to have. It brings me real joy to engage directly with children and young people across the country. My Department will continue to support education staff and provide a range of guidance and practical resources to help schools embed effective whole-school or whole-college approaches to mental health and wellbeing, such as a resources hub

for mental health leads and a toolkit to help choose evidence-based early support for pupils. I recognise that there is interest across the House in a number of different forms of support, such as counselling provision, as we have heard this afternoon. We believe that schools are best placed to choose what provision best meets the needs of their pupils, but we will ensure that resources are in place to help schools do this well.

Siân Berry: Does the Minister agree that what has been announced today falls short? Access to services that are available in a local area—presumably by appointment, and in a different setting—does not constitute the same availability of support as having properly qualified counsellors in schools.

Stephen Morgan: I can assure the hon. Member that I have not announced anything today. As I mentioned in response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), we are working through the detail, but the commitment is to access to dedicated mental health support in every school. It was a real pleasure to visit the hon. Member's constituency and see that work at first hand.

A number of Members are interested in the role of councils in this important issue. Local government's public health responsibilities are an essential element of preventing ill health, promoting healthier lives and addressing health inequalities. The Department of Health and Social Care will provide more than £4 billion of public health funding in 2025-26, including over £3.8 billion through the public health grant to local authorities—an average cash increase of 5.4%, or a 3.0% real-terms increase in local authority public health grant funding compared with the last financial year. That represents a significant turning point for local public health services, marking the biggest real-terms increase after nearly a decade of reduced funding.

I thank all Members from all parts of the House for their contributions this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch spoke with real insight and passion about the support that children and young people need, and about the need for parity between physical and mental health, and he made a number of informed contributions based on evidence and research. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist), who for some time has spoken in this place on behalf of families who have lost loved ones due to suicide. I pay tribute to her work alongside the hugely dedicated campaigners that are the 3 Dads Walking. I have had the privilege of meeting those individuals, and they are inspiring in the work that they do.

We heard from the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who made a number of points from her experience on the Select Committee and from visits to schools in her area. I look forward to her continued constructive engagement as we progress our ambitions on mental health in this place.

A number of Members made contributions on support for SEN children. Every child, regardless of their individual needs, deserves the opportunity to achieve, thrive and succeed. This Government are aware of the scale of the challenges in the current system, and we have made clear our commitment to addressing them.

In conclusion, I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch and all Members that this Government prioritise the health and happiness of children and their wellbeing. We recognise the need for further support in schools, so that all children can achieve and thrive, including in tackling the generational challenge of school absence and bolstering young people's wellbeing and sense of belonging. We value the many contributions from across the House in the debate today, and I again thank my hon. Friend for securing it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The last few minutes go to Chris Bloore to wind up.

4.56 pm

Chris Bloore: First, let me thank the Minister for his comprehensive response, but also for how his Department has helpfully answered the many questions that my office has put through to him. I also thank him for his candidness at the Dispatch Box, and I look forward to hearing a lot of the detail following the questions from Members from all parts of the House.

I will make reference in a quick speed-dating way to many of the comments that Members have made. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for her expertise and comments, particularly on SEND provision. I thank the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) for raising awareness of the success that she and campaigners have had in her constituency. As a fellow former county councillor, I, like the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne), understand the challenges that county councils face, particularly in rural areas, and I understand his frustration. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for his focus on early intervention, and I support his viewpoint that cross-Government working is vital to making progress on this issue.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for her intervention. I am sad to hear about students being told to unroll from school because provision is not available. That is simply not acceptable. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) for his excellent and heartfelt comments about representing his residents, and also for his timely comments about the work of teachers in our schools.

I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). She has a long history on this subject, and I have read many of her contributions over the past two weeks. I know that she is fully committed to this cause. I thank the Conservative spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) for her thoughtful comments and for her expertise in the area in which she worked prior to coming to this place.

Finally, we have been talking in this debate about the life chances of our children. We have made so much progress in bringing discussions about mental health to the fore, and we know the difference that early intervention can make. It is okay not to be okay, and we have made progress with people feeling that they can say that, but it will not be okay if we do not make progress to support children in the long run by the time this Parliament is over.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered mental health support in educational settings.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on what mechanisms are open to Members under the Standing Orders of this place to obtain accurate information from Government Ministers. Earlier today, during the debate on the future of farming, the shadow Environment Secretary asked the farming Minister for the exact cap associated with the sustainable farming incentive, which the Minister claimed has now been reached. Astonishingly, the Minister was unable to give that information to the House, despite farming being in his brief. How can Members of this place ensure that Ministers provide accurate information to the House of Commons? If the Minister is unable to do so when requested, how can I request that he come back to the House to update Members when the exact information is known?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Member will know that the content of statements that Ministers make is not the responsibility of the Chair, but he has put his comments on the record. Of course, he can go to the Table Office, which will give him further advice on how he can put in probing questions for further clarity. No doubt those on the Treasury Benches have heard him and will relay that information.

I assume that the hon. Member alerted the Minister that he would raise this point of order. If not, he will no doubt do so very swiftly.

Contribution of Muslims to Communities

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The subject of this debate is the contribution of Muslims to communities, so I look forward to hearing it.

5 pm

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): Ramadan 2025—or 1446 AH, as many Muslims know it—is the first I am observing since being elected to this place as the Member of Parliament for Glasgow South West. As the only ethnic-minority and Muslim MP representing a Scottish Westminster constituency, I feel a sense of unique responsibility to espouse the positive role that Muslims play in our country, which should, but often does not, feel natural and easy to celebrate vocally.

According to the 2022 census, over 76,000 Muslims live in Scotland, and I am proud that 13,000 of them—almost one in six—live in my constituency of Glasgow South West. It is a vibrant and diverse community of people of all colours and ethnic backgrounds who find a way to be multicultural, but who still tend to coalesce seamlessly around our Scottish and British identity. Perhaps we have much to teach the rest of Britain, and I would welcome a visit from the Minister or one of his team whenever they have time.

Across the UK, there are 4 million Muslims, representing 6% of the total population. Their contributions are vast, particularly in the month of Ramadan, when many will redouble and amplify their efforts in their community and charity work. British Muslims donate £1.79 billion a year to charitable causes—four times more than the national average—and volunteer time worth £622 million a year. In that regard, I place on record my thanks to the many Islamic charities that are active in my constituency, including Islamic Relief, which diligently works not only on international causes, but increasingly on local causes.

Businesses owned by Muslims contribute £25 billion a year to the British economy, notwithstanding the fact that the UK is a world leader in Islamic finance, holding 85% of the European Islamic finance banking sector. As with every community, there are challenges around inequality, but vast strides have been made in education and in the participation of Muslim women in society. There has been a notable increase in educational attainment, with 32.3% of Muslims holding degree-level qualifications in 2021, compared with only 24% in 2011. That is largely driven by Muslim women coming into higher education—something that we can wholeheartedly welcome.

The story of Muslims is intricately woven into our society and is worthy of celebration. It is apparent in every walk of life, but perhaps most prominently in our NHS, where I worked as a full-time surgeon prior to my election to this place. That footprint was most palpable during the covid pandemic, when many served on the frontline despite knowing that they were at a disproportionately higher risk of harm. Many made the ultimate sacrifice, with Muslim doctors Alfa Sa'adu, Amged el-Hawrani, Adil El Tayar and Habib Zaidi—who had ancestry in Africa, Pakistan and the middle east—dying of covid in the course of their clinical duties.

Unlike this Ramadan, when mosques at night are resplendent with light and beautiful recitation of the Quran, in 2020 they went dark and fell silent, with many taking the decision to close their doors to worshippers to stop the virus and protect everyone in their community long before the Government told them to do so. Many, such as the Glasgow central mosque, which is a stone's throw from my constituency boundary, transformed into testing and vaccination hubs, undoubtedly saving thousands of lives. That should not be a surprise, because despite recent rhetoric, it is important to place on record that the footprint of Muslims on the British Isles, and in serving British interests, has been long, enduring and, at times, existential for our country.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who is my office neighbour, for allowing me to move us down from Scotland to Staffordshire, in the heart of the country. I congratulate him on securing this debate. It is doubly important for me, as I am sure it is for all hon. Members, that you are in the Chair for this important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. The House is strengthened by both his presence and yours.

Newcastle-under-Lyme is home to many faith communities that do much good in bringing our community together. Since September 2023, we are home to the Newcastle-under-Lyme Islamic Centre at the masjid on Pilkington Avenue in the Westlands. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking those in the Muslim community in Newcastle-under-Lyme for all they do to bring our people together?

Dr Ahmed: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I wholeheartedly thank those in the Muslim community of Newcastle-under-Lyme for all their contributions—one day I may even get an invitation from my hon. Friend to go there.

At least 2.5 million Muslim soldiers and labourers are reported to have fought with the allied forces in the first world war and 5.5 million in the second world war. Nearly 1.5 million Muslims were killed in action, not including the many Muslims serving in other roles during the war. Among them was my grandfather, Imam Mohamed, who was interned by the Japanese while serving as a constable in the Royal Hong Kong police force during the second world war. In more recent times, that sense of service has been manifested in the election of Muslim MPs to this place. It would be remiss of me, Madam Deputy Speaker, not to mention your achievements as the first ever female Muslim Minister serving in a Government and, of course, as the first ever Muslim Deputy Speaker.

Despite the contribution I have described, with that shared history and those shared values, it is unfortunately a tumultuous time for many British Muslims. Over 6,000 anti-Muslim hate incidents have been reported in the last year. I see a sense of this increase in my own social media timeline, with an increasing diatribe of hatred directed at me—not so much because of the colour of my skin any more, as it was when I was younger, but because of my religion. Despite my being born here and serving in the NHS here, many question my place in Parliament because they do not deem enough generations of my family to have lived here for me to be British enough to serve in this place.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Like him, I have a very diverse community, as he knows, because he was once a resident there. My seat in east London has long had, as east London has historically had, a reputation for communities working together and supporting one another.

My hon. Friend has talked about the age of politics that we live in—a time of populism. Siren populist voices would like us to think that community engagement has gone. Does he agree that the work of the diverse communities from different parts of the world, and particularly of those in the Muslim community, with how they engage themselves in business, charity and social life, shows that up to be the lie that it is?

Dr Ahmed: I wholeheartedly agree, and I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. In fact, the thrust of the conclusion of my speech will be how important social cohesion is. We must keep that at the forefront of our minds.

The rhetoric we see online has the ability, surreptitiously, to desensitise all of us, and that desensitisation is finding its way to places such as the dinner table, where it is becoming an increasingly acceptable form of conversation to indulge in anti-Muslim rhetoric. As it does so at those dinner tables, at Muslim dinner tables across the country people are questioning their place in this society. This trend should worry us all, because it undermines the fabric of our society, our cohesion and our identity as a country. We know from other forms of hatred that what starts with antisemitism or anti-Muslim hatred rarely stops there.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for his contributions to this House, and I echo the comments about how great it is that we have you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this important debate.

My hon. Friend makes the point about fighting the tide of hatred, which I have seen at first hand. In a previous life before I entered this place, I was very proud to work for our first ever Muslim-heritage elected Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. It is a testament to him that he has been fighting against this hatred and showing that London can stand as a beacon of hope against it.

It is really important that we are here today to celebrate the achievements of Muslim residents around our country, and there are many amazing organisations in my constituency of Stratford and Bow, such as the Minhaj Welfare Foundation, Soul Sisters and the British Bangla Welfare Trust. Would my hon. Friend join me in thanking them for their contributions to Stratford and Bow, and in wishing them a peaceful and blessed Ramadan?

Dr Ahmed: I thank my hon. Friend, a well-respected politician who represents all her constituents well, and I will definitely join her in congratulating those organisations, particularly the Minhaj Welfare Foundation, which also operates in my constituency.

As I was saying, this trend should worry us all, because of its undermining nature. We know that that kind of hatred, which begins as anti-Muslim rhetoric, does not stop with Muslims. It has a common denominator to divide and to fragment the bonds that have been forged over years, and indeed is a lightning rod to

[Dr Ahmed]

violence and civil disorder. This coming Saturday is a reminder of where that hatred leads if left unchecked. It will be the sixth anniversary of the Christchurch mosque shooting in New Zealand. On 15 March 2019, 51 innocent lives were tragically taken in that act of hatred—the youngest being just three years old.

That sickening attack on those attending Friday prayers was a dark day. But in that darkness came the light of the response by the now former New Zealand Labour Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. She enveloped the Muslim community in empathy, inclusiveness and acceptance in a way that Muslims living in the west had rarely experienced, and in a way that will never be forgotten. I remember, the following day, coming out of the operating theatre and being driven to tears by her compassion. She validated my existence as a Muslim in the west in a way that no one in this country could have managed at the time, and for that, Muslims far and wide will hold her in a special place in their hearts.

But we must not mistake compassion for weakness. In compassion there is often strength, and perhaps an even clearer vision of the future and a bravery to confront difficult issues and have the difficult conversations across communities, but most importantly within. We saw that sense of compassion and bravery in our country last summer in our Prime Minister, who acted so decisively during the riots to protect mosques, to protect those at risk of violent attack, and to mobilise the state quickly and effectively against anarchy. He attended the big iftar at Westminster Hall—the first time it has ever been held there—and tonight he is hosting an iftar at Downing Street too.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate; it is fantastic. It would be remiss of me, coming from a small town in the west country, not to talk about the Muslim population in my town. In the context of what happened in the summer, I was really proud to be able to stand with the Muslim community in Weston-super-Mare, and also to see how the civic pride and civic duty of that community was not diminished by the hostility that they faced. I really want to pay tribute to the Ahmed family, and Aishah in particular, a 21-year-old. She has had Aishah's Food Charity for years, feeding the people of Weston-super-Mare and supplementing the assistance that is provided in the context of the issues that we have with destitution. The family are amazing, and a huge asset to the town.

Dr Ahmed: I thank my hon. Friend for his warm words. I join him in commending the Ahmed family for all that they are doing to cement the bonds of community cohesion in his constituency.

The Prime Minister's actions are a clear indication that this Labour Government, under this Prime Minister, value and share bread with all communities and are a friend of the Muslim community. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for his tireless efforts over the last decade in tackling anti-Muslim hatred; he also is a true friend of Muslims across this country.

When hatred takes root in our society it diminishes us all. That is why I am glad that the Deputy Prime Minister is also taking action. Perhaps the Minister

might be kind enough to outline some of the details of the new group set up by his Department to tackle anti-Muslim hatred in this country once and for all, led by Dominic Grieve KC, which is welcomed.

The Minister will know that this not just an issue for Muslims; it speaks to the wider issue of social cohesion. The Khan review of social cohesion in March 2024 argued that social cohesion is not just about protecting the democratic norms of our country; it has wide-reaching benefits for society as a whole, from helping achieve sustainable economic growth to reducing the threats of terrorism and hate crime, increasing societal resilience to shocks such as pandemics, improving public health, increasing volunteering and strengthening communities, social cohesion and a wide range of adjacent policy areas—areas that I know this Government take seriously. I believe recent events around the world demonstrate that we are at an inflection point in our country. We can roll over to the easy answer to the scapegoating a community, or conversely avoid, as has been done in the past, the difficult conversations that sometimes need to be had within communities. Neither of those attitudes serves any of us well. We should call out hatred when we see it online, at dinner tables, in changing rooms, in public spaces. But in a pluralistic British society, we should also be able to issue challenge to communities when we see failings. I am proud to be an MP on the Labour Benches, because I believe it is only this Government who can achieve that. Many communities with their own separate traditions, but still able to coalesce naturally into one British identity.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) for securing this debate during such an important time for Muslim communities. What a pleasure it is to follow a speech that was thoughtful and reflective, but also challenging to us all in this place and in particular to us as a Govt. I look forward to feeding back on some of the points he raised. And I will, of course, take him up on his invitation to visit—I never miss a chance to go to Glasgow.

This debate is perfectly timed. It is only right that we honour and celebrate the contribution of British Muslim communities during the month of Ramadan, a time of reflection, devotion and communities. We have had a little tour in this debate: we started in Glasgow, but we have also been to Newcastle-under-Lyme, Weston-super-Mare and the east of London, and now I am adding a little bit of Nottingham. For Muslims across the UK and around the world, Ramadan will be a sacred period of fasting, prayer and charity. It is also a time that brings people together, strengthening bonds between neighbours, colleagues and friends of all faiths and beliefs, and of none.

Here in the UK, we see the vibrancy of Ramadan reflected in our public life: in this debate today, the Ramadan lights on Oxford Street, the historic Iftar recently hosted at Windsor Castle, and the many gatherings taking place across the country. They show how deeply embedded and richly valued these traditions are within our national culture. I think of my own in Nottingham. I think of the Al-Khazra mosque and how it throws its doors open during Ramadan because it is a good time

for people are curious, perhaps about what they are reading and seeing, to come and understand Islam. Of course, food is always a great draw there, because it is fantastic. I also think of the work that Mufti Ahmed Peerbhai does to get people in, including myself, to learn about Islam and to talk and to educate, which is very, very important work. Ministers across the Government are honoured to be joining Iftars throughout this month, celebrating the richness of our communities and the values of compassion and generosity that Ramadan embodies, and, as my hon. Friend mentions, the Prime Minister is hosting an Iftar at Downing Street tonight.

It is also particularly fitting to have this debate during Muslim Heritage Month. This is a great moment to reflect on the immense contributions Muslims have made to Britain, past and present. Islam and Muslims have been part of Britain for centuries, from the early 1700s and the small communities of Muslim sailors and traders from Assam, Bengal, Gujarat and Yemen. Outside the port communities of east London—we have heard from colleagues from east London—South Shields and Liverpool and the community in Woking, Surrey, Muslim populations remained small. Indeed, it is surprising to hear that the first mosque in London did not open until 1895. As my hon. Friend noted in his own powerful personal story, it was only after the second world war, when many former soldiers answered the call to help rebuild the nation, that our Muslim populations grew substantially. From the soldiers who fought alongside British forces in both world wars to the innovators shaping our future today, the legacy of British Muslims is one of resilience, dedication and excellence.

I am furious that my hon. Friend has beaten me to the opportunity to embarrass you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure you do not want us to highlight your own personal achievements, but they are very important. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] You were, of course, the first female Muslim Minister to stand at this very Dispatch Box, and you are now the first Muslim person to sit in that Chair as Deputy Speaker. I think of the people who watch these debates and the importance they will place on that. Certainly, we think of the young girls and boys who will see you and see your example, and know that if you can do it, perhaps they can do it, too. To those who are watching I say, “You can, you must and you should. There are lots of very good examples in Parliament of people who look and sound like you who have done so much for our country and our democracy.”

We want to recognise that history. The Government are committed to doing so, which is why we support the creation of a Muslim war memorial. It will stand as a lasting tribute to the courage and sacrifice of Muslims who served Britain in times of conflict, ensuring that their contributions—too often forgotten—are finally given the recognition they deserve. We intend for the memorial to include an educational element to ensure that people of all backgrounds and ages are able to learn about and understand the sacrifices made by Muslims in the British armed forces during the two world wars and beyond.

Turning to the theme of the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West clearly set out the contribution that Muslims make to the UK, but I will add a little bit myself, too. Whether in business, the arts, science or healthcare, British Muslims are at the forefront

of progress and innovation. Their contributions to the economy are substantial, with Muslim-led businesses generating billions of pounds and creating thousands of jobs. A recent report by the Equi think-tank estimated that British Muslims generate £70 billion a year for the UK economy through income, business and charitable giving.

I think of Himmah, a charity in Nottingham that was recently awarded the King’s Award, with its food bank and what it does for my community to ensure that people where we live do not go hungry. I am looking forward—if that is the right word—to running the London marathon next month to raise funds for Himmah. I really, really wish I had started training. I currently don’t own a pair of trainers, which I believe is an impediment to the exercise.

That same Equi report noted the huge contribution that Muslims make to our public services, including education, social care and emergency response, filling more than 46,000 roles across our NHS, delivering essential care to our sick and elderly. Of course, my hon. Friend is a shining example of that—a surgeon who has made such a difference to so many people at the most challenging moments. We are very lucky to have had him serve in our NHS, and we are very lucky to have him serve in our legislature, too.

Adam Jogee: I wish the Minister all the best for running the London marathon—my father did it five times in the 1980s, so I am happy to get some tips for him after the debate. As he talks about the contribution made by the Muslim community up and down our country, would he join me in expressing a note of disappointment that there is not a single Member from any opposition party on their Benches this afternoon? We are meant to be one United Kingdom, speaking for all communities, and it is a real disappointment that nobody else is present to listen.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the kind offer of support. I have to say, I am not generally one for policing colleagues’ diaries, but I hope that during this period, colleagues from all political parties and none are able to use their platform positively to promote the important work of Britain’s Muslim community and to fight the rise of Islamophobia, which I will turn to shortly.

Before I do, I want to reflect on two things that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West mentioned. First, London is the west’s Islamic finance capital, with UK-based Islamic banks controlling assets worth nearly £6 billion, which is 85% of the total assets in Europe—what a great success story that is for our country. Secondly, I want to mention the practice of Zakat and the extraordinary charitable giving of British Muslims, who donate millions every year to support those in need, both at home and abroad. As my hon. Friend has said, British Muslims give four times more to charity than the average UK adult, donating more than £700 a year. During Ramadan alone, we can expect contributions to exceed £100 million—what a lifeline that is for those who receive that funding.

Civil society also benefits immensely from the leadership and activism of Muslim communities; I think of the Muslim councillors on my local authority, as well as colleagues in this place. It goes much deeper, too, with

[Alex Norris]

remarkable contributions to volunteerism and social welfare. Whether it is supporting food banks, as I mentioned, supporting homeless shelters, mentoring young people or engaging in community outreach, their service embodies the values of generosity and civic duty that strengthen our society and foster social cohesion, in a nice intersection between faith and our national values—I think we would like to think that those are British values, too.

None the less, as my hon. Friend has said, we know that, despite invaluable contributions, Muslim communities continue to face discrimination and prejudice within our society. Anti-Muslim hatred remains a real and persistent issue, affecting the lives of many. My hon. Friend talked about online hatred, and also about creeping normalisations, and we should stand against that, and we, as a Government, most certainly do so. It is impossible not to go back, certainly with the sixth anniversary of the horrific Christchurch terror attacks being on Saturday. That was a stark reminder of how online hatred can fuel real world violence. I remember being at Al-Khazra mosque in the days following the attack, talking to Muslim constituents and, indeed, to those who, like me, came in solidarity. They told me about their fears and how they felt when faced with the reality that that could have been them at Friday prayers. We also talked about the things that we had to do to stand against such terror and to make sure that they were safe in our city.

We have recently established a new working group to define and tackle anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia. I hope that this initiative reflects our unwavering commitment to ensuring that all communities in the UK can live free from discrimination and fear. My hon. Friend asked for a little more detail on this. As he said, the group is being chaired by Dominic Grieve KC, once of this place, which is really positive. The group will advise Government on how best to understand, quantify and define prejudice, discrimination and hate crime targeted at Muslims.

The context behind the establishment of this group is the fact that hate crime is at a record high in England and Wales, which is why we think that this is an issue that requires urgent attention. The work of the group will be measured in months rather than years. We want its members to come back to us as swiftly as possible to help shape our Government's response to make sure that we are truly standing up against the rise of this hatred.

Adam Jogee: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister again. He talked about the work of the group taking months, which is the correct approach as we want to make sure that this is done properly. Will he explain how Members of this House can feed into the process, so that we can be sure that the experiences that our constituents raise with us are also raised with the group?

Alex Norris: That is an excellent question. I will make sure that colleagues, through the Minister for Faith, Lord Khan, are able to have that opportunity. We are very good conduits of information and insight, because we see this every day in our constituencies, and, by definition, we cover the entire community. That is an excellent idea, which I shall make sure comes to fruition.

In conclusion, Ramadan reminds us of our shared values: kindness, unity and a commitment to justice. During this important time for British Muslim communities, the Government reaffirm their dedication to building a society where everyone, regardless of background or belief, is valued and respected. I hope that all those observing this debate have seen the strength of feeling across the House. I say to them, Ramadan Mubarak. May this month bring them peace, strength and countless blessings.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 March 2025

[GILL FURNISS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Young Carers: Educational Opportunities

1.30 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered educational opportunities for young carers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I am pleased to see so many hon. Members from across the House here today, and I thank them for attending. I know that some have personal stories to tell, and I look forward to hearing them.

As many hon. Members will be aware, yesterday was Young Carers Action Day. We have held a number of events in Parliament with the support of the Carers Trust. This week, young carers visited No. 10 and wrote directly to the Prime Minister to ask for his support in ensuring that young carers and young adult carers are the golden thread that goes through everything his Government do. Students from Mark Hall academy in Harlow visited Parliament, and the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) and I took part in an open-top bus trip around London, which went very well until we were unfortunately attacked by hail.

A recent report by the Carers Trust has identified a number of issues that young carers face in educational settings:

“Caring has a significant negative impact on education... Awareness, identification and recording of young carers in educational settings is still too low... Support for young carers in education is worryingly inconsistent.”

Here are a few statistics: almost half of young carers—48%—reported being bullied in the past year; more than two in five—44%—frequently struggle to study for tests or exams because of the demands of their caring situation; and almost a third of young carers are regularly late for school because of those demands. Almost one in four young carers say there is no support at all for young carers in their school, college or university.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): It is estimated that there are around 2,000 young carers in Staffordshire, many of whom are hesitant to come forward for fear of disrupting their home lives. For those flying under the radar, it is even harder to get proper support. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Department for Education’s commitment to creating a more comprehensive register of young people will ensure that resources can be distributed more effectively, so that problem areas can be identified?

Chris Vince: I thank my hon. Friend for her useful and thoughtful intervention. She is absolutely right. One of the biggest issues for young carers is identifying them. First, young carers do not recognise themselves as being young carers. Secondly, as she rightly says, some young carers are worried about coming forward,

as they feel that identifying themselves as young carers would somehow make it seem as though their parents are failing them, which is absolutely not the case.

I welcome the DFE’s commitment to better identifying young carers—it is great that young carers are now part of the school census—but we have to recognise that there is much more to do. In the most recent school census, 72% of schools said that they do not have any young carers, which cannot be right. Although we have made strides in this area, there is obviously much more we need to do. I look forward to the Minister’s comments on that.

As many hon. Members will be aware, since I mention it in most of my speeches, I spent the first 15 years of my working life as a secondary school maths teacher, teaching in various schools across Essex and working with students aged 11 to 18 with a variety of abilities. I have recalled to the House many times one parents’ evening in which a student of mine arrived with both his parents, who were severely physically disabled. To my shame—this is something I have carried with me—I had no idea, until that point, that he and his older sister were young carers.

Since then, I have worked to ensure that I am more knowledgeable about young carers and young adult carers. Before my election in July, I worked for a wonderful charity in Harlow and Essex called Action for Family Carers. It provides respite care and in-school support for children and young people who care for family members and loved ones with physical and mental disabilities.

Young carers and young adult carers play a hugely important role for their families and their communities, giving to the NHS in an invaluable way. We must recognise their impact in saving money for the NHS and in helping the economy, but too often, they do not get the recognition they deserve. There is an urgent need for better identification of young carers in the education system, as many do not even realise that they are young carers until it has already impacted their lives, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) said. For them, it is just normal—caring for a family member or a loved one.

I have visited several schools in my Harlow constituency that do a great job of supporting young carers, and I pay special tribute to Mark Hall academy, which allowed me to meet and talk to its young carers club. I also pay tribute to Purford Green and Holy Cross primary schools for their great work in identifying young carers, and to the many other schools across Essex where I have previously worked.

Some, but not all, schools do great work to identify young carers and have a designated young carers lead. It is vital that all teachers have knowledge of young carers and young adult carers, so my first ask of the Minister is to make training on young carers a mandatory part of teacher training.

It is important that schools have a designated young carers lead. Having spoken to young carers in my previous job and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for young carers and young adult carers, I know how much anxiety is caused by having to tell at least five different teachers why they are late or have not done their homework. One young carer recently told me that he feels embarrassed to tell people, and that he has to ask peers to keep the noise down in the school library because, for him, it is the only quiet place where he can get his studies done. He does not have that option at home.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): The hon. Member makes a valid and important point about schools having a young carers lead, and I am proud to say that every school in Gloucestershire has one. My constituent Christian, who I met yesterday, has been caring for his grandmother from the age of six, but it was not until he was 11 that he was identified by his school as a young carer. Does the hon. Member therefore agree that, although it is an excellent endeavour to have more leads, more still needs to be done?

Chris Vince: As soon as the hon. Member mentioned Gloucestershire, I thought of the fantastic young carers from Gloucestershire I met yesterday. He is right that having a young carers lead is useful where a school has identified a student as a young carer, but we need to do more to identify young carers in the first place. I was previously a teacher, and teachers have a key role in identifying young carers.

There is also a lack of structured support in schools, particularly during the transitions from primary to secondary or from secondary to further education. One of our young carers told the APPG about his experience of applying to university, and how the university website did not provide any case studies that were relevant to him.

When we talk about transitions, we are not just talking about moving through stages of education; we are talking about how the caring role can change—often, sadly, for the worse. It is the responsibility of people in positions of authority to recognise that and to act. As a former teacher, I know only too well how easily young people can slip through the cracks. I am committed to changing that, which is why we need targeted training for educators to better identify young carers and to equip them with the tools to make their lives more manageable.

Other professionals can help, too. Action for Family Carers, for example, ran a project to reach out to GPs. It seems nonsensical that when a parent visits a doctor's surgery with an acute medical condition, the question of their children's caring responsibility is not even broached.

To support young carers, there should be a dedicated point of contact in education—a trusted person in authority who students can approach to discuss any caring responsibilities that might affect their studies. Whether it is about missing a deadline or arriving late to class, having one person to communicate with would ensure that the right people are informed and the student's needs are met. This simple addition could make a world of difference, and there are some great examples of schools that do just that, but it is not universal. There should be mandatory training for teachers, so that they can all help with the task of identifying young carers.

Finally, transition periods, especially from primary to secondary school and on to college or university, are tough enough for everyone but even more so for young carers without support. As young carers highlighted to the all-party group, the leap to university feels unattainable due to the lack of provision. We know that a number of young carers do not go to university because they are concerned about leaving those they care for behind, and when they do go, they choose universities that are close to home, which potentially limits their options.

Education should provide hope and opportunity for all, regardless of background or circumstance. Resources must be in place for those facing disadvantage, ensuring

that those challenges do not become insurmountable barriers. It is important that young carers have the opportunity to be children as well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak.

1.41 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for raising this important issue. I know it is a passion close to his heart, and he knows it is a passion close to mine too, as a parent of a young carer—I will come to that in due course.

Fewer than 1% of pupils are young carers, but it is important to remember that there will be many more we are unaware of who do not receive the support that they desperately need. Too often, the sacrifices and hard work of young carers go unnoticed and unsupported. Many children will be unaware of the burden their peers face as young carers. Many young carers will feel as if their friends are unable to relate to their home life and the extra pressures they experience outside the school gates. Again, that is something that I know, very close to home.

I pay tribute to the all-party parliamentary group for young carers and young adult carers. Its inquiry in the last Parliament, whose report was published in November 2023, found that young carers are struggling to balance their education with their caring responsibilities. Young carers are at risk of poor attendance, low attainment and more challenging experiences in education settings, such as bullying or social isolation. Young carers told the inquiry that they find it challenging to ask for help with their education at home and do not want to add extra stress to their family members, who are often also undertaking caring responsibilities.

There is no doubt that pupils' school experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are fundamental in shaping their first steps into the workplace. Evidence to the inquiry highlighted how issues with attendance, attainment and experiences in educational settings have a distinct effect on the likelihood of young carers pursuing or continuing their studies beyond 18, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow mentioned. It also affects young carers' and young adult carers' ability to enter and remain in employment, as well as their experiences in the workplace.

The recent report "Caring and classes: the education gap for young carers", published by the Carers Trust, found that almost half of young carers at secondary school in England were persistently absent in 2022-23, which means that they missed at least 10% of their education. That is equivalent to one day off school every fortnight, and because they are missing school due to their caring responsibilities, it can be difficult for teachers to recognise when a pupil is struggling and to identify the support and help they need. I therefore welcome the work of the Young Carers in Schools programme, run by the Carers Trust and the Children's Society. The programme helps schools to support young carers by ensuring that they attend and by helping to improve their wellbeing.

More importantly, the programme provides schools and teachers with a comprehensive guide to identifying young carers. As a result of the programme, 94% of the schools involved said that staff were more likely to know what to do if they identified a young carer, and 94% had a better understanding of the support required by young carers. I hope that with the combined support of teachers, schools, parents and carers, young carers will be able to reach their full educational potential, and I commend the organisations, charities and schools that support young carers throughout their childhood, both inside and outside school.

I want to mention two other matters. First, I was lucky recently to attend the Bromley Rotary club's youth awards in my neighbouring borough, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon). The awards recognised 36 people from 17 schools for their outstanding contributions to the community. I was hugely impressed that the majority of those young people received awards because they are young carers—they care for family members and in many cases also raise money for local charities associated with their family member's disability. I know my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge would welcome it if I paid tribute to those awards, which started 10 years ago with only four schools participating. They have now grown, with 20 schools participating.

Lastly, closer to home, I am the parent of twins who are 11. My eldest daughter has cerebral palsy and a range of very complex disabilities. Her twin—two minutes younger—is the carer in many respects, because they have that doting twin bond. During covid they were six and their mum was undergoing chemotherapy, so it was a very intense period for my youngest daughter. Her sister needed full-time care support and no carers were allowed in the house. She dealt with that admirably. My daughter is lucky, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow said. We got by, and she was certainly my No. 2 during that period in keeping things going in the house. We got through it, and her secondary school, where she started last September, recognises carers—it recognises the contribution that she makes and the support that she may sometimes need.

Particularly with twins, the issues become more predominant as they get older; my daughter has a sister who speaks 12 words, while she speaks about 20,000, frankly. As the gap between them gets bigger, there is still the doting bond, and the feeling of, "That is my twin, and I will be there most probably forever to support them,"—even after I've gone. Being a young carer is so important to her life, so I see that situation first hand.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for young carers, and for securing the debate. It is a subject very close to both of our hearts, as he knows. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

1.47 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for securing this important debate. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to drop into his young carers event, which did an excellent job at increasing awareness. For example, it shared key findings, such as the fact that fewer than half of teachers agree that their school provides the support that young carers need.

In a previous job I had in the NHS, I used to meet young carers from time to time, and they always really impressed me in how they dealt with multiple issues. I highlight the work of a great group of young carers who are part of North Ayrshire Young Carers, which is a local group in North Ayrshire that helps young carers meet each other, organise fun activities and have a break together—letting young people be young people. Services for young carers often offer a range of support for anything a young carer might need, from walking groups and group stress management to guidance on how to apply for financial support if required.

The group reports that young carers say year on year that education is one of the biggest barriers that they face, and young carers feel that teachers do not understand their caring responsibilities, as we heard earlier. The Scottish Government estimated that there are at least 44,000 young carers in Scotland, and that 29,000 of them are under 16.

Young carers can have a range of extra responsibilities, as we all know, whether that means giving medication, looking after their other siblings, or providing emotional and physical care for the adults. Many young carers rely on local groups such as North Ayrshire Young Carers, not only for time out and breaks but for one-to-one advice and information on how to access funding and school support. There is still so much more that can be done to support young carers in the classroom: we can help educational practitioners to identify them, and help groups of young carers to continue their education by moving into further or higher education.

Many young carers report feeling stressed, lonely or tired, and they feel they are missing out on time with their friends or things at school. It is important that we do all we can here in Westminster to support young carers in education to combat that situation. I am delighted to see the debate taking place and highlighting what needs to be done to ensure that young carers get the right support as well as the educational opportunities that they deserve. I look forward to hearing other Members' contributions.

1.50 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss.

I thank the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for securing this important debate. It is fair to say that he has timed it well following Young Carers Action Day, which, as he mentioned, we both enjoyed yesterday, despite the hail on the open-top bus. What struck me about that trip around central London, talking to carers like Holly and Olly, is just how strong they have to be, because they have no choice. I find that humbling. Every time I talk to young carers, it is deeply humbling to realise what they are contending with at home, what they are managing to achieve at school and how they hold all that together.

It is absolutely right that we should do more to try to support them and to put the framework in place, through all the arms of government, to ensure that they can achieve their potential and feel that they are not letting down their families at the same time. Something that comes through loud and clear is that sense of guilt. I was talking to Holly about deciding whether to go to university, and she felt incredibly guilty about leaving her mum and her sister, who she cares for. But she went

[Alison Bennett]

ahead and did it. She got into Oxford, and she is in her final year studying French and linguistics. She is an incredible young woman, and I think she will go far in life.

As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for care and carers, when I speak to young carers—and old carers—I feel very fortunate indeed. It is always a privilege to hear their stories. I am always reminded about how much more there is to do to support them. They make extraordinary sacrifices for their loved ones, but, as we have heard from hon. Members, they quite often do so to the detriment of their education and their futures.

In the 2022-23 school year, young carers missed an average of 23 days of school, compared with just 14 days for children without caring responsibilities. Perhaps even more concerning is that 39% of young carers in secondary school were considered persistently absent, meaning they missed at least 10% of school days. Those high levels of absenteeism are alarming, and the consequences are hugely damaging. Research shows a clear link between school absence and academic performance. Only 40% of absent pupils achieve their expected standards in reading, writing and maths at the end of key stage 2, compared with 65% of all pupils nationally. For young carers, the gap only widens as they move further through their education, and they fall further and further behind. They are 37% less likely to achieve high A-level grades and 38% less likely to obtain a university degree than their peers. If they care for a loved one for more than 35 hours a week, they are an astonishing 86% less likely to graduate from university.

Although some support is available in the form of discretionary bursaries for further education, it often comes far too late down the line, when the damage has already been done. The young carers school programme, run by the Carers Trust and the Children's Society, is an essential initiative that works to reduce barriers by training local authorities and carers' services. That is making a difference, but I hope that most Members agree that it is not enough.

Carers, teachers and local authorities all agree that support for young carers is lacking, particularly when it comes to understanding and identifying them in the first place, even before we get into looking at what their needs are. I hear time and again from carers that the lack of recognition is perhaps the most fundamental problem they face—not only recognition of them by others but realising in themselves that they count as a carer and that the support they provide is above and beyond what is normal. Too often when we talk to young carers they say, "I was just helping out my sister at school. She was having a meltdown and the teachers called me. I did not realise I was a carer."

Although the previous Government committed to developing training modules for educators to better spot young carers, charities and schools, as we all know, are stretched far too thin to ensure consistent coverage across all schools. A key theme that came up on the open-top bus tour yesterday was how different parts of the country have a very different offer for young carers. I firmly believe that young carers deserve more. No child should be forced to choose between their future and helping their family. The previous Government left young carers behind, struggling with school absences, lack of support and barriers to higher education.

On top of that we layer the impacts of the pandemic, and, as the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) said, that put extra pressure on his family. I commend him for what he has said this afternoon and for everything that he and his daughter do to help the family.

We must ensure that young carers are recognised, supported and given the same opportunities as their peers. The Government have a real opportunity to do the right thing. Schools must play a more proactive role in identifying young carers, which is why I back our Liberal Democrat policy that requires every school to have an appointed, dedicated young carers lead. Meanwhile, higher education must be put within reach of young carers. To make that a reality, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I believe we need to introduce a young carers pupil premium with targeted funding to support schools in offering academic and pastoral help for student carers. As with so many things, we must identify early and support early. This helps carers and it helps society as a whole, stopping problems before they have even begun and saving money in the process.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I believe that young carers deserve better. With the right support, they can thrive in education, achieve their ambitions and build bright futures, all while continuing to provide the support that they need and want to provide for their loved ones. It is time to give young carers the recognition and opportunities that they deserve.

1.57 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for securing the debate, for his very good speech and also for the work he has done in support of young carers over the years. It was good to hear about that. I also pay tribute to other hon. Members who have spoken today and brought a wealth of insight to our debate, particularly the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis). He and I serve on a certain Bill Committee and I feel I am getting to know his family very well. The more I hear of them, the more I like them. I pay enormous tribute to him and his family for what they do in often very difficult circumstances and I am grateful to him for what he said.

I particularly pay tribute to young carers across our country. As the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) has just said, it is absolutely inspiring and humbling when we hear the testimonies of the unsung, often unacknowledged work—even by themselves, as she says—that they do. It is always great to have the opportunity to hear about them and from them. If any of the young people in the Gallery today are young carers, I pay tribute to them and thank them for what they do. I hope they feel that they are being properly acknowledged in Parliament today.

As we have heard, it is not just the additional responsibility and the weight of caring for a family member or relative that is all-consuming for young people. It is the sacrifices that come with that. For young carers, it often means missing out on social plans with their friends, not being able to commit to extracurricular activities outside the school day, and too often having to miss school in order to fulfil their duty as a carer. We have heard that point made.

The Carers Trust surveyed over 1,000 young carers and the results were saddening. A key finding was that almost a third of young carers reported that they always or usually struggle to balance their caring responsibilities with school, college or university work. We understand that there are 54,000 young carers in England and Wales, and their overall absence rate is 12%, compared with just 7% for pupils who are not young carers. That means that a young carer misses more than one school day per fortnight on average. This commonly leads to persistent absence: 39% of young carers were persistently absent in 2022-23, compared with 21% of those who are not young carers. That is twice as many. The impact is undeniable, not only on the educational attainment and opportunities of young carers, but on their sense of being included in the school community, which is so important.

I was saddened to read in the survey that 28% of young carers report that they either never had, or did not often have, someone at school, college or university who understood that they were an unpaid carer. An even higher rate—40%—said that they never got, or did not often get, help from their school, college or university, so even when it is acknowledged that they have caring responsibilities, many of them do not feel that they get any support from their institution.

As hon. Members have said, there is no doubt that more support needs to be instilled in schools, local authorities and communities. A point was made about the record of the last Government. I do not want to go too much into defensive mode, because I very much acknowledge the points made by the hon. Member for Mid Sussex—she is clearly speaking the truth on behalf of young carers, as other hon. Members have—but in government, we were determined that all young carers should receive the support they need to succeed in all stages of education. The pupil premium, which was introduced under the last Government in 2011, gave schools in England additional funding to improve outcomes for children facing disadvantages. It has supported the roll-out of support for many young carers.

I take the hon. Lady's point—she may well be right—that it would be appropriate to have a targeted pupil premium for young carers, by making them automatically eligible for the pupil premium, and I would be interested in the Minister's view. I understand that 60% of young carers are eligible for the pupil premium at the moment—that speaks to the disadvantage that many of them face—but it might be appropriate to be more targeted and specific about their eligibility.

Alison Bennett: It struck me as the hon. Member was speaking that an advantage of the proposal is that it would incentivise schools to identify carers. One of the problems we have spoken about this afternoon is the fact that many schools say they have no young carers. Does he agree that it would provide that incentive?

Danny Kruger: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: it would be a helpful incentive to identify young carers among the school population. I will come in a moment to further support that schools need to do that work.

As has been mentioned, there are bursaries, introduced by the last Government, to help with the costs of education, such as travel and books, childcare and residential costs when required. In the 2023-24 academic

year, more than £160 million of bursary funding was allocated to institutions to help disadvantaged 16 to 19-year-olds with the cost of taking part in education. I recognise the hon. Lady's point that those bursaries can come quite late in a child's education, and that it would be good to be more proactive. It might well be that more work can be done to ensure that children and their families get the opportunity to apply for the bursaries, and to encourage schools to support them to apply earlier on, because I bet loads of families do not know that these bursary opportunities exist.

Another programme introduced by the last Government, in 2014, was the Young Carers in Schools programme, which addresses the need to ensure that schools do more to identify young carers and increase their engagement in school. The programme set out 10 key steps to help schools to identify and support young carers. Each step provides key practical tools that can be adapted to support the individual school. The hon. Lady made the point that provision can be quite patchy across the country, and I dare say she is right. Again, national schemes are great, but only in so far as they are properly applied, uniformly, to the best possible standard. I hope that the Department is working on ensuring that there is greater coverage of that useful programme.

The Young Carers in Schools award allows schools to gain recognition for their success in supporting young carers. I would be interested to hear from the Minister to what extent that programme has been successful. It also enables schools to share good practice. My understanding is that its impact is positive: 94% of schools said in response to a survey that their staff were more likely to know what to do if they identified a young carer and how to support them. That sounds improbably good, and it might be that that is a somewhat superficial response; nevertheless, it is encouraging to hear that schools are positive about that programme. There is also encouraging evidence about the impact on young carers themselves.

On higher education, there is depressing research, cited by the hon. Member for Mid Sussex, that shows that young carers are significantly less likely to graduate than young people without caring responsibilities. I understand that the Office for Students launched an equality of opportunity risk register, which identified 12 sector-wide risks that may affect a student's opportunity to access and succeed in higher education. It made reference to young carers in six of those key sector risks, so there is obviously recognition of the extent to which caring responsibilities can impact on one's opportunities in higher education.

More needs to be done to set out how education providers will improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds so that they succeed and progress in higher education and onwards. There is clearly more to do to ensure that all young carers get the support they need to succeed. I urge the Minister to engage with young carers—I am sure she is doing so—schools and local authorities to identify what additional support young carers need, to ensure true equality of opportunity for every pupil.

2.6 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): It is an honour and a pleasure to serve with you as Chair, Ms Furniss. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the

[Catherine McKinnell]

Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for securing this debate on such an important subject. I thank him for his continued contribution to improving the lives of young carers and for sharing his professional experience and expertise. Much as we lament that he is no longer a maths teacher, we celebrate the fact that he is here in this place putting his insight and experience to such valuable use.

I thank each and every child and young person across the country who selflessly cares for members of their family. Our Government will do everything we can to ensure that you and your families have the support you need at home and in your education. We are determined, through our opportunity mission, to break the link between a child's background and their future success. We want every child, including young carers, to be set up for the best start in life so that they succeed and thrive at school. We will tackle the disadvantage that we know persists in far too many places through excellent teaching, high standards and the generational challenge of improving school standards. We will build on the opportunities for growth that every young person should have, so that they can follow the pathway that is right for them, whether through a high-quality apprenticeship or by going to college or university. Hon. Members have rightly drawn out those points in the debate.

Underpinning all that, the Government are determined to build family security and ensure that every child, whether a carer or not, has a safe and loving home. To do that, we must tackle the scar of child poverty, which impacts far too many children and young people and their families.

The impact of caring on children and young people's education, which has been rightly highlighted today, has been hidden for far too long. Too many young carers continue to be invisible to their schools and wider agencies. They fall behind their peers and fail to reach their full potential and unlock opportunities, despite improvements in the assessment of their need for support. It is unacceptable that any child or young person who selflessly dedicates themselves to supporting ill or disabled family members goes through childhood without support themselves. We must ensure that no child faces these disadvantages alone.

Adding those young children to the schools census has, for the first time, shone a light on their education. It has raised awareness in schools and given us much of the evidence that we have used for this debate, but we know that not enough schools are identifying and accurately recording the information on young carers in the census, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow pointed out, with 72% not recording any young carers in 2024.

We expect that data to improve over time, as the data collection becomes better established, but we are looking at the ways in which the data is entered and whether we can bring in technical changes to support more accurate reporting. We obviously have to do that without overly burdening schools, and we are determined to get that right. We also want to undertake further analysis of the data, and develop and publish young carers' data on attainment measures alongside the data that we already publish on population, absence, exclusions and suspensions. We will continue to work with organisations such as the

Carers Trust, which I know works directly with schools, to raise awareness of these new data requirements and maximise the impact.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow that schools should consider how they are recognising and meeting the needs of young carers. As set out in the "Keeping children safe in education" guidance, we require designated safeguarding leads to undergo training to provide them with the knowledge and skills to carry out their roles, and that includes being alert to, and having good knowledge, understanding and awareness of the needs of young carers.

On training for teachers specifically, the mandatory initial teacher training core content framework sets out the minimum entitlement of knowledge, skills and experience that all trainee teachers need in order to be in the best position to teach and support the pupils in their schools. Courses have to be designed so that trainee teachers can respond in the best way possible to the strengths and the needs of all their pupils.

From September 2025, all trainee and early-career teachers will receive a training programme that is underpinned by the initial teacher training and early career framework. That will set out the core body of knowledge, skills and behaviours that defines great teaching. That includes teachers learning that pupils' experiences at school, and their readiness to learn, can be impacted by their home and life circumstances, and it will include an awareness of young carers.

We recognise that continuous improvement is important in this area, which is why we have committed to review the early-career teacher entitlement in 2027, including the content of the initial teacher training and the early career framework, to make sure that it is providing that best possible support for new teachers. As part of that, we will obviously consider the issues raised in today's debate.

Responsibility for young carers cuts across education and health into both children and adult social care. The Children Act 1989 and the Care Act 2014 place clear duties on both of those social care services to assess and support the needs of young carers. Being a young carer was identified as a factor in almost 18,000 children's social care assessments in the year ending March 2024. The needs of those young carers and their families must therefore be fully recognised within the "Children's social care national framework" statutory guidance on the purpose and principles of practice for social workers.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) on securing this debate. The Minister is developing a really important point. When researching this topic, one of the things that terrified me was that 38% of carers report having had a mental health challenge while in an education setting. I therefore really welcome the Government's promise to deliver a mental health professional or counsellor in every school. I just wonder whether the Minister could indicate when she thinks that might happen.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that people with mental health issues, including young carers and indeed the family members who they are caring for, are just not getting the help, support or care that they need.

We are absolutely determined to fix the broken system. We are already recruiting 8,500 more mental health workers, introducing access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, rolling out Young Futures hubs in every community, and looking to modernise the Mental Health Act 1983. We recognise that we must address the significant challenge that my hon. Friend raises, and if we are going to tackle that issue and achieve the differences that we want to see for the young carers we are talking about today, that is a good place to start.

An important part of that jigsaw is our manifesto commitment to introduce a single unique identifier to improve information sharing and link multiple sets of data between Government Departments and organisations more quickly and accurately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), who is no longer in her place, rightly referenced in her intervention. That is why the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill introduces provision for that identifier in law. The Bill will pave the way for the consistent identifier to be specified and for organisations to be required to use it, and to create a clear legal basis for sharing that information where we know that it will promote the welfare, wellbeing and safeguarding of children, including young carers.

We fully support the "No Wrong Doors for Young Carers" memorandum of understanding developed by the Carers Trust on behalf of the Local Government Association. It is vital that we improve joint working between adult and children's social care services, health and other key organisations. We strongly encourage local authorities to sign up to that.

For the first time, the school census data is evidencing the impact on attendance, exclusions and suspensions. We know that young carers are far more likely to be absent from school and to have higher rates of exclusion and suspension than their peers. We recognise that absence from school is almost always a symptom of wider needs within a family. It is often the best early indicator of an unmet need that is manifesting in school—or, indeed, by that child not being in school—in a family that may not be in contact with other services.

Our guidance on school attendance highlights that schools should see absence as a symptom and prioritise attendance with strategies such as attainment, behaviour and support for disadvantaged pupils, including the use of the pupil premium and support for young carers. Schools should also consider whether additional support from other external partners—including the local authority; children and young people's mental health services, which were rightly referenced; and GPs and other health services—would be appropriate and make referrals where necessary. That is of particular importance for young carers. Schools might be the first place to identify where there is a lack of needed support for a family.

As other hon. Members have, I pay tribute to the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), who spoke very powerfully about his family's circumstances. We have no idea what may be going on in somebody's home or life. Where that manifests in school, it is important to have the mechanisms in place to provide extra support where it might be needed. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) spoke powerfully about that too. There is an awful lot of agreement in the Chamber today about what we want to see.

Daily attendance data collection has been established to ensure consistent recording and monitoring of pupil attendance. We need to support the identification of patterns of absence so that we can help schools and local authorities to make the appropriate interventions. We are absolutely determined to have more children in school; children cannot get an excellent education if they are not in school. Where that is because of responsibilities at home or because a child is a young carer, it is absolutely right that we use the available data to target that support effectively to ensure that every child can be in school and to unlock opportunities for them and their families.

We have allocated £2.9 billion in pupil premium funding this year to improve the attainment of disadvantaged children. As has been discussed, young carer status does not attract pupil premium funding, but evidence suggests that around 60% of young carers are eligible through free school meals entitlement. The guidance to school leaders is absolutely clear, however, that pupil premium funding should not be restricted to just those who have eligibility for the funding; schools must use it to support all pupils where they identify needs. That will include young carers.

Access to higher education should be based on ability and attainment, not background. Opportunity has to be available to all. We must ensure that no group is left behind; everyone should be able to fulfil their aspirations. In the summer, we will set out our plans for changes to higher education, which will include the part that we expect higher education providers to play in improving access and outcomes for all disadvantaged students. In the meantime, I welcome the development at the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, better known as UCAS, to include young people with caring responsibilities. That inclusion, along with the school census, highlights the need for much better support for young carers. We especially want to ensure that they can make the best of their opportunities and possibilities beyond key stage 4.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow again for raising this important matter, and all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I also thank my hon. Friend for his many years of campaigning and work on the issue. Young carers contribute enormously to the wellbeing of their families and communities, and to society at large. That is why we are all here: they deserve to be championed and to be assured that society will reciprocate and support them in return. I acknowledge that the education system, in partnership with agencies, needs to improve to meet the developing needs of children, especially our young carers. They must be at the heart of our opportunity mission.

Finally, I thank all those committed professionals and volunteers who support young carers—may they continue to do so. As a Government, we will continue to work with them to improve outcomes. To the many teaching and pastoral care staff in schools, to the early help, youth and social work professionals, to those working in local councils and in carers organisations throughout the country: I feel confident that, with your continued dedication and a Government who are committed to improving the lives of young carers, we will make strides to support this important group.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I call Chris Vince, who has two minutes to wind up the debate.

2.22 pm

Chris Vince: I thought I had two hours! I thank you, Ms Furniss, and all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) for a trademark passionate and powerful speech about his family, as well as the wider role of young carers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for paying tribute to the young carers services in her constituency. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for their contributions, and the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) for his learned contribution as well.

I thank the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett); the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger); and the Minister for contributing to this important debate. I know from experience that what the Minister says is true: where there is greater poverty, there is greater need. We are seeing more and more young carers supporting a loved one with mental health issues.

We need more accurate data to understand the scale of the challenge. We also need to recognise that young carers have different caring responsibilities and often care for different people. They also often have needs themselves. I welcome the Minister's statement about making knowledge about young carers part of teacher training.

When we speak to young carers, we cannot help but be struck by how thoughtful, articulate and caring they are. I apologise to anyone who had an ambition to become a tax lawyer or a bank manager, but when I speak to young adult carers about their futures, they often tell me that they want to be nurses, care assistants, doctors and teachers. I even met one yesterday who said that she wanted to be a politician. Sadly, however, we too often meet young carers who do not have any ambition, because all they can think about is caring for their loved one—that is something we need to take very seriously.

I will briefly mention the young carers covenant—otherwise the Carers Trust will tell me off—which identifies some of what I have asked for today. I also emphasise the importance of recognising the difference between young carers and care leavers; it is amazing how many people do not understand that distinction. Finally, I ask every hon. Member to keep talking about young carers in Parliament. Young Carers Action Day may happen only once a year, but our young carers do this work every single day.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered educational opportunities for young carers.

2.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 13 March 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Board of Trade: Appointments

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): I am delighted to announce that I have appointed a new Board of Trade.

The newly formed Board will be an advocate for UK businesses at home and abroad, championing the country's 5.5 million SMEs and realising their export potential. This will help super-charge growth for the economy as part of the plan for change.

The newly appointed advisers have been hand-picked for their deep sector expertise and knowledge, representing some of the UK's most successful businesses. They will play a crucial role in supporting the Department's growth priorities, focusing on supporting small businesses and boosting exports.

The Secretary of State is pleased to appoint:

Omar Ali
 Mike Hawes OBE
 Dame Vivian Hunt DBE
 Allison Kirkby
 Paul Lindley OBE
 Catherine McGuinness CBE
 Michelle Ovens CBE
 Mike Soutar
 Sarah Walker
 Dr Charles Woodburn CBE

In addition to the following ex-officio advisers:

Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Ian Murray MP
 Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Jo Stevens MP
 Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Hilary Benn MP
 The Lord Mayor of London, Alastair King
 Minister of State for Investment, Baroness Gustafsson of Chesterton CBE
 Minister of State for Industry, Sarah Jones MP
 Minister of State for Trade Policy and Economic Security, the right hon. Mr Douglas Alexander MP
 Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment Rights, Competition and Markets, Justin Madders MP
 Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Services, Small Business and Exports, Gareth Thomas MP
 Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Future Digital Economy and Online Safety, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Legislation) and Baroness in Waiting (Government Whip), Baroness Jones of Whitchurch.

The role as a Board of Trade adviser is unpaid and voluntary.

[HCWS517]

TREASURY

Horizon Shortfall Scheme

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): As the Minister for Services, Small Business and Exports (Gareth Thomas) has previously announced, the Department for Business and Trade is introducing an independent Horizon shortfall scheme appeals process to ensure all claimants have a fair opportunity to receive full compensation, in line with the recommendations of the Horizon Compensation Advisory Board.

The Government are committed to taking swift action to ensure affected postmasters receive the financial redress they are owed, with minimal administrative burden. To this end, the Government will ensure that no income tax, capital gains tax, national insurance contributions, corporation tax, or inheritance tax will be payable on any compensation received through the appeals process.

The Government will legislate via secondary legislation to formalise this tax exemption shortly.

[HCWS519]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Victory in Europe and Japan: 80th Anniversaries

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): The Government have announced plans to mark the 80th anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day with a series of events and celebrations. It is my intention that we, as a nation, come together to mark this pivotal moment in our shared history.

Victory in Europe Day, which takes place on Thursday 8 May 2025, marks the allied victory in Europe. The news resulted in millions celebrating the end of the war, with street parties, dancing and singing across the country. The war in the far east did not end until 15 August 1945, with Victory over Japan Day.

The second world war touched every aspect of life and had a devastating impact on those who experienced it, and for the generations after. From the sailors, soldiers and aviators who fought, to the children who were evacuated, and all those who stepped into essential roles on the home front, we owe it to the second world war generation, who 80 years ago fought for our freedom and paid the ultimate sacrifice in giving generations lasting peace.

Through a series of national and local events, we will unite to pay tribute to the millions of people across the UK and the Commonwealth who served in the second world war. VE and VJ Day 80 will be an opportunity for celebration, as it was across the streets of Britain in 1945, but also of commemoration, as it will be one of the last opportunities to honour our living second world war veterans. There is also a younger generation for whom the events of the second world war—the sacrifices made, and the reasons for them—seem like distant history. It will be a time for us to come together to listen to their stories and reflect on their values that ensured the allied victory: service and selflessness across our nation.

The Government have announced a programme of events and activities that will mark these anniversaries and reach into and connect communities across the country through educational outreach, and cultural and creative activity. This will include a military procession and flypast on Monday 5 May, a Westminster Abbey service and a VE Day concert on Thursday 8 May, and a service at the National Arboretum in partnership with the Royal British Legion to commemorate VJ Day on 15 August. I am pleased today to announce further details of a truly inclusive national engagement programme that will complement this series of events, and I am delighted to be working with the devolved Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure that the commemorations are UK-wide. There are many exciting ways that Members of both Houses of Parliament, and members of the public, can get involved.

To ensure that all communities across the UK feel engaged in the stories of VE and VJ Day, the Government have already announced plans for UK-wide street parties on Monday 5 May through the Great British food festival, supported by the Big Lunch and the Together Coalition. Street parties, BBQs and community get-togethers will be held across the UK, made easy with the launch of the Big Lunch guide to bringing people together, which is full of event planning resources and tips, craft activities and conversation prompts for communities hosting local celebrations. Funding has been made available, through the National Lottery community fund's Awards For All programme, for organisations to bid for grants to host events, activities and projects this year for communities to come together.

In order to prepare for those events, I am delighted to announce the introduction of "Tip Top Towns", where we are inviting communities across the UK—whether town, village or city—to share how they are coming together for VE Day 80. We want the public, volunteer networks and community groups to take part in activities that will get them in the community spirit ready for 5 May, whether that be preparing community gardens, hosting craft events to create street party decorations, sprucing up their local areas or encouraging children to draw pictures to put in their windows. The public are invited to share their pictures of activity on our webpage and across social media using the #VE80 hashtag, with VE Day certificates available to all who participate. Young people will be at the heart of this, including uniformed youth groups, with a special VE Day commemorative badge being introduced by the Scouts.

The value of these commemorations lies in their ability to connect generations. It is vital that our young people understand the impact of the second world war, and that they have the opportunity to hear the stories of our living second world war veterans at first hand before it is too late. This is an opportunity for us to come together, to listen to the stories of those who lived through this period and to reflect on the values that secured the allied victory.

The Government have announced a number of new ways young people will be able to engage with veterans' stories as part of the VEVJ Day 80 commemorations. It is my strong commitment that every young person has the opportunity to learn about and connect with the stories of their forebears, ensuring that the sacrifices

and experiences of those who served are remembered and passed on to future generations through "VE Day 80: Our Shared Story".

As part of the Government's national engagement programme, the National Theatre is developing a new production and film, titled "The Next Morning", which will focus on the hopes, dreams and ambitions of young people after the war and what that means for young people today. Written by James Graham, the fantastic writer of "Dear England", it will offer a poignant opportunity for young people to really consider what the end of the second world war means for their own lives and their own ambitions.

The Imperial War Museums are also launching today a new initiative, "Letters to Loved Ones", which will invite school children to explore their own family histories to find stories from the war and share them. This will culminate in a joint event at Imperial War Museum North on Wednesday 7 May, alongside the National Theatre.

To supplement this activity, a brand-new collection of educational resources to support young people's engagement with VE and VJ Day 80, both inside and outside the classroom, will be developed. "VE Day 80: Our Shared Story" will include a range of resources, including the Royal British Legion's "I'll Remember—Discovering the Stories of VE and VJ Day 80", the Imperial War Museum's "Learning from Letters", and Atlantic Productions' new web-based augmented reality experience that brings moments from VE day to life—"VE Day 80: Immersive".

In this 80th anniversary year, we must remember that while VE Day brought an end to the European war, the war continued to play out in Asia until Victory over Japan Day on 15 August. It is vital that we remember and honour those soldiers who continued to fight and to sacrifice, and within this we must not forget the hugely significant role played by the Commonwealth in allied victory. I am hugely grateful to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Imperial War Museums for all they are doing to work with us to ensure that the stories of VJ Day are preserved and honoured for future generations.

I am pleased to announce that the Commonwealth war graves will be undertaking a brand-new UK and international tour, "For Evermore". A mobile exhibition, it will travel across the UK and the globe to the Pacific, bringing the stories of the second world war to life. Their brand-new app, "For Evermore", will be updated to offer interactive tours of key Commonwealth war grave sites, allowing the public to explore history and connect with personal stories. At the heart of the tour will be the Torch of Peace—an enduring symbol that honours those who gave their lives, the importance of preserving their legacy, and a baton to share and pass stories to future generations.

In an increasingly uncertain and fragmented world, this anniversary has never been more important. It is only by learning from conflicts such as the second world war and listening to their devastating effects from those who experienced them that we bring the realities of conflict to life. We must ensure that their stories live on not just in books or paper, but in the hearts and minds of future generations. On this anniversary, we reaffirm

our shared commitment to preserving the memory of the men and women across the UK and Commonwealth who served and sacrificed.

I look forward to seeing the exciting and creative ways in which communities choose to mark the 80th anniversaries of VE and VJ Day this year. Together, we will be able to make sure the stories and legacies of those who gave their lives will always have the same profound impact, as we continue to tell them to the generations to come.

The Department would welcome the support of colleagues across both Houses.

[HCWS520]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Legislation Review

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I would like to update the House on the report commissioned by the Home Secretary and published today by the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation into law in the wake of the Southport attack.

The barbaric murder of three young girls in Southport last Summer is a scarring moment in our history. We think of those little girls, Elsie Dot Stancombe, Bebe King and Alice da Silva Aguiar, whose lives were devastatingly cut short. We think of their families' agony. And we think of those who survived the attack but live with physical and emotional scars.

In January, the perpetrator was sentenced to 52 years in prison for his horrifying crimes. It is highly likely he will never be released.

As the Prime Minister said, the responsibility for this barbaric act lies with the vile individual who carried it out, but that provides no comfort.

When the Home Secretary addressed the House on this matter in January, she set out the next steps the Government would take—including on establishing a public inquiry, on reforms to Prevent and on the legislative framework.

The inquiry will examine the issues raised in this case but also wider challenges around the rising levels of predominantly young men and boys fixated with extreme violence who may pose a risk to society. We are moving swiftly to set up the inquiry. It is expected to begin within weeks, once we have completed the important consultation with the families and victims. We intend to announce further details by the end of this month.

Within the wider Prevent system, we are learning lessons to get ahead of this changing threat, and to ensure we have the early intervention capabilities we need to keep the public safe. The Home Secretary has previously announced new measures to strengthen Prevent decision making.

Since then, we have extended channel multi-agency support to new cohorts, launched new pilots to ensure those below Prevent thresholds get the support they need, and appointed an interim Prevent Commissioner to bring robust independent oversight.

The appalling attack in Southport terrorised an entire community. The police and CPS determined that it was not an act of terrorism under the legal definition of terrorism set out in the Terrorism Act 2000, because there is no evidence that the perpetrator's purpose was to advance a political, religious, racial, or ideological cause. The court accepted that conclusion.

However, we should be in no doubt about its seriousness. The judge described the attack as "equivalent in its seriousness to terrorist murders".

And as the Prime Minister and Home Secretary have set out, this case comes against a backdrop of growing numbers of cases of violence-fixated individuals and young people being drawn into extreme violence and radicalisation.

The Met Commissioner has warned of "young men who are fixated on violence... grazing across extremist and terrorist content",

while Five Eyes counter-terror partners have also warned about growing radicalisation of minors.

The most significant terror threat remains from Islamist extremism, followed by extreme right-wing activity, and we must be continually vigilant against these ideological threats.

But we also need to ensure that the legal framework is strong enough to respond to extreme violence where ideology is not apparent or is less clear.

In the light of this serious and growing problem, the Home Secretary announced to Parliament in January that she had asked the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation to examine the legal framework around terrorism and the powers available to tackle this kind of extreme violent attack. The reviewer has published that report today.

First, we are grateful to the independent reviewer for his thorough analysis of the terrorism framework in response to this horrific attack and his important conclusion, which the Government accept, that the law does need to change to respond to the rise in extreme violence in cases where ideology is unclear or cannot be proven.

Jonathan Hall KC concludes that the legal definition of terrorism is already wide and should not be changed any further. The Government accept his conclusion.

However, the independent reviewer considers there is a gap in the wider criminal law. The Prime Minister has been clear that if the law needs to change to recognise this new and dangerous threat, then we will change it—and quickly.

The reviewer notes there is no offence currently for possession of an article in private with intent to carry out a mass casualty attack, or other offence of extreme violence.

We are grateful for his consideration of this point and his conclusion that this point is already being addressed by a new measure, currently before Parliament in the Crime and Policing Bill. This will make it an offence to possess a bladed article with intent to cause unlawful violence and applies whether the possession is in public or private.

The reviewer also concludes that within existing criminal law

"there is a real and not theoretical gap for lone individuals who plan mass killings".

On that basis, he recommends that the Government consider creating a new offence where an individual intends to kill two or more persons and prepares for such an attack. We accept and strongly support this recommendation. I can confirm we will fix the legislation to close the gaps identified.

Finally, the independent reviewer draws attention to the challenges of communicating transparently and effectively following an act of extreme violence in the digital age.

It is a cornerstone of our democracy and our tradition of trial by jury that trials are fair, and justice is served. For that reason there have long been restrictions on what can be said before and during a trial.

However, the tragic events in Southport in July last year showed how social media is putting those long-established rules under strain, especially where partial or inaccurate information appears online.

That is why the Home Secretary, the Lord Chancellor and the Attorney General have asked the Law Commission to expedite elements of their ongoing review into contempt of court, and why counter-terrorism policing are also already considering what information can be released in the aftermath of major incidents.

The Government have been clear that we wish to maximise transparency and ensure that public authorities are able to take into account the wider risks to public safety to counter misinformation and disinformation. We are grateful to the Law Commission for agreeing to accelerate their consideration of this important issue and will carefully consider their findings when they are published later this year.

I would like to reiterate our thanks again to the independent reviewer for his comprehensive report and contribution to our efforts to fully learn the lessons of this terrible case. As the Home Secretary has already set out, today's report is an important step in the search for answers, and to tackle horrific acts driven by a fixation on extreme violence.

[HCWS521]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Flood Recovery Framework

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I would first like to thank all of those who supported local

communities in the wake of severe flooding following Storm Babet in October 2023 and Storm Henk in January 2024, and who have done so again after more recent flooding. My thoughts remain with householders and business owners impacted by flooding, which is a devastating experience for all those affected. It is important that we recognise the enormous amount of effort that has gone into supporting households, businesses, farms and communities to repair and recover from these floods.

In the days that followed Storms Babet and Henk, Government activated the flood recovery framework to provide funding support to households, businesses and farms in the worst affected areas of England.

To date, across all the framework's schemes (community recovery grant, business recovery grant, council tax discount, business rates relief and the property flood resilience scheme), the Government have supported over 8,500 homes and businesses across 130 local authorities, reimbursed over £8.2 million and committed a further estimated £18 million in future payments. In addition, the farming recovery fund has provided £57.5 million to 13,000 farmers via a one-off recovery payment to support recultivating productive agricultural land, following Storms Babet and Henk and the exceptional winter weather in late 2023 and early 2024.

As is normal practice following events of this scale, a post-activation review has been undertaken which has identified a number of administration process changes and policy questions for further consideration.

In response to feedback from local authorities and hon. Members, we have acted swiftly, agreeing measures to enable faster identification of eligible areas by allowing local authorities to provide verified flooded property data directly to Government, extending the time to claim business and community recovery grants by one month so that support can be provided to all those in need, reducing the administrative burden on local authorities by reducing the frequency of reporting and improving communications with councils through targeted, regular engagement and direct links into Departments.

We will keep under review our support for those who have had their homes and businesses devastated by flooding. Climate change means we are likely to see more frequent severe weather and flooding and it is vital that we have the right measures in place to support communities.

[HCWS518]

Petition

Thursday 13 March 2025

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Repairs to Whitebarns Lane in Furneux Pelham

The petition of residents of the village of Furneux Pelham, North East Hertfordshire,

Declares that Whitebarns Lane is the sole pedestrian and vehicle access for residents in social housing in Furneux Pelham; however, it is unfit for purpose and has been in a near constant state of dangerous disrepair for many years as a result of Hertfordshire County Council's refusal to maintain the route as a road; further declares that this refusal to carry out repairs after many years of lobbying has led to vulnerable residents of Whitebarns, including the disabled and elderly, suffering from falls and other injuries; and furthermore expresses dismay at the ongoing neglect and mis-treatment of social housing tenants in rural communities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Hertfordshire County Council to ensure that a proportion of the £1.6bn in increased funding for pothole repairs is used to repair and maintain Whitebarns Lane and, to ensure that social housing tenants are never again placed in a situation whereby they have no substantive access to the main highway, to urge the Government to take action to ensure that the development in Furneux Pelham and all future developments have such access as standard.

And the petitioners remain, etc. — [*Presented by Chris Hinchliff, Official Report, 26 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 902.*]

[P003047]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

I understand the frustration of the residents of Whitebarns Lane, Furneux Pelham at the poor state of the lane, which is having a negative impact on those who use it. However, the local highway authority, Hertfordshire County Council, does not own or have responsibility for the lane in question. Decisions on whether to adopt private streets or unadopted roads such as Whitebarns Lane are entirely a matter for the local highway authority; it is not for the Government to dictate to individual local highway authorities what to do in situations of this sort.

Under the 1980 Highways Act, the local highway authority is responsible for the management of those streets that have been adopted by it, or its predecessor authorities. A road that is not maintained at public expense by a highway authority is known as a private street, as defined by section 203(2) of the Highways Act 1980. The responsibility for management of private streets rests with the owner, or more usually the frontagers, who are those owning property that fronts, or abuts, the street concerned.

The Highways Act 1980 makes provision for the adoption of unadopted roads and for urgent repairs to be made by the highway authority without adoption. Under sections 205-218 of the Highways Act 1980 (known as the “private street works code”), the street works authority can resolve to make up a private street at any time. The cost of doing so is usually met by owners of the properties that front the street concerned, and the street is then usually adopted by the highway authority. Guidance on the process of highway adoption is available on gov.uk at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-of-roads-by-highway-authorities>

Under section 230 of the Highways Act 1980, Hertfordshire County Council has the power, without commitment to adoption, to carry out urgent repairs to an unadopted road, such as Whitebarns Lane, to prevent or remove danger to persons or vehicles. Other provisions within section 230 enable a private street works authority to require the owners of a private street to carry out urgent repairs.

Any decision about whether to do so is for the local authority to make. It is also for the authority to decide whether to recover costs from the owners where a notice to carry out urgent repairs has been served but not complied with, and the authority has carried out the repairs itself.

However, where an authority has served a notice on the owners or frontagers requiring them to repair the street, a majority in number or rateable value of the owners of premises in the street may themselves serve notice on the authority requiring them to proceed under the private street works code, after which the local authority must declare the street to be a publicly maintainable highway.

In 2025-26, the Department will be allocating Hertfordshire County Council £35.6 million, an extra £9.3 million compared to this financial year, to maintain and improve its local highway network. It is entirely a matter for Hertfordshire County Council, as the local highway authority, to decide how it spends the highway maintenance funding based on local needs and priorities.

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